



Unreinforced Masonry Policy Committee Meeting

Meeting Summary

City of Seattle, Department of Planning and Development

Seattle Municipal Tower, Room 1610, 700 5th Avenue, Seattle, WA 98104

Thursday, March 22, 2012 – 8:30 a.m. to 10:00 a.m.

Attendance

Committee Members

- Lynda Carey, Bellwether Housing
- Bob Freitag, University of Washington
- Mark Huppert, Preservation Green Lab
- Edlira Kuka, Solid Ground
- Terry Lundeen, Coughlin Porter Lundeen
- Paul Mar, SCID Preservation and Development Authority
- Rachel Minnery, Environmental Works
- Steve Moddemeyer, Collins Woerman
- Mark Pierepiekarz, MRP Engineering
- Craig Weaver, USGS
- Eugenia Woo, Historic Seattle

Staff

- Landon Bosisio, EnviroIssues
- Rebecca Herzfeld, City Council Staff
- Sandy Howard, DPD
- Erika Lund, Office of Emergency Management
- Jon Siu, DPD
- Bryan Stevens, DPD
- Angie Thomson, Facilitator, EnviroIssues
- Maureen Traxler, DPD

Public

- Pamala Mijatov
- Stan Phair
- Ross Wildman

Welcome and Introductions

Angie Thomson, EnviroIssues, welcomed meeting participants, reviewed the agenda, and provided a brief overview of the previous URM policy committee meeting. Angie noted the communication “parking lot”: communicating the policy to the public is an important topic, but is not a subject within the committee’s focus. Discussions and recommendations relevant to this topic will be placed in the “parking lot” for consideration at a later time.

URM Policy Objectives

Jon Siu, DPD, gave a brief presentation on the URM technical committee’s recommendations and the URM policy’s objectives. He noted that many people have expressed anxiety over the City’s approach to addressing URM’s. Overall, the primary goal of the retrofit program is to improve life safety by protecting people from being injured or killed in URM’s in an earthquake. Historically, the performance of URM’s during earthquakes has been poor. Previous City policies for retrofits of URM’s and other types of buildings led to a substantial number of building vacancies or incentivized demolition. The City wants to

minimize these outcomes to preserve community character. While property protection is not the primary goal of the URM policy, it may be an indirect byproduct of seismic retrofitting, in smaller earthquakes.

The URM technical committee met from 2008 to 2009 and looked at a variety of retrofit programs found in California. The Technical Committee proposed a retrofit standard based on San Francisco's "Bolts Plus" program. Bolts Plus is viewed as the least intrusive program to property owners, while giving some meaningful reduction of risk of building collapse in an earthquake. However, Bolts Plus does not meet a particular "performance standard," as the term is generally used in engineering circles. In basing its retrofit standard on Bolts Plus, Seattle's URM policy is intended to reduce risk.

Jon showed a diagram indicating how a building behaves under earthquake forces. The first level of retrofit for URMs is to brace the building's parapets, and the next level is to bolt the walls to the floors and roof. General building seismic retrofits are currently required by code when buildings undergo substantial alteration. The code currently requires parapets and other "unsafe building appendages" be retrofitted, but DPD only enforces the requirement when reviewing a building permit application.

The retrofit method proposed by the Technical Committee includes a simple prescriptive compliance method similar to "Bolts Plus", and requires a more fully engineered design for buildings that don't meet certain criteria. For example, buildings with soft or weak stories – generally buildings that have a heavy, rigid structure over a taller, weaker story, such as a garage – are prohibited from using the simple "Bolts Plus" method. In this case, an engineered retrofit would be required.

The technical committee's draft proposal can be found in committee members' binders. The proposal covers a variety of issues. For example, if two properties share a common wall, also known as a party wall, both owners must agree to strengthen the wall. The purpose is to avoid property disputes to the extent possible. The technical committee's proposed standard is consistent with recent Building Code standards for alterations to buildings so that buildings that have recently undergone a seismic retrofit will comply.

