



RETROFIT GRANTS PROGRAM INFORMATION FOR OWNERS OF SOFT STORY BUILDINGS



What is a Soft Story Building?

“Soft Story” is a term used for buildings with a soft, weak, or open-front condition. Soft Story buildings are multi-story, wood-frame buildings in which the ground floor may have large exterior openings and/or a lack of interior walls. Buildings of this type typically have a parking garage or commercial storefront on the ground floor, leading to a relatively weak lateral load resisting system in the lower story, which makes the building potentially vulnerable to collapse in the event of an earthquake.



Soft Story building with tuck-under parking



Soft Story destroyed by 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake

Which Soft Story buildings can participate in the Retrofit Grants program?

Any residential or non-residential Soft Story building other than a single family home or a duplex.

Am I required to retrofit my building?

Owners of Soft Story buildings with five or more residential units built prior to 1978 were required by Berkeley Municipal Code (BMC) Chapter 19.39 to apply for a building permit by December 31, 2016 and to complete the seismic retrofit work within two years after submitting their permit application.

Is my building a Soft Story building?

Not necessarily. If you received this fact sheet in the mail, it is likely because you are the owner of a building that has been identified as a possible Soft Story building. Although the City maintains a public inventory with the retrofit status of known Soft Story buildings with five or more residential units, the City has not created a comprehensive inventory of other Soft Story buildings. If you are unsure if your building has a Soft Story condition, an engineer or architect would need to evaluate it, and then propose a retrofit solution.

What type of seismic retrofit is eligible for a grant?

Seismic retrofits of Soft Story buildings often include installing steel moment frames and new subsurface concrete footings to stabilize large exterior openings or adding new plywood sheathing and hardware to strengthen interior or exterior walls at the ground level. The minimum seismic retrofit for a Soft Story building typically does not require work above the first level and the floor diaphragm immediately above it.

To be eligible for a grant under this program, a retrofit must meet or exceed the technical requirements in the City of Berkeley’s Framework Guidelines for Soft, Weak or Open Front Buildings. These guidelines were developed for buildings with five or more residential units subject to the mandatory retrofit requirements in BMC Chapter 19.39. Other Soft Story building owners undertaking voluntary seismic retrofits under this grant program should adhere to the modified version of these guidelines, available on

the Retrofit Grants program website. As recipients of federal funds, all projects will also be required to undergo a historic preservation review conducted by the City and FEMA prior to the start of construction.



Soft Story building with garage doors at ground level



Retrofit of a retail storefront using a steel moment frame at the interior

What do I need to do to pass FEMA’s historic preservation review?

Proposed retrofits of Soft Story buildings will typically pass FEMA’s historic preservation review if the seismic retrofit work is limited to the interior of the building (or the parking area) or if work that impacts exterior walls is restored to the original condition so that it does not negatively affect the façade. In cases where portions of the completed seismic retrofit will be visible from the exterior, or where a building has local landmark status, or where FEMA determines that the building may be eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, the retrofit design may require additional review by the State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) to ensure that the project does not negatively impact the historic character of the building.

How will a seismic retrofit impact my tenants?

Typically, the work required for a Soft Story retrofit can be limited to ground floor areas, minimizing the construction impacts on tenants in upper stories. For buildings with parking on the ground floor, some tenants may temporarily lose their parking spaces during construction.

What if the seismic retrofit impacts the onsite parking area?

In most cases, a Soft Story retrofit can be designed to retain all onsite parking spaces. However, the potential reduction of required parking spaces should not stand in the way of seismic retrofit work. The zoning regulations allow parking to be reduced, reconfigured, or removed for public safety structural alterations if approved by the City’s Traffic Engineer per BMC Section 23C.04.075.

If I perform a seismic retrofit, will I need to do other additional work?

Maybe. You might be required to install automatic gas shut-off valves and repair or replace your private sewer lateral. In cases where buildings have commercial space that will be impacted by the seismic work and that space is out of compliance with state and federal accessibility requirements, accessibility improvements may be required. For more information, see www.cityofberkeley.info/Triggers/.

How can I find more information about the Retrofit Grants program?

Review the program rules and application instructions at www.cityofberkeley.info/retrofitgrants/. Contact us at retrofitgrants@cityofberkeley.info or by phone at (510) 981-7475.

