

September 21, 2023

MEMORANDUM

To: Public Safety and Human Services Committee
From: Yolanda Ho, Supervising Analyst
Subject: Voluntary unreinforced masonry building retrofits – Resolution 32111

On September 26, the Public Safety and Human Services Committee (Committee) will receive a briefing and possibly vote on [Resolution 32111](#) that states the City Council’s and Mayor’s intent to recognize voluntary seismic retrofits of unreinforced masonry buildings (URMs) that meet the City’s 2023 Draft URM Retrofit Technical Standard.

This memo provides background information, describes Resolution 32111, and identifies next steps.

Background

URMs are buildings constructed before 1945 with brick or clay tile bearing walls where the parapets and walls are not secured to the floors and roofs. These buildings are particularly vulnerable to damage or collapse during earthquakes, potentially endangering people in the buildings if walls collapse and pedestrians if parapets break away and fall onto the sidewalk or street. Seattle has over 1,100 URMs in more than 50 neighborhoods, with the highest concentrations in Capitol Hill, Pioneer Square, and Chinatown-International District.

In December 2021, the Council adopted [Resolution 32033](#), stating the City’s intent to develop a phased mandatory URM seismic retrofit program, led by Seattle Department of Construction and Inspections (SDCI) and the Office of Emergency Management (OEM).¹ Since the passage of that resolution, SDCI has hired a URM Program Manager to lead development of the program, convened four working groups to discuss specific issues (technical standard, communications, funding, and owner and tenant needs), released the [2023 Draft URM Retrofit Technical Standard](#), and published [Director’s Rule \(DR\) 6-2023](#) to allow use of an alternate retrofit method, as permitted by the [Seattle Existing Building Code \(SEBC\)](#). SDCI will also be hiring a Senior Structural Plans Engineer to support this work.²

The 2023 Draft URM Retrofit Technical Standard would allow building owners to be in compliance with a forthcoming mandatory URM seismic retrofit requirement by pursuing one of two methods:

¹ For more background on Resolution 32033, including a description of the issues related to URMs, see the [Central Staff memo](#) for the Committee meeting on December 9, 2021.

² The Council added the URM Program Manager position and funding to the 2022 Adopted Budget, and added the Senior Structural Plans Engineer position to the 2023 Adopted Budget. Both positions are primarily funded by permit fee revenue.

1. The Code-Based method – this pathway will allow a building to be in compliance if it meets the seismic retrofit performance level of a substantial alteration per the SEBC; or
2. The Alternate method (DR 6-2023) – this pathway results in a building upgrade that provides a minimally acceptable level of safety from collapse, including bracing parapets, strengthening connections between walls and floors, and preventing the walls from falling outwards. This option is limited to buildings that meet specific criteria.

SDCI is still developing a timeline for mandatory compliance and other key aspects of the program, including identifying funding options to help building owners cover the costs of the retrofits.

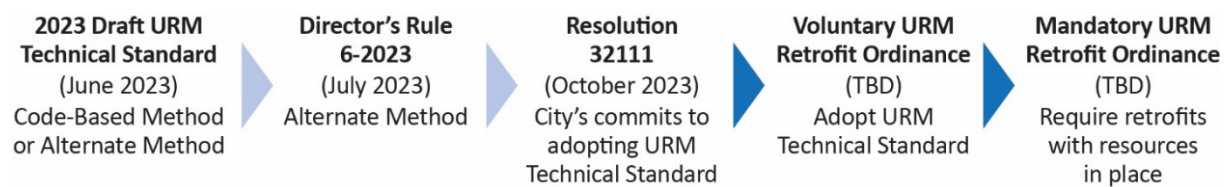
Resolution 32111

As an interim step towards developing the mandatory retrofit requirement, SDCI would like to encourage voluntary URM seismic upgrades. Resolution 32111 would state the City Council’s and Mayor’s intent to recognize seismic upgrades to URM buildings that meet the 2023 Draft URM Retrofit Technical Standard.

The resolution is the prelude to forthcoming legislation that will guide voluntary URM retrofits. SDCI will prepare a proposed ordinance for the Council’s consideration to officially adopt the URM Retrofit Technical Standard as a compliant URM retrofit methodology. Building owners that voluntarily upgrade URM buildings to the retrofit technical standards prior to the City’s adoption of a URM seismic retrofit requirement will not need to take additional measures to comply with the mandate.

Resolution 32111 is intended to provide transparency to building owners that the City intends to use the 2023 Draft URM Retrofit Technical Standard as a compliance standard in future legislation. Exhibit 1 provides key milestones for program development.

Exhibit 1. SDCI’s key milestones towards developing the URM seismic retrofit mandate



Next Steps

If the Committee votes on Resolution 32111, it may be considered by the City Council at its October 3 meeting.

cc: Esther Handy, Director
Aly Pennucci, Deputy Director