Seismic Retrofit Guide for Bay Area Owners

A plain-English starting point for owners of older Bay Area buildings: what a soft story is, which programs may apply, and how a retrofit project runs.

WHAT IS A SOFT STORY?

A wood-frame building whose ground floor is much weaker than the floors above, usually because of garage openings, tuck-under parking or storefront glass. In a strong quake the ground floor can rack and collapse. The fix is usually new steel moment frames, plywood shear walls and upgraded foundation connections at the weak level.

PROGRAMS THAT MAY APPLY

- [ ] **Mandatory soft-story ordinances.** San Francisco, Oakland, Berkeley and Alameda, among other Bay Area cities, require retrofits for many older multi-unit wood-frame buildings with soft first stories. Requirements, deadlines and fines vary by city.
- [ ] **Unreinforced masonry (URM).** California cities track URM buildings under state law, and many Bay Area cities have mandatory URM programs.
- [ ] **Selling the building does not reset compliance.** Obligations generally run with the property.
- [ ] **Homes.** The state Earthquake Brace + Bolt program offers grants toward bolting and bracing older houses in eligible ZIP codes. See earthquakebracebolt.com.

HOW A RETROFIT PROJECT RUNS

- [ ] **Screening.** Find out if your building is on the city's list and what tier or deadline applies.
- [ ] **Evaluation and design.** A licensed structural engineer evaluates the building and designs the retrofit.
- [ ] **Permit.** Drawings go through plan check. Timelines vary widely by city.
- [ ] **Construction.** Most soft-story retrofits are done at the ground floor, often with tenants staying in place. Plan around parking and access.
- [ ] **Final inspection and sign-off.** Keep the certificate of compliance with your property records.

OWNER TIPS

- [ ] Bring the contractor in during design. Constructability input keeps the engineer's design buildable and the budget real.
- [ ] Ask about tenant notices and any cost pass-through rules in your city before work starts.
- [ ] Combine the retrofit with other ground-floor work (utilities, garage, storefront) to pay for access once.
- [ ] Check whether your lender or insurer offers better terms once the retrofit is complete.

Want a second set of eyes? LPD Builders walks commercial spaces and buildings across the nine Bay Area counties. Request a site walk at **lpd-builders.com/contact** or call (415) 299-5369.

General information for Bay Area property owners, not legal, engineering or financial advice. Rules change; confirm with your city building department, the CSLB and your own advisors before you act.

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