



Is the San Mateo County Event Center Earthquake Safe?

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SUMMARY

The 2013-2014 San Mateo County Civil Grand Jury (Grand Jury) conducted an investigation of the earthquake safety of buildings under management of the San Mateo County Event Center (SMEC). Information provided to the Grand Jury indicates that all buildings under management are compliant with seismic performance requirements of the California code applicable to each building (as set forth in further detail below).

This report attempts to provide the citizens of San Mateo County an understanding of the seismic safety of the buildings at the SMEC based on the building codes relevant to earthquake safety in place at the time each such building was built or underwent a material retrofit, and the role of seismic safety requirements in the event of a retrofit in the future.

BACKGROUND

The San Mateo County Event Center property is owned by San Mateo County but operated and maintained by the non-profit San Mateo County Exposition and Fair Association (Association) under contractual arrangements dating back to 1939. The Association was created to run the annual San Mateo County Fair, manage the Event Center buildings and grounds, and now, under terms of a 2008 agreement, also manage the Jockey Club satellite wagering facility. The Association retains all revenues generated from the County Fair and Event Center building rentals and activities, receiving no operating subsidies from the County.

The property was acquired in stages, beginning in the 1930s, to create a permanent site for the San Mateo County Fair. The State of California made the initial purchase of property, and San Mateo County continued to add adjacent parcels over several decades for an accumulated 47.8 acres. All deeds were ultimately transferred to San Mateo County, the legal owner of the property now known as the Event Center for the purpose of holding an annual County Fair or Exposition.

The Event Center is located within the city of San Mateo. The seven buildings onsite total 195,000 square feet, surrounded by ample parking. The site is not only home to the County Fair, but is used year-round as an "event facility" hosting hundreds of meetings, concerts, sporting events, trade shows and social gatherings. The Event Center has a significant impact in the local community due to the County Fair and other major events. It generates an estimated \$40 million in annual revenues for the local economy as event participants patronize area hotels, restaurants, stores, and shopping centers. ¹

¹2010-2011 San Mateo County Civil Grand Jury. (2011, June 30). It's Not the Same Old County Fair. *The Superior Court of San Mateo County 2010-2011 Final Reports*. Retrieved February 17, 2013, from http://www.sanmateocourt.org/documents/grand_jury/2010/countyfair.pdf

METHODOLOGY

Documents

Letter from General Manager of the San Mateo County Exposition and Fair Association, dated December 9, 2013 responding to a Grand Jury inquiry dated November 5, 2013.

Interviews

Risk Management - San Mateo County Real Estate Property Services

DISCUSSION

The topic of earthquake building safety is a complex one. Engineers and architects do not use the term “earthquake safe” when describing a building. The structural engineer views a building as a structure designed to provide a certain level of resistance to a range of ground motions caused by earthquakes of varying potential magnitude.² Hence, from a building code perspective, a building is “earthquake resistant”.

While no structure can be called earthquake safe and thus immune to damage from all size earthquakes, the goal of earthquake-resistant design is to construct buildings which perform better than a building lacking seismic design features. The California building code defines the requirements of earthquake-resistant design to withstand the largest earthquake of a certain probability that is likely to occur at the building’s location. The objective of the building code is to limit the loss of life by preventing collapse of the building for rare larger earthquakes while the loss of building functionality should be limited for much more frequent smaller magnitude events.³

FINDINGS

The California building code is revised periodically to reflect the latest views and knowledge of experts in the field of seismic risk analysis and earthquake building design. Only a new or extensively renovated building must be constructed to meet the requirements of the latest version of the building code adopted for enforcement by San Mateo County. In this sense, the majority of the current buildings within San Mateo County are not required to meet the seismic design requirements of the most current code. Similarly, the buildings of the Event Center are required only to meet the earthquake resistance requirements of the building code enforced at the time of their construction. However, should a future building renovation be sufficiently extensive, the entire structure will require compliance to the earthquake-resistant requirements of the then current building code.

As the property owner, the County purchases, under an umbrella policy, property and casualty insurance which covers earthquake-caused public injury or fatality, as well as building and content property damage. Adequacy of the County’s insurance coverage is determined by the

² See http://la.curbed.com/archives/2008/05/ask_curbed_is_m_2.php

³ Seismology Committee. (1999). Recommended Lateral Force Requirements and Commentary. *Structural Engineers Association of California*. Retrieved February 17, 2014 from <http://www.seac.org/bookstore/blue-book-compilation>

County risk manager through standard insurance placement practice and coverage is competitively acquired by the County's insurance agent soliciting premium quotes from the insurance market place.

Based on information provided, the Grand Jury finds that all buildings under San Mateo County Event Center management are compliant with seismic performance requirements of the California code applicable to each building. This does not imply that any of these buildings meet 2014 seismic performance standards.

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