



ADA COMPLIANCE VS. SEISMIC RETROFITS: A CONFLICT WORTH RESOLVING

In many U.S. cities, property owners who voluntarily strengthen their buildings with seismic retrofits are sometimes surprised to learn that they must also bring certain accessibility features up to [current ADA \(Americans with Disabilities Act\) standards](#)—even when no changes to occupancy or tenant improvements are being made.

This document explains when and why ADA compliance may be required during seismic retrofits, how it creates a barrier for property owners, and why many in the industry believe this policy needs to change.

WHEN SEISMIC WORK TRIGGERS ADA COMPLIANCE

In California, for example, seismic retrofitting is classified by the Building Code as an “alteration”—a category of construction that can trigger ADA compliance requirements. This means cities may require accessibility upgrades even when:

- There’s no change in occupancy
- The work doesn’t involve tenant improvements
- The project is a voluntary life-safety retrofit

These requirements often focus on the path of travel leading to the area of work, which can include:

- Parking area striping and signage (in hardship cases, required upgrades may be limited to 20% of the total construction cost)
- Entry ramps and/or accessible doorways
- Restroom modifications
- Hardware, signage, or handrail changes

In cities like Los Angeles, seismic retrofits for soft-story and non-ductile concrete buildings are now mandatory under the [National Earthquake Hazards Reduction Program](#). ADA compliance requirements may still be triggered during these mandated retrofits, particularly for upgrades to parking lot striping, accessible travel paths, entryways, ramps, and restrooms.

Even under mandatory retrofit programs, ADA requirements for accessibility upgrades—such as ramps, doorways, and restroom modifications—continue to apply when seismic work is classified as an alteration.



This requirement is rooted in the idea that any significant work on a building should also improve accessibility. However, *seismic retrofits don't affect how a building is used or accessed*—raising concerns about whether this rule is being fairly applied in this context.

WHY THIS CREATES A BURDEN ON BUILDING OWNERS

Adding ADA compliance to a seismic retrofit increases total project cost—sometimes significantly.

Although hardship exemptions exist, they generally limit required ADA spending to **20% of the total construction cost**. For smaller retrofits, even the 20% cap can be a major burden—especially when the retrofit itself is already difficult to fund.

REAL-WORLD IMPACT

Saunders Seismic has worked with clients—including large REITs—who ultimately chose **not to proceed** with a voluntary seismic retrofit due to the additional cost and scope of ADA-triggered upgrades.

With more cities implementing mandatory retrofit ordinances, property owners must now navigate both seismic safety standards and ADA compliance requirements. For example, in Pasadena, soft-story retrofits often include accessibility upgrades to entryways and parking areas.

In contrast, work like re-roofing, HVAC upgrades, and fire sprinkler replacements typically do **not** trigger ADA requirements—despite also involving building-wide improvements. The inconsistency creates confusion and discourages life-safety improvements.

CODE REVISIONS COULD ENCOURAGE MORE RETROFITTING

To encourage voluntary retrofits, many in the industry believe the state should:

- **Exempt seismic retrofits from ADA triggers** when no occupancy change is made
- **Align with policies used for re-roofing and similar building repairs**
- **Clarify hardship exemptions** and allow greater flexibility for life-safety projects



Advocacy groups continue pushing for clearer hardship exemptions under CBC 11B-202.4 to reduce the financial impact of ADA-triggered upgrades during seismic retrofits.

Many in the industry believe ADA requirements during seismic retrofits should align with policies for other repairs like re-roofing or fire sprinkler replacements, which typically do not trigger accessibility upgrades.

Reducing unnecessary requirements could result in more buildings being strengthened—especially older buildings that are most at risk during an earthquake

WHAT BUILDING OWNERS CAN DO

If you're considering a seismic retrofit and are concerned about ADA costs:

- Speak with your contractor about hardship exemptions under CBC 11B-202.4
- Work with a design team familiar with ADA compliance and retrofit scope
- Advocate for code changes at the city or state level
- Document how ADA costs may be delaying or preventing your retrofit
- Check if your property qualifies for financial assistance through FEMA grants or local funding initiatives as part of mandatory retrofit programs in cities like San Jose.
- If your building is rent-stabilized in Los Angeles, note that only 50% of retrofit costs can be passed on to tenants, so plan accordingly when budgeting for both seismic and ADA-related upgrades.

A CALL FOR CHANGE

As we reflect on the challenges posed by ADA requirements during seismic retrofits, it's clear that regulatory clarity and flexibility are crucial for ensuring life safety without undue delay.

At [Saunders Seismic](#), we've seen firsthand how unexpected ADA compliance costs can stall or cancel important retrofits. We help clients navigate these complexities and explore their options—because life safety should never be compromised by regulatory confusion.

If you're planning a seismic upgrade and need guidance on how ADA rules may affect your project, [contact us](#). We're here to help you navigate these challenges and ensure your building is safer for everyone.