

November 30th, 2018

Oakland City Council
1 Frank H. Ogawa Plaza
Oakland, CA 94612

Dear Councilmembers,

SPUR supports the mandatory soft-story retrofit ordinance for multifamily buildings introduced by Councilmember Kalb and Mayor Schaaf. As you know, the Bay Area is seismically vulnerable, with a 72 percent likelihood of a major earthquake impacting the region. Within the region, the Hayward fault is the most likely to experience a major earthquake, with a 33 percent likelihood of a major event in the next 30 years. As the legislation notes, soft-story residential buildings in Oakland represent 11% of Oakland's housing units, but 2/3rds of the expected housing losses in a future earthquake. It is important that policy makers take steps now to make sure that our buildings and lifelines are strengthened to reduce that risk.

Strengthening multifamily buildings is one of the most important things a city can do to increase resiliency. Not only does strengthening housing prevent injury and loss of life, it also strengthens neighborhoods in the long term. Having housing that residents can live in in the post disaster period strongly increases the likelihood that people won't permanently leave while housing is being repaired. We don't want Oakland to experience population losses similar to New Orleans in the post-Katrina period.

SPUR was instrumental in supporting seismic safety efforts in San Francisco over the past 15 years. We strongly supported the Community Action Plan for Seismic Safety (CAPSS), which formed the basis for San Francisco's mandatory soft story retrofit ordinance. We also authored a series of reports as part of our Resilient City Initiative, calling for a mandatory soft story retrofit program as one of the most important steps for a city to take to increase resilience.¹

One of the challenges with a mandatory soft-story retrofit ordinance is ensuring sufficient financing for owners to pay for the retrofit. We are pleased that the City has sought grant funding from FEMA to help defray some of the costs. We would encourage the City to explore a program similar to PACE (Property Assessed Clean Energy) for seismic costs. This program would be worth pursuing if it provided cheaper capital to property owners than what is available on the private market. We would likewise encourage the City to bring private lenders together to inform them about the mandatory soft-story retrofit ordinance and to ensure that it is easy for property owners to access loans and other capital to complete the required retrofits. It would also be very helpful if the City could identify funds both to retrofit permanently affordable housing impacted by this ordinance and to enable non-profit affordable housing providers to purchase market rate soft-story buildings that house low income tenants in order to convert them to permanent affordability.

¹ "The Dilemma of Existing Buildings, Private Property, Public Risk", SPUR Report 2009 and "Safe Enough to Stay: What will it take for San Franciscans to live safely in their homes after an earthquake?" SPUR Report, 2012. See <https://www.spur.org/featured-project/resilient-city>

The City should make sure that it is prepared to implement this program. In order for the program to be successful building permits and inspections will need to be processed in a timely fashion, especially given that the program includes timelines for required repairs. The Planning and Building Department should be sufficiently staffed to ensure the success of this program.

Lastly, if the City has not yet begun work on an ordinance to require the retrofit commercial soft-story structures it should do so. Commercial soft-story buildings also present a danger to the Oakland's resilience and should be addressed.

Thank you for taking this important step towards making Oakland a Resilient City. Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact us.

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