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seismic retrofits for apartment buildings with soft stories built over garages.

Feb. 03, 2014

Sixteen years ago, the Los Angeles City Council adopted tough new guidelines on seismic retrofits for apartment buildings with soft stories built over garages.

While it applied to all new construction, the council decided against requiring retrofits of existing buildings because of the cost and the threat of losing some 20,000 apartment buildings.

“We should have made this mandatory,” then-Councilman Hal Bernson said at the time. “But I don't think there was the political will on the council to do that.”

Today, it is a new City Council and mayor faced with the same questions as they review a list of 1,451 buildings constructed since 1976 that researchers believe could be in jeopardy if a major earthquake struck the region.

Los Angeles officials are trying to determine what their next step on the issue should be in developing an examination of each building on the list and the costs associated with mandating building retrofits.

Mayor Eric Garcetti recently reached a partnership with seismologist Lucy Jones and the U.S. Geological Service to review the information and make recommendations on next steps.

“This is something I take very seriously,” Garcetti said in an interview on KPCC-FM (89.3). “We will spend this year listening to property owners ... looking at the different suggestions on what we can do.”

The Building and Safety Department will be asked to develop a program to gauge the

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structures as the city works with the financial industry to determine the best way to pay for improvements and aid owners and tenants.

“There's no question that this is a major public-policy issue,” said Michael Cochran, president of the Structural Engineers Association of California. “But from our perspective, it is work that needs to be done. We have a lot of faults that are overdue for an earthquake, and we need to bring them up to code.”

Cochran pointed out that engineers believe L.A. needs to mandate changes to modernize the building code as it checks each and every building.

“What San Francisco did in a similar situation is send out letters to all the building owners and asked them to provide evidence their building met standards,” he said. “The city would then evaluate if the buildings are safe.”

For those not up to building codes, Cochran acknowledged repairs could run into the thousands of dollars for each structure. “That will be the biggest hurdle on how to finance it,” he said.

Cochran stressed that there are other issues to consider, such as the impact of having to sacrifice a number of buildings and relocate residents.

“When you are looking at the economy as a whole and you take 1,000 buildings out of commission, now the economy comes to a grinding halt,” he said. “How do you bring the economy back up?”

Jon Coupal of the Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Association said more study is needed on the possibility of government help, either at the local or state level, to offset the costs of repairs.

“Where you are giving tax breaks, there needs to be a lot of careful thought before

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“We have heard from property-owner associations on this. A lot of these are pre-1976 structures and more than 20 years old, are under rent control, and the landlords can't afford to do it themselves. Even if they are able to pass through the cost to their tenants, a lot of renters will not be able to afford it and will be forced to move. We have to do this in a way to offer incentives to them.”

Englander has been working with Assemblyman Adrin Nazarian, D-Glendale, to use one of his bills to examine the possibility of a state program.

“We are still considering all the options,” Nazarian said. “At this point, we can't be more specific than that. We are looking at a rebate on property taxes, a tax credit or some other form of incentive.

“Can the state afford it? That's the question,” he added, “especially at a time when we are looking to overcome some of the cuts forced on us by the recession. We don't want to come up with a program we can't afford.”

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