Jon asked the policy committee to assume the Technical Committee proposal will be the technical standard for the purposes of its discussions, and asked policy committee members to focus on how to best implement the URM retrofit program. Whether or not the program actually goes forward will ultimately be determined by the Mayor and City Council, through the ordinance adoption process. If the policy committee decides to make the retrofit program a more stringent standard than the Technical Committee proposal, DPD will need to undertake the effort separately. Jon reiterated that while life safety is the primary goal of the policy, historic preservation and building resiliency will be natural byproducts of the goal.

Bob Freitag, University of Washington, asked if DPD and the technical committee looked at clusters of buildings. Terry Lundeen, Coughlin Porter Lundeen, answered that the committee did consider groups of buildings but ultimately decided to exclude the issue from their recommendations because it would require a property owner to analyze other people's buildings. Bob asked if a cluster of URMs could use a Local Improvement District (LID) or an alliance to act together to improve their buildings. Jon responded

that while the technical committee did not address this issue, the current policy proposal does not prevent owners from doing so. Angie said LIDs and alliances would be an excellent topic for the finance and incentives discussion.

Steve Moddemeyer, Collins Woerman, noted that nobody would disagree with having life safety as an important goal of the policy, but the committee will need to develop political know-how to convince people to accept the recommendations. Owners will express support for life safety but argue that they do not have the money required to retrofit their building.

URM Survey

Sandy Howard, DPD, summarized slides from the URM Survey Report. She clarified that this information should only be considered a starting point as the data has not been verified. Some buildings may have been retrofitted to a certain standard, but it is not known to what standard or stringency. DPD has a process for property owners to challenge the URM identification and to update the URM list.

The survey shows 819 URM buildings in Seattle, and classified the number of occupants into three broad categories (0-10, 10-100, greater than 100). The majority of these buildings are less than three stories, with an average of two. Nearly all one- and two-story buildings have not been retrofitted. Most commercial buildings are one-story; residential buildings are generally three stories. The greatest amount of data yet to be verified are government and school buildings— there are estimated to be 50 URM school buildings. DPD will continue to work with the school district to confirm the data. Rebecca Herzfeld, City Council staff, asked if it has been determined whether the school buildings have undergone a retrofit. Sandy answered that DPD is still working to collect that information.

Craig Weaver, USGS, asked for the estimated total population of those that work and live in URM buildings. Sandy answered that about 60% of Seattle's URM buildings have between 11 and 100 occupants. Angie added that DPD is still working on creating a full picture of the problem at hand, but the committee must continue to make the best policy they can with what is known at this time.

Discussion

Angie began the discussion by suggesting that the URM policy exclude single-family residential buildings and small residential buildings from the policy. She clarified that the City has made this as a baseline assumption, and single-family buildings were not included in the survey. The retrofit policy would include commercial buildings and all large residential buildings. Angie asked the group if this is an acceptable starting point. Mark Pierepiekarz, MRP Engineering, asked what constitutes large vs. small residential buildings. Bob expressed his view that large single-family dwellings should be in a different category. Terry disagreed, saying the vast majority of single-family buildings are not actually URMs.

Steve said he agrees with excluding single-family residential buildings from the policy, but believes that it implies that some buildings are not as important as others. He asked if the policy could somehow include the criticality of buildings, such as where they are located and what impact they might have on other neighboring buildings. Rachel Minnery, Environmental Works, said she would like to see the policy incorporate the context of buildings. What is around the building? Is it on an evacuation route? She

asked if the goal of the policy is to protect people outside of the buildings or only people inside. Jon answered that the policy is primarily focused on protecting the building for the people on the inside. Mark Pierepiekarz added that it would be a conflict to mandate anything outside of the survey set of buildings.

Lynda Carey, Bellwether Housing, suggested looking at the exit path of URM buildings. She proposed including all residential buildings with 4 units or more, excluding those who prove they have a valid exit path. Terry questioned whether it may be hard to connect the policy to an exit path. Mark Pierepiekarz noted that an exit path may not matter if the whole building collapses. He added that a good defining point for the policy may be the line between single-family and multi-family buildings, particularly because it may be cheaper for property owners to spread the cost of a retrofit among multiple units. Steve agreed, saying the policy's building inclusion should be based off the single-family vs. multi-family distinction.

