

Outreach Events Public Comments and Feedback

[URM Pilot Outreach Events Compiled Feedback and Comments]

This document includes all public feedback and comments as well as feedback from the Public Outreach and Engagement Liaisons (POELs) regarding their small group meetings.

POEL Feedback: Small Group Meetings and Workshop

Compiled POEL feedback provided by Cherry Cayabyab at the Department of Neighborhoods, who coordinates POEL involvement on projects.

Small Group Meetings – POEL Feedback

- The Filipino community contacts were also mostly renters, but the attendees found the information helpful and good though.
- The Oromo small group meeting presented to a few business owners and residential tenants, with short notice so not able to coordinate with the outreach team for their observation; POEL feedback was that it was useful info for the biz owners, understand the risks, would help them work with landlords and lets them know to work with the City as a resource regarding relocation (which may have been residents)
- The Somali meeting included 1-2 business tenants who would appreciate more resources for tenants. Evening and early dark an issue, people staid but ready to go at end get home to kids.
- The Vietnamese meeting went well, 17 people, a local leader wrote a poem for safety, a wonderful engagement experience, they want Ellen to come back and talk to the senior center. Small group meeting preferred by that cultural group, view workshops more for one directional information sharing.

Workshop – POEL Feedback

- Amharic, Filipino, and Chinese POELs attended; Hispanic POEL did not attend.
- The Hispanic POEL was not successful with Latino community; they were not super interested in the topic, mostly renters, felt property owners would raise rent and they'd move out of the building if that happened
- For the Chinese POEL's contacts there was an issue with timing of event, around dinner, dark earlier, use public transportation or use vanpool so tough for them to get to the event location.
- The POELs that attended did enjoy it; it was helpful to get information about the URM. In Ahmaric and Vietnamese communities they had more owners so there was interest in their networks, and they would like more information on the program and stay in sync.
- For the Ahmaric language, the technical terms in the handout were tough to translate; if using outside translation service they may be better prepared to address technical terms.

Public Comments: Community Workshop Columbia City November 13th

Public suggestions created during the Your Thoughts Exercises are compiled below, along with a list of the questions and answers from the workshop. Additional submitted letters and suggestions received during the Pilot are also included for a complete record of public Pilot feedback.

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Your Thoughts Exercises:

Attendees were asked the following questions and they shared their thoughts with written notes on index cards.

Comment frequency greater than 1 indicated by - # after comment.

1. What would get in the way of fixing a URM building?

- Lack of capital, funds, too expensive, etc. - 11
- Limited repair funds (non-profit)
- Loss of revenue during retrofit - 2
- Inability to raise rents to recoup costs - 2
- Loss of small businesses due to business interruption - 2
- Long term lease
- Not knowing whether your building is really a URM
- Loss of square footage - 2
- Space may not be as desirable after retrofit
- Relocation for retrofit
- Possible loss of tenants
- Scheduling
- Time
- Lack of awareness
- Lack of encouragement from the government
- Coordination between DPD engineering and Landmarks
- Reduced visibility from interior spaces
- URM retrofit results in other construction costs, e.g. new roofing, siding, interior improvements
- Cost to assess URM condition to see if it qualifies
- Delays in permit issuance for older non-URM projects while URM standards are being set
- Some owners may not be sophisticated/understand issues
- Delay with structural issues apart from a full redo is also a challenge

Total cards: 9

Total comments: 30

2. What do you think would help people get started and strengthen their buildings?

1. Share URM information and ideas with every community by having workshops about URM topics
2. Raise funds to fix a URM building

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3. Architect or other staff will join together and share the knowledge and help the community to rebuild some URM building
4. Preserves structural design
5. Saves lives
6. Financial analysis/understand larger economics/cost-benefit analysis and information
7. Property tax abatement equal to value of seismic renovations
8. Tax incentives/financial support - 3
9. Exemptions of improvements in URM retrofit
10. Exclusion of ADA upgrades from project that would normally be triggered with URM retrofit
11. Access to grants and low interest loans - 2
12. Emphasis on transfer of development rights (TDRs) as an alternative to demolishing a building
13. Hire people and get paid
14. City should pay for at least a reasonably detailed analysis of existing buildings to define/confirm what is a URM - 2
15. Beyond verifying URMs then City should pay for design of retrofit
16. Share precedent of what other states, cities, etc. in seismic areas are doing earlier in meeting
17. What would a very serious quake do to Seattle buildings, i.e. does that explain why quakes have not knocked down buildings in 3 previous quakes?
18. Show future steps slide earlier in presentation
19. Financial incentives especially around the initial building assessments
20. More knowledge about what the costs are
21. Dedicated City staff to walk owners through the process
22. More clarity around what incentives are available
23. Organizing surrounding small businesses
24. Keep people informed
25. Pay for owners cost to hire structural engineer to evaluate potential URMs condition

Total cards: 11

Total comments: 29

3. Other questions or comments noted on cards

- There is no basis for the described timeframes. Where is economic justification, in detail?

