Office to Residential Conversions

A general guide for adaptive reuse code provisions and exceptions in the downtown area

San Francisco Department of Building Inspection

Technical Services | Permit Services Division

Updated August 2024

This guide is meant to assist developers and designers seeking to better understand adaptive reuse code provisions and exceptions for office-to-multi-family residential conversions in downtown San Francisco. It is not a comprehensive listing of all the relevant codes or potential equivalencies. For more detailed code information and guidance, please see the Department of Building Inspection (DBI) Information Sheet G-29, located on our website at **sfdbi.org.**

BUILDING CODE PROVISIONS, EXCEPTIONS AND POTENTIAL EQUIVALENCIES

Building Envelope – Must comply with allowable height, number of stories, floor area, insulation, fenestration and automatic fire sprinkler requirements. Qualified historic buildings may be required to retain some historically significant or character-defining features.

Exterior Walls and Openings Protection – Must meet fire-resistance ratings based on the fire separation distance from the property line and type of building construction. Commercial-to-residential conversions will not generally require increased fire resistance of the exterior walls but may require some walls to be rated for fire exposure from both sides.

Existing non-rated exterior walls may be retained if the exterior wall is protected with a water curtain design approved by DBI and SF Fire as a local equivalency. Further, if the existing building features more or seeks to add more exterior wall openings than are allowed under the current code, DBI will consider design equivalencies that meet the intent of the code.

Means of Egress – All components must meet the current code. Allowances for existing buildings may include existing staircases where space and construction does not allow for a reduced pitch or slope, size of operable window openings for emergency escape and rescue, accessible means of egress, and the use of inspected and improved fire escapes in qualified historic buildings.

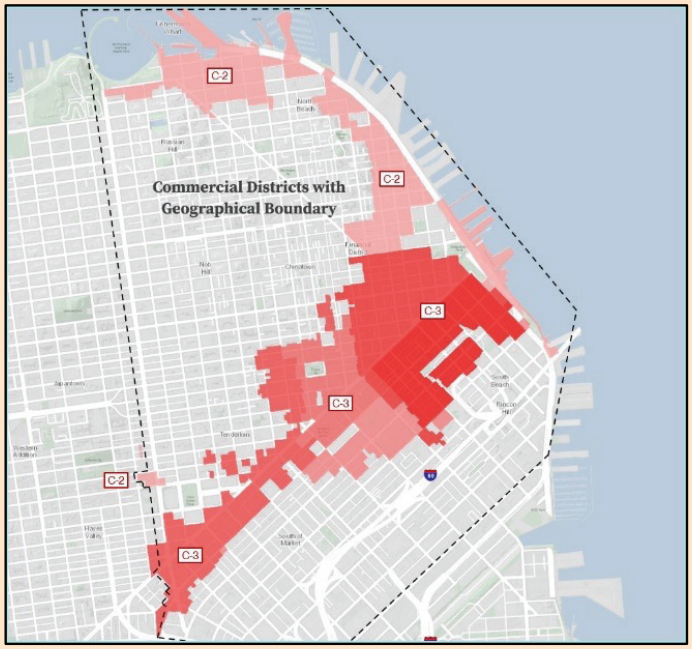
Ventilation – All new dwelling units require natural or mechanical ventilation. Aside from high-rise residential buildings, public hallways, corridors and spaces opening into dwelling units also require natural or mechanical ventilation. Independent exhaust systems are required for kitchen hoods, bathrooms and dryer exhausts.

Lighting – Natural light is required for all habitable rooms. Where obtaining direct natural light is not feasible, light courts, sky lights, and indirect light from exterior windows of adjoining spaces may be used. Habitable rooms in qualified historic buildings may use the light and ventilation standards articulated in the California Historic Building Code.

APPLICABILITY

These code provisions and exceptions only apply to buildings located within the area highlighted in this map, which can be found online at sfplanning.org.

COMMERCIAL TO RESIDENTIAL ADAPTIVE REUSE ELIGIBILITY AREA



Map courtesy of SF Planning

Seismic – Buildings proposed for vertical or horizontal additions must meet current wind and seismic code requirements for new buildings. Buildings undergoing substantial structural or non-structural alterations are required to undergo seismic retrofit.

Concrete buildings requiring retrofitting may use the City's forthcoming seismic retrofit standards with less stringent requirements if the project provides certain structural and safety features.

Buildings proposed for unsubstantial alterations may not be required to meet the full or modified seismic standards, but it is recommended to perform a seismic evaluation, retrofit the building to the appropriate standard, an d, for steel buildings, inspect the joints of welded moment frames and column splices and repair them as necessary.

Minimum Unit Size – Commercial to multi-family residential conversions may be eligible to use the minimum dwelling unit size for new construction instead of what's required for existing buildings. To determine if this equivalency is acceptable, DBI will evaluate the current or proposed egress systems in relation to the proposed occupant load.

