Jesse Arreguín
City Councilmember, District 4

ACTION CALENDAR
July 14, 2015

To: Honorable Mayor and Members of the City Council

From: Councilmember Jesse Arreguín

Subject: Steel Reinforcement of Balconies and Periodic Inspection of Balconies

RECOMMENDATION

1. Send a letter to the California Building Standards Commission (attached) urging them to update the state Building Code to require steel reinforcement of balconies in all new balcony designs.

2. Refer to the City Manager and Housing Advisory Commission to:

    a. Consider the adoption of a local Building Code requirement to require steel reinforcement for all balconies in new developments. Request that the City Manager report back to Council with their analysis and recommendations within 60 days.

    b. Consider establishing a requirement that balconies in multi-unit rental properties be periodically inspected by City inspectors. Staff to determine the time frame for required inspections (i.e. 2 years, 5 years, 10 years).

BACKGROUND

The tragic balcony collapse at 2020 Kittredge on June 16, 2015 which killed six people and injured seven others has raised questions over the safety of uncovered, cantilevered wooden balconies. Images of the wooden supports of the balcony that failed show major damage to the condition of the wood, including the appearance of dry rot and mold.

While precautions such as waterproofing are done when balconies are constructed, water intrusion, decay, and damage often goes unnoticed. Given how dangerous such situations can be, and the consequences of such damage, it is vital to the safety of residents to build balconies with materials that are more resistant to both short-term and long-term decay. Steel provides the strength and durability to meet such requirements.

While many new buildings construct balconies to this standard, currently there is no mandatory building code requirement for steel reinforcement of balcony designs.

With most of California's housing growth taking place in the cities, there will be a greater number of apartment buildings constructed, including buildings with balconies. With more balconies, there's a possibility that the current standard allowing wood reinforcement of balcony floors will mean that failures in sealing and subsequent water damage may lead to more balcony collapses.

Statewide, we need to develop a comprehensive inspections procedure. In the meantime, the state should move forward with changing the building code to require a design for balcony floors utilizing steel or other materials impervious to damage from water intrusion.

In addition, since problems in the construction of balconies will often go unnoticed once the building is complete, the City should require periodic inspection of all balconies in all multi-unit rental properties by a City inspector to verify the stability of the balcony and to require owners to address any damage so that balconies are in good structural condition.

ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY
No adverse effects to the environment

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS
Unknown. Staff time involved in studying the concept of adopting a local building code requirement. Enforcement of steel reinforcement requirement would be conducted through building inspections. Requirement for periodic inspections of balconies would be enforced by City inspectors. Any violations would need to be corrected or owners would face penalties.

CONTACT PERSON
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Attachments:
1: Letter to the California Building Standards Commission

California Building Standards Commission
2525 Natomas Park Drive, Suite 130
Sacramento, CA 95833

Dear Chair Batjer and Members of the Commission:

At its regular meeting of July 14, 2015, the Berkeley City Council voted to send the following letter:

The City of Berkeley is still in shock and filled with immense grief over the horrific balcony collapse at 2020 Kittredge on June 16, 2015, which claimed the lives of six people and injured seven more. As we try to recover from this tragedy, we must look into ways of preventing such events from ever happening again.

Initial opinions from experts say that degradation of the wood from water exposure played a part in the collapse. Another balcony from that building was removed the next day, with images showing stark differences in the condition of the wood, with the failed balcony appearing to have dry rot and mold. These indications show the risks of constructing balconies out of wood, especially without steel reinforcement.

The Berkeley City Council believes that alternative materials such as steel must be used in the construction of balconies to ensure that balconies are placed under the strictest and safest conditions. Unlike wood, steel is less likely to deteriorate over time, is better able at withstanding the elements, and is a stronger material.

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Statewide, we need to develop a comprehensive inspections procedure. In the meantime, the state should move forward with changing the building code to require a design for balcony floors utilizing steel or other materials impervious to damage from water intrusion.

Therefore, we strongly urge the California Building Standards Commission to update the California Building Standards Code so that balconies are constructed with steel reinforcement.

Sincerely,
The Berkeley City Council

Cc. Jim McGowan, Executive Director, Building Standards Commission
State Senator Loni Hancock
Assemblymember Tony Thurmond