

California geologist says quake fault lies beneath Hollywood project



California's geologist says the proposed Millennium Hollywood skyscraper project lies atop an active earthquake fault. (Mel Melcon, Los Angeles Times)

California's state geologist has concluded that an active earthquake fault is underneath a massive proposed skyscraper project in Hollywood, setting the stage for a huge battle at City Hall over growth and seismic safety.

The California Geological Survey on Thursday released its final map showing the estimated path of the Hollywood fault. It shows the fault line running under the site of Millennium Hollywood, which would be the tallest and largest development in Hollywood history.

The state map shows a fault line south of the Capitol Records tower in an area that could serve as the site of one of the Millennium skyscrapers.

“Our conclusion from the data is that there is an active fault, and it does run right along the course that's right along the map,” said state geologist John Parrish.

The state's findings further complicate the future of the project, which has the backing of L.A. Mayor Eric Garcetti and is seen as a major step in the city's effort to remake Hollywood as a vibrant, denser neighborhood.

Developers want to build 35- and 39-story buildings that would add 1 million square feet of housing, hotel rooms, offices, restaurants and stores, transforming land littered with parking lots into a new urban hub full of workers and shoppers in a project that could be worth as much as \$1 billion.

The developer's consultant, Michael Reader, again asserted Thursday that his analysis of his data shows no evidence of active faults underneath Millennium.

"We're disappointed," Reader said, calling the state's conclusion "incorrect."

Philip Aarons, of Millennium Partners, said his company would continue geological testing to investigate any seismic safety concern raised by the city. He said he believes more study will "further demonstrate our expert's conclusions that no active fault exists on our site."

"We've said it before and we've said it again: Millennium Hollywood is steadfast in its commitment to building a safe project that conforms to the highest earthquake resiliency standards," Aarons said.

California law generally bans new buildings on an active earthquake fault because of the risk to public safety.

Houses sitting astride an earthquake fault were badly damaged during the 1971 Sylmar earthquake and the Napa earthquake in August, rendering them uninhabitable. In China and Taiwan, taller buildings on faults have been destroyed, killing people inside when they collapsed, Parrish said.

Whether the project goes forward will ultimately be up to the Los Angeles Department of Building and Safety. The City Council voted last year to approve the Millennium project. But as concerns about seismic safety increased, **Garcetti said he would rely on government experts to determine whether the city should issue permits to allow the skyscrapers to be built.**

Jessica A. Levinson, a Loyola Law School professor who focuses on governance issues, says the conflict between seismic safety and the desire for development puts the city in a dilemma.

"Common sense dictates that we need to be careful about building a skyscraper on top of a fault line," Levinson said. "Ideally, this is the type of thing we do beforehand, where there is a determination about where it's safe to build — and then a project goes forward. And my gut feeling is that we may all learn from this experience."

Millennium Hollywood has spent significant money on geotechnical studies after the state released a draft map in January showing the fault's estimated path underneath its property. After

a trench was dug on an eastern section of the Millennium site, **Reader appealed to the state to remove the Hollywood fault from that area on the map.**

State officials have analyzed all the data supplied by the developer's consultants but came to a dramatically different conclusion. Looking at underground sonar and soil samples and a break in the soil layers at the very end of a trench, **state officials said an active earthquake fault slices through the part of the property where Millennium's skyscrapers could be placed.**

Los Angeles Councilman Mitch O'Farrell, whose district includes Hollywood, said "there is clearly a disconnect between the [developer's] data and the state's final map, which must be reconciled."

The state's map now shifts the attention to city building officials and Millennium.

Millennium must submit its geology reports, which conclude there are no active faults, and apply for building permits from the city before construction can proceed. City building officials will judge whether the developer has proven it won't be building on top of a fault.

The city building department said it cannot reach a conclusion until it receives and reviews the data.

"If an active fault is found, physically, not just theoretically, they're going to have to deal with it," said Luke Zamperini, spokesman for the Los Angeles building department.

The new map also contained other shifts of the estimated path of the fault line. A line was removed from beneath the former KFWB radio studio at 6230 Yucca St., where a 16-story residential complex is planned just east of the Millennium complex. State officials said further testing showed the fault was inactive at that location, and the city last week allowed the project to move forward.

A nearby commercial and residential development, known as Blvd6200, now has the fault's path skirting its northern edge, no longer underneath the building.

"We do not project the fault going underneath Blvd6200, but it certainly goes very close to it, through the backyard," Parrish said. The project's consultants "presented some persuasive information that the fault really should be pushed up north. We agreed with them."

John M. Bowman, a lawyer for Blvd6200, praised the state's decision.

"The process worked," he said.

The California Geological Survey's completion of the Hollywood fault zone map marks a new era of restrictions for development in this thin zone, stretching from the Sunset Strip in West Hollywood to Atwater Village. Future construction in the fault zone will generally require proof that new buildings won't be built on top of a fault. The so-called Alquist-Priolo Earthquake Fault Zone is roughly 500 feet wide on either side of the fault's estimated path.

Advertisement

State scientists assembled the map over the last year by analyzing existing geology reports, including from old soil samples and geologic formations that indicate the fault's location. "We have placed, I think with a great deal of accuracy and information, where we thoroughly believe that the trace of an active fault exists throughout this whole area," Parrish said.

ron.lin@latimes.com

rosanna.xia@latimes.com