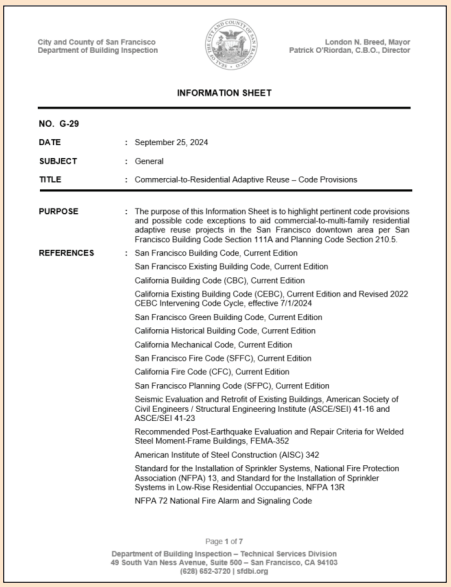
Accessibility – Proposed projects will need to be individually evaluated to determine their accessibility requirements. While a change of occupancy alone may not trigger accessibility upgrades, additions to an existing building may necessitate access improvements in the new addition, common areas and within the path of travel.

High-rise Buildings – Buildings with occupied floors 75 feet above fire department vehicle access (generally at or near street level) are considered high-rises. High-rise buildings with occupied floors 120 feet above fire department vehicle access must have at least two fire service access elevators.

The entire high-rise must feature a smoke control or management system and the building is required to have additional emergency and fire protection systems, including automatic sprinklers, a fire alarm system with voice (pre-recorded messages and manual paging), emergency communications systems, fire pumps, emergency generators, and water tanks. Equivalencies for these requirements may be allowed under some circumstances on a case-by-case basis.

High-rise buildings are required to have a code compliant Fire Command Center with a fire alarm system light-emitting diode (LED) annunciator and an Emergency Voice Alarm Communications System with speakers and manual live paging. High-rise buildings without an existing Firefighters Air Replenishment System are not required to install one.

All dwelling units and sleeping rooms must have smoke detectors with low-frequency sounder bases for in-unit local-alarm, and also general alarm speakers generating low-frequency tone and a pre-recorded evacuation message.



City and County of San Francisco
Department of Building Inspection

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Patrick O'Riordan, C.B.O., Director

INFORMATION SHEET

NO. G-29

DATE : September 25, 2024

SUBJECT : General

TITLE : Commercial-to-Residential Adaptive Reuse – Code Provisions

PURPOSE : The purpose of this Information Sheet is to highlight pertinent code provisions and possible code exceptions to aid commercial-to-multi-family residential adaptive reuse projects in the San Francisco downtown area per San Francisco Building Code Section 111A and Planning Code Section 210.5.

REFERENCES : San Francisco Building Code, Current Edition
San Francisco Existing Building Code, Current Edition
California Building Code (CBC), Current Edition
California Existing Building Code (CEBC), Current Edition and Revised 2022 CEBC Intervening Code Cycle, effective 7/1/2024
San Francisco Green Building Code, Current Edition
California Historical Building Code, Current Edition
California Mechanical Code, Current Edition
San Francisco Fire Code (SFFC), Current Edition
California Fire Code (CFC), Current Edition
San Francisco Planning Code (SFPC), Current Edition
Seismic Evaluation and Retrofit of Existing Buildings, American Society of Civil Engineers / Structural Engineering Institute (ASCE/SEI) 41-16 and ASCE/SEI 41-23
Recommended Post-Earthquake Evaluation and Repair Criteria for Welded Steel Moment-Frame Buildings, FEMA-352
American Institute of Steel Construction (AISC) 342
Standard for the Installation of Sprinkler Systems, National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) 13, and Standard for the Installation of Sprinkler Systems in Low-Rise Residential Occupancies, NFPA 13R
NFPA 72 National Fire Alarm and Signaling Code

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DBI Information Sheet G-29 provides technical guidance for code equivalencies and exceptions for adaptive reuse projects.

Carbon monoxide detection and alarm may also be required in certain locations. In buildings without an operational wired phone jack system, emergency radio coverage testing shall be required and, depending on the test results, a radio coverage enhancement system may be required.

Low-rise Buildings – Commercial to residential conversions featuring three or more permanent dwelling units must be fully sprinklered for fire suppression, feature a fire alarm system that is compliant with current standards, and may require standpipes.

Existing elevators may remain unchanged and do not need to be upgraded to meet the current code requirements for gurney size, hoist way construction and Firefighters Emergency Operation. Existing elevators with more than 25 feet of travel will be required to have a Firefighters Emergency Operation. HVAC systems - heating, ventilation and air conditioning - are only required to shut down when smoke is detected. All dwelling units and sleeping rooms must have smoke detectors with low-frequency sounder base for local alarm and an additional low-frequency audible appliance (sounder or speaker) for general alarm. Carbon monoxide detection and alarm may be required. Two-way emergency communications systems and testing may also be required in some buildings. Emergency radio coverage testing is required and, depending on the test results, a radio coverage enhancement system may be required.

Qualified Historic Buildings – Buildings determined by SF Planning to be qualified historic buildings can comply with the standards set forth in the California Historic Building Code as long as continued use of the building does not pose a life safety hazard.

Depending on the work being performed and whether the project includes non-historic lighting and space conditioning, qualified historic buildings may be partially or fully exempt from energy conservation standards.

Existing fire escapes on qualified historic buildings may be used as one of the required emergency exits as long as the fire escape extends to the ground, is easily negotiated and is in good working order.

S.F. Green Building Code – Adaptive reuse projects are exempt from the City's Green Building Code as long as the building's alteration is not a Major Alteration as defined in the code.

RESOURCES

For more information about adaptive reuse code provisions, please see Information Sheet G-29 on **sfdbi.org.**

Additional support is available at:
Department of Building Inspection
Technical Services Division:
techQ@sfgov.org

SF Fire Department:
sf-fire.org