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- Make sure the cost-benefit analysis (CBA) (when one is done, hopefully done before charging forward) includes lost square footage/visibility, resulting in lower rent for the space.
- Please change the whole program to address the 50 or so top priority buildings first and deal with the rest when you actually have good facts, inventory, cost/benefit analysis, etc.
- Not enough thought has been given to a building owned by a nonprofit re cost of retrofit
- In an historic district like Columbia City, if a retrofit is uneconomic the property owners is caught in a catch 22, can't afford to retrofit but also will never be allowed to tear down or expand the buildings. Result is a vacant unmaintained building
- Tonight was the first and only time we've seen probabilities, albeit only of a 50 year event. How will the CBA include probabilities and discounted cash flows?
- How will the CBA include the social cost of locally owned/minority lower rent businesses being displaced, i.e. priced out?
- How many buildings fall into the "critical risk" category? Including soil conditions. Why doesn't the policy start with those and wait to see the results before \$1billion dollar mandate is decreed city-wide?
- The CBA consultant told us they won't be able to get down to the specifics of Columbia City. How do we know all of the costs and negative economic impacts will be accounted for?
- Who will determine if a building is a URM?
- Who pays for getting off the list if you are not a URM?
- Some URM buildings have been retrofitted already under previous codes. Will the new policy require upgrading to new code requirements?

12 cards, 12 questions/comments

Public Questions and Answers

- What is the chance of the next big quake?
- Each quake is different which is why some building are still standing and some will fall in the next quake.
- How do you tell if the building is a URM
- Building owner is responsible? Now up to the property owner to pay for the retrofit?
- What is the basis for the survey [DPD's windshield survey]. Why that is the valid way? As valid as any other way, records are not accurate. Trying to do too much with the survey. How robust

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before the program launches? Set a purpose for the survey and stick with it. Engineers looked for characteristics and did some property research.

- What is the basis for the city survey; important to get facts straight before launching a program
- The map that identifies potential URM's probably needs to be greatly scrutinized. It seems the city needs to budget funds to do a much better analysis of which buildings really are URM versus brick clad wood frame buildings. The city should also budget for helping with design work if we're serious about this. There's a fine line between giving money to negligent building owners versus those that are proactively retrofitting.
- Be clear that pilot is for learning best practices for outreach and education, not about launching the retrofit program in Columbia City.
- Bolts Plus is the Bolts + Parapet; Braces are part of the proposed standard for buildings that do not qualify for bolts plus; slide is unclear and misleading.
- How would historic landmark be able to use braces? Determined on a case by case basis. There is some flexibility in the code for life safety.\
- Will the cost-benefit include loss of square foot leasing space and economics of post retrofit rents?
- Re-focus presentation from an owner's perspective; it is their responsibility to have a safe building and the city wants to ensure safety and provide incentives to get the work done.
- How to get word out to the whole community, not just those here at the meeting.
- Are OR, VT and NV counting URM's?
- There is not an economic basis to do the retrofit
- What happens if the historic landmark process holds us up, will we be penalized?
- Where are the incentives being decided? Policy committee then Council.
- Suggest getting a consultant to look at incentives.
- If a business shuts down, who pays for that cost?
- Add loss of business revenue to cost-benefit
- Phase in program with most important buildings first
- Consider a partial retrofit – if the building had been retrofitted in the past call it good
- It is too expensive to do retrofits piecemeal – will have to move out tenants.
- Small businesses usually can't afford to relocate twice, plus everyone may not be able to or chose not to follow to the new location (temporary or not). It depends upon where (proximity) the tenant is able to relocate. There are financial impacts for tenants and owners of URM buildings. Are there any financial impact funds available to assist the small businesses that would be called upon the relocate?
- I would add to the potential impacts to an owner doing these projects. If a small business tenant has to relocate their business while the URM retrofit is being done, they probably won't return. The owner will need to find new tenants, plus have the loss of income while doing the retrofit.
- I understand the safety issues and the importance of retrofitting these buildings, but the financial impacts could be very difficult for some to overcome.
- Who's responsible to determine if you own the URM – on the owner; not answered

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- There was mention of masonry parapets already being required to be braced after the 2001 quake (even without renovation happening) but that this requirement hasn't been enforced which makes me really question how this new policy would be enforced.
- What is required for URMIs that have already been retrofitted?