Eugenia Woo, Historic Seattle, stated that from a historic perspective, it is not necessarily true that bigger is more important than smaller. A two-unit building may be just as important as a twenty-unit URM. Lynda asked what DPD classifies as multi-family. Jon answered that DPD considers three or more units a multi-family building; two units are classified as a duplex. After a brief discussion, the group agreed to include URMs with three or more units in the policy to be consistent with DPD's classifications.

Maureen Traxler, DPD, asked the committee if small commercial buildings, with only a handful of occupants, should be included in the policy. Rachel thought the context of the building should be taken into account. Mark Pierepiekarz clarified that the occupancy of a building should determine the speed of when the retrofit needs to occur. He added that neighborhoods need to be aware of this issue and consider pooling their resources to protect building clusters that are significant to the community. Bob suggested adding outreach or legal assistance for business owners to the policy. Craig said he is for the fewest amount of exclusions as possible at the policy level.

Erika Lund, Office of Emergency Management, asked if there is any connection with the City's comprehensive plan or other neighborhood plans. Eugenia Woo mentioned several historic districts, including Ballard or Pioneer Square, may want to be involved. Rachel asked if structures that store hazardous materials should be required to meet a more stringent standard. Mark Huppert mentioned that San Francisco's policy has multiple levels of risk. If a building possesses great environmental risk, it could be classified as a high risk building and given a different time horizon for a retrofit. Mark Pierepiekarz agreed with differentiating classes of buildings by risk and granting them different deadlines for action.

Rachel brought up the subject of soils. Mark Pierepiekarz added that the soil upon which buildings are constructed are important – generally the weakest buildings on the weakest soil tend to crumble first. Maps showing soil quality make this issue easy to define. Bob stated that he does not want to see the policy destroy the character of neighborhoods. Restaurants, for example, need to be safe since they are a gathering place, but many of them define their respective neighborhoods. Angie summarized the

discussion and suggested that the group revisit the topic of “building use” at the next meeting when DPD can provide an overview of the City’s use categories.

Mark Pierepiekarz said the survey is very helpful, but it would be even better to know what buildings have not yet been retrofitted. Craig asked for estimates of the number of buildings that have not undergone a retrofit and the estimated occupancy of those buildings.

Mark Huppert commented that he doesn’t want to lose buildings that are significant to the community to unnecessary demolition. Eugenia said that just because a building is not a landmark does not mean it is not historically significant. Rebecca mentioned that the Department of Neighborhoods has a list of potentially historic buildings and those that have been altered. Eugenia said the list is a good starting point, but has a lot of data gaps. She urged the committee to prevent owners from using the policy to demolish their buildings for development opportunities. Bob said he sees property owners in other parts of the country using the policy to demolish their buildings in an attempt to combat rent control laws.

Lynda asked if there will be a date when the policy will be applied. Property tax exemptions should be discussed during the incentives conversation.

Wrap Up and Next Steps

Angie summarized the meeting’s themes. The committee agreed that multi-family buildings with three units or more should be included in the URM policy. Different categories, such as building use, location, soil quality and community significance should be classified into different levels, with different timelines for retrofit compliance. Lastly, the policy should prevent owners from demolishing a historically significant structure for redevelopment purposes.

Bob mentioned that the committee should present their findings and recommendations to an organization like the U-District Chamber. A pilot group would allow the committee the opportunity to see how property owners react and hear their concerns.

Action Items for DPD:

- Work with the school district to find out what buildings have undergone retrofits.
- Determine the estimated population of those who live and work in Seattle’s URM buildings.
- Determine the number and height of URM buildings that have yet to be retrofitted.
- Provide an overview of the City’s building code risk categories.

Angie thanked the committee members and attendees for their time and participation. The next meeting will take place on April 26th from 8:30am – 10:00am, in SMT 4050.