

California Historical Building Code
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The California Historical Building Code (CHBC) sounds like a dusty old document found in the library or on display at the Alameda Historical Museum. In fact, the *CHBC* is used every day in Alameda and around the state. The *CHBC* is the mandatory building code for all qualified historical structures in California. And, as you might imagine, we have numerous qualified historical structures here in Alameda.

The premise behind the *CHBC* is to facilitate the preservation and continuing use of qualified historical buildings or properties while providing safe living space for building occupants and access for persons with disabilities. Application of current code would often make it impossible to maintain and reuse historical buildings. The *CHBC* provides alternative solutions for the preservation of those old buildings, which make up so much of the fabric of Alameda. Use of the *CHBC* is key to being able to renovate the Carnegie Library, located across the street from City Hall. Rather than altering the appearance of the front of the building by adding an extensive ramp, the *CHBC* allows for accessibility by way of an alternative main entrance on the Oak Street side of the building.

Buildings are designated as “qualified historical buildings” when they are placed on, or are eligible to be placed on, national, state, or local historic registers. Over 4,000 structures in Alameda fall into one of those three categories. A list of these buildings can be found on the City of Alameda’s website. Several thousand additional buildings in Alameda are considered qualified historical structures since all buildings built prior to 1942 are deemed important to the history and architecture of Alameda. Nearly a quarter

of all buildings in Alameda are