

Correcting a Housing Crisis

The defeat of Proposition 3, a proposal to raise \$100 million with City of Los Angeles bonds to help landlords bring old apartment buildings up to earthquake safety standards, was both unexpected and unfortunate.

Proposition 3 fell short of approval by only 3,500 votes and, as often happens after a narrow political defeat, supporters of the measure are looking to put the blame wherever they can. But the biggest disadvantage Proposition 3 faced was having to win approval by 66% of the vote cast rather than a simple majority, because it would have raised the city property tax slightly. Considering the difficulty of getting 66% support for almost anything on the ballot, all the backers of Proposition 3 should have been more active and involved in the campaign on its behalf.

But what happened in the past is less important than what must be done now to make sure that none of the low-cost housing Proposition 3 was supposed to preserve is lost.

City engineers estimate that there are about 1,600 old buildings made of brick or other masonry materials within the city limits. They are vulnerable to serious damage in earthquakes, so various city laws require that they be reinforced or torn down. Many of these same buildings also represent a significant portion of the low-cost housing in the

city, a resource already in scarce supply. Proposition 3 would have provided low-interest loans so landlords could refurbish the old buildings without having to raise rents beyond the reach of poor tenants. That is still the soundest approach to the problem, so a revised version of Proposition 3 should be put to city voters again, as soon as feasible.

In the meantime, the City Council should put a temporary moratorium on the destruction of apartment buildings whose owners could have qualified for the money raised by Proposition 3. And Mayor Tom Bradley, whose lackadaisical approach to the issue of low-cost housing in the city has been particularly disappointing, should order city officials to provide technical assistance to any landlord who wants to apply for state money that will soon become available to refurbish housing units that do not meet earthquake standards.

The state fund was created last year when voters approved California Proposition 77. But with only \$80 million for the entire state, Proposition 77 will barely make a dent in the \$100-million challenge facing Los Angeles. That's why city officials must return to the proverbial drawing board and write up another version of Proposition 3.