
OFFICE OF THE INDEPENDENT BUDGET ANALYST REPORT

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Item Number: 55

Fire Sprinkler Retrofitting for High Rise Buildings

OVERVIEW

On Tuesday, December 4, 2007 the City Council will be asked to consider extending the required compliance date for sprinkler retrofits of high rise buildings to January 1, 2013. The current compliance date is January 1, 2008. If approved, this will be the fourth extension of compliance requiring fire sprinkler retrofitting for high rise buildings in the last 16 years.

The Fire Extinguishing System Section (55.1003) of the San Diego Municipal Code states:

- (b) It is unlawful for any owner of a high-rise building to allow any person to occupy any portion of a high-rise building after January 1, 2008, where occupancy has been authorized pursuant to section 55.1003.2.11(a)(4), except where:
1. The occupant is performing construction or maintenance to prevent the high rise building from being in an unsafe condition; or
 2. the occupant is performing construction or maintenance to the building related to the installation or maintenance of an automatic fire sprinkler system; or
 3. an approved fire sprinkler system has been completely installed.

Currently, the City Administration Building (CAB) has fire sprinkler systems installed in the basement and five of the 15 floors. If the extension of the compliance date is not approved by the City Council, CAB will not be compliant with the Fire Extinguishing System Section of the Municipal Code. Aside from the obvious, the IBA was not able to identify the specific consequences of not complying with the Municipal Code. In addition, as pointed out in the Mayor's Executive Summary to the City Council, the City Administration Building is one of the few remaining high rise buildings without complete fire sprinkler protection in the City of San Diego.

FISCAL/POLICY DISCUSSION

In the Executive Summary, the Mayor's staff recommends extending the compliance date with the Fire Sprinkler Retrofit Ordinance until January 1, 2013 thus keeping CAB compliant with the Municipal Code. The reasons given for the request to extend the compliance date includes the possible redevelopment of the Civic Center Complex and the time needed to identify the necessary funding to complete the fire sprinkler updates. The current cost estimate to complete the installation of fire sprinklers in CAB is \$5.0 million. The time required to complete the project is estimated to be three years. This includes identifying funding, planning, bidding and installation of the project.

On July 31, 2007 the Centre City Development Corporation issued a Request for Qualifications seeking development partners to explore the possible redevelopment of the Civic Center Project. ***The IBA is not aware of any updates being provided to the City Council or Council Committee on the status and timeline of the proposed redevelopment.*** The IBA agrees that it is not fiscally prudent to expend \$5.0 million to complete a fire sprinkler system in CAB if demolition of the building is expected in the near future. However, it should be noted that in 1995 the Mayor and City Council were in a similar situation as today and decided to comply with the Fire Sprinkler Retrofitting Ordinance by declaring its intent to demolish the City Administration Building prior to January 1, 2000, which never occurred. ***With the proposed redevelopment of the Civic Center Complex in its infancy and the timeline for possible approval and construction unknown, extending the installation of the fire sprinkler system another five years continues to be a safety concern.*** The City Council needs considerably more information from the Mayor before taking this step.

CONCLUSION

In light of the delicate balance of moving forward on this essential project while trying to maintain fiscal prudence the IBA offers the following alternative to the action proposed by the Mayor:

Extend the compliance period one year (instead of five) with the caveat that the Mayor return to the City Council with an update on the proposed redevelopment of the Civic Center Complex that includes a timeline for possible approval and construction of the project. If after a year, the redevelopment of the Civic Center remains uncertain, identify funds in the 2010 Budget to complete the installation of the fire sprinkler system in the City Administration Building.

SIGNED

Jeffrey Sturak
Fiscal & Policy Analyst

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APPROVED: Andrea Tevlin
Independent Budget Analyst