



PORTLAND BUREAU OF EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

Mayor Ted Wheeler, Commissioner-in-Charge • Carmen Merlo, Director
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February 28, 2017

Representative Paul Evans, Chair
House Committee on Veterans and Emergency Preparedness
900 Court Street NE, Hearing Room E
Salem, OR 97301

Re: HB 2140 Seismic Disclosure for Residential Sales

Dear Chair Evans and Members of the Committee:

The City of Portland respectfully urges your support for HB 2140 with the -2 amendment. Scientists have known for the last 30 years that Oregon is earthquake country. We are at risk from both a catastrophic subduction zone earthquake off the coast, and smaller, but still potentially damaging, local crustal earthquakes. HB 2140 is a modest, yet important, step in promoting our state's seismic resilience.

Oregon's seismic building code has been updated several times in the past 30 years, reflecting our evolving understanding of earthquake risk. Adoption of a statewide building code in 1974 for the first time ensured that new homes throughout Oregon would be bolted to their foundation to resist lateral forces from seismic activity. Unfortunately, much of the state's housing stock – including the majority of single-family residential homes in Portland – was built before scientists understood that Oregon had any earthquake danger. These homes generally lack minimal seismic safety; they are not secured to their foundations. Homes that are not bolted down may fall off their foundation during moderate to heavy shaking, shearing off utility connections, and becoming uninhabitable. It is estimated that there are as many as 100,000 single-family homes in Portland alone that are not bolted down.

Despite ongoing efforts, many residents are also unaware of the state's earthquake danger. There is a long history of Oregon seismic activity in the geological record, but many residents have never felt a large quake. The most recent damaging earthquakes, in Scotts Mills and Klamath Falls, occurred in 1993. A Pulitzer prize-winning 2015 article in *The New Yorker* on the Cascadia subduction zone and an ongoing Oregon Public Broadcasting series on earthquake preparedness have helped educate the public, but the message hasn't reached everyone.

HB 2140 raises awareness by ensuring all home buyers recognize that Oregon has earthquake risk, and certain homes may be more vulnerable to damage. It does not require any action on the part of either seller or buyer. Sellers simply state whether they know the house has been retrofitted – it does not require them to find out or make remedies.

Our hope is that making seismic status information a standard part of real estate transactions will encourage more homeowners to bolt their homes to their foundations. Because selling a home is a time when owners often get an inspection and make safety repairs, this legislation could bring the issue to people’s attention at a time when they are more likely to act on the information. Raising the issue of seismic risk may also encourage them to act in other ways to prepare for an earthquake.

The long-term resilience of a community is directly tied to the ability to keep people safe in their homes. When people are displaced from their homes or their communities whether because of a lack of housing or other basic needs, the chances of them returning are small. Population loss destroys neighborhoods and hobbles economic and social recovery. Ensuring homes are safe enough to stay will make communities more resilient.

Portland is preparing for the next earthquake with a sense of urgency. Adequate resources aren’t available to accomplish everything as quickly as we’d like, but we’re making real progress: hardening critical water infrastructure, planning to accelerate retrofitting of unreinforced masonry buildings, and training hundreds of additional community volunteers on how to help their neighbors in a disaster.

This legislation supports efforts to get Oregon earthquake-ready, by providing information to new homeowners at a time when they are more likely to take action to protect their home and investment. Unlike many other efforts, it is also low-cost. It simply helps prospective homeowners make informed decisions. The City of Portland urges your support for HB 2140.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Carmen Merlo" followed by a horizontal line.

Carmen Merlo, Director
Portland Bureau of Emergency Management