Other Public Comments:

Suggestions from one engineer (Geoff Spelman) :

Points to highlight:

- Remaining portion of a long standing problem. We had 5,000 high risk buildings in 1950 and now we estimate that there are perhaps 400 buildings that have not been upgraded.
- This is mostly your problem. Largely a private sector problem but where owners have not taken steps to mitigate risks then we need to look to see what needs to be done to protect lives and safety.
- Solutions exist. Buildings do not need to be torn down. They can be made safer through proven means.
- Proactive v reactive

Learning from previous regulatory measures

Sample dialogue:

Why are we here tonight? We are here because brick buildings are more likely to collapse in the event of an earthquake than other types of construction. That's basically it. We are here to talk about the tail end of what has been a long standing problem and some technical and financial solutions, During the past 30 years most brick buildings within the city of Seattle have been upgraded. A lot of that work occurred with buildings located in historic districts which were renovated under laws that created incentives for preserving historic structures. Other buildings were done when there was a change of use. Owners came in for a permit and structural improvements were made at the time. So a majority of the thousands of brick buildings in the City of Seattle have been reinforced and are therefore likely to survive a strong earthquake. However, there remains several hundred buildings that have not been reinforced and these buildings pose a greater danger to their occupants and to those around them. This is mostly a private sector problem, one that primarily affects owners and tenants. If a building is damaged or is destroyed in an earthquake the financial effects of that fall largely on the owner and tenant. However one of the key functions of local government is to protect the health and safety of citizens. So while this is primarily a problem with private property and private owners, when we have a situation where when there is a heightened danger to people whether they be tenants, short-term occupants or passersby, local government has a responsibility to take reasonable steps to protect the safety of those citizens.

Reactive versus proactive

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Currently if a building is damaged by an earthquake or other causes our department will be asked to quickly survey of the damaged building. If we judge a building to be unsafe for human habitation or occupancy we will place a red tag of the building and it will be unlawful to occupy that building until such time as it deemed safe. At that time it will be an emergency and the owner and/or the tenant will be struggling to save their investment by either repairing and strengthen a compromised building or by declaring that the building needs to be torn down and replaced with a new structure. Again, those economic costs will fall largely on private owners, assuming there's been no loss of life or injury as a result of falling bricks.

What we are trying to do here is to work to prevent the situation from arising. We understand that these buildings pose greater risks but such risks can be mitigated by applying modern, proven, engineering solutions. And it's far less expensive to deal with this proactively than two try to repair a building that has been severely damaged.

The department is also trying to take the position of being smarter with its regulatory authority. In the past when the city was faced with loss of life as a result of the building deficiencies, it developed new regulations that resulted in buildings being unused for long periods of time. Good intentions but with serious economic impacts. So we are learning from those experiences and part of this process is to develop an approach which reduces the dangers posed by these remaining unreinforced brick buildings while doing everything to be reasonable and predictable. We want to reduce the economic cost to owners and tenants. So we are here to talk and to listen about the problems posed by these buildings and refining solutions that make doing what's right and smart and necessary as easy as possible.

Sandy,

I appreciated last night's meeting about this program and the chance to ask questions and express my concerns. I am neither a radical or activist and have only one building affected -- but as an experienced businessman who is deeply concerned with urban design and development (and has invested millions in the revitalization of Columbia City over 11 years), I must say that so far I see this whole program as half-baked. I have yet to see real data to justify the huge expense or the proposed timing of the policy. The timeframe, 7-13 years, appears to be based on how fast it could practically get done, not any real economic analysis. For instance, why is it 13 years instead of 33 years? (never answered to date) Also, trying to retrofit 800+ buildings in that timeframe will likely create a spike in workload that causes less qualified and fly-by-night contractors, leading to the same problems created in the expensive deck and siding failures in the housing boom of the 1980's. Such a market distortion would be totally self-induced.

The bigger issue is that this whole program has yet to have a sound economic justification. It seems way too premature to be trying to do a real cost/benefit analysis at this point when the basic data of the inventory of URM's is so flawed. For instance, your slides show 48 buildings in the Columbia

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City/Hillman City area as URM's, which is simply not true. It includes buildings that are wood-framed with brick veneer and buildings that have already been strengthened -- the actual number might be closer to 24 than 48. So what good is a cost benefit analysis based on such flawed data? The details of such an analysis mean a lot too. For instance, although it was made clear that it would include the "consequential costs" of a catastrophic event, it was not clear that it would include the consequential costs of retrofit (ie total closure of commercial tenants, lost rents, reduced rents from lost square footage, displacement of minority/locally owned businesses unable to pay the higher rents, etc.). In fact, the lack of attention to the commercial buildings (ie "depends on the lease" -- ie not my problem) was very disappointing.

My main recommendation would be to approach this whole program beginning with an initial phase focused on the critical risk buildings (less than 8% of the current URM inventory). It would be more manageable, focused on the biggest risks, create real data about the feasibility and cost/benefit, and result in a lot smaller demand on mitigation costs. When in doubt and without actual trusted data, pick the low hanging fruit first and learn from there.

Sincerely,
Pete Lamb