

High Rise Fire Sprinkler Retrofit

Policy Analysis Report for Supervisor Sherrill

Presentation to:

San Francisco Fire Code Technical Advisory Council

October 2, 2026

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Approximately 129 buildings subject to ordinance

- Building profiles
 - 40% condominiums, 60% rented apartments
 - 76 buildings or 59% are at least 120 feet tall
- Phased Compliance
 - **2032:** Submit sprinkler retrofit permit applications
 - **2034:** Complete water system and riser installation
 - **January 1, 2035:** Complete full sprinkler installation

There is no single “cost per unit”

Sprinkler installation type

*Exposed,
camouflaged, or
concealed piping*

Fixed Costs

- SFFD plan review and hydraulic testing
- City permitting
- Engineering, installation, inspection

Municipal Infrastructure

- Main water line
- Fire service line

Building Characteristics

- Electrical wiring
- Architectural complexity
- Presence of asbestos
- Extant sprinkler system

Sprinkler design compounds costs



Exposed

Camouflaged

Concealed

Variable building conditions could add up to \$50,000 per unit

Cost Driver	Estimated Cost Per Unit
Water main improvements	\$8,000 per block
Electrical upgrades	\$200–\$10,000
Asbestos mitigation	\$500–\$10,000
Pump room	\$3,000–\$6,000
Standpipe modifications	\$1,000–\$4,000
Fire service line	\$900–\$4,000
Fire pump	\$1,800–\$3,500
<i>Potential total</i>	<i>Up to \$50,000</i>

3 cost scenarios: retrofit cost estimates range from \$15,000 to \$225,000 per unit

	Baseline	Midrange	High Cost
Per Unit	\$15k–\$17k	\$27k–\$30k	\$208k–\$225k
50-Unit Building	\$0.75–\$0.87M	\$1.37–\$1.48M	\$10.4–\$11.2M
Sprinkler design	Camouflaged	Camouflaged	Concealed
Infrastructure	Largely adequate	Several upgrades	Major upgrades
Relocation	Up to 5 days	Up to 5 days	5 days–6 weeks

Limited financing options

Condominiums

- Financing requires collective HOA action
- Special assessments, increased dues, reserves, or HOA borrowing
- Individual homeowner equity cannot readily finance building-level improvements

Rental Buildings

- Owners have more centralized access to financing
- Capital improvement costs may be passed through to tenants
- Potential affordability impacts for renters

High-rise fires pose life safety risk

High-rise buildings present greater fire response and evacuation challenges

- Building height and occupant density complicate **evacuation, firefighting, and rescue**
- SFFD identifies automatic sprinklers as one component of the life-safety systems that allow safer evacuation/relocation strategies in high-rises

Local fire incidents demonstrate continued risk

- SFFD responded to **1,694 fires in occupied residential buildings** between July 2016 and the report date
- **942 fires (56%)** occurred in multifamily residential buildings
- At least **86 fires originated on the 7th floor or higher**
- Of these, **46 occurred without a fire suppression system present** and 36 had an operating wet-pipe sprinkler system
- No fatalities were reported among these 86 incidents; each group had two documented civilian injuries

Peer Jurisdictions

Other jurisdictions have used exemptions, repeal, or alternative life-safety standards in response to cost and implementation concerns

Jurisdiction

San Jose

Houston / San Antonio

San Diego

Honolulu / Florida

Philadelphia

Outcome

Full compliance; only 11 buildings affected

Compliance; condominiums exempt

Ordinance repealed after extensions

Alternative life-safety compliance permitted

In progress: property tax abatement financing program with Pennsylvania Legislature

Policy Options

The Board of Supervisors should:

1. Consider **repealing** the ordinance
2. Consider **amending** the ordinance to **include exclusions for alternative life-safety systems**
3. Improve cost certainty by **developing building-by-building profiles** of major cost-drivers
4. Consider establishing **financial assistance programming**

Questions and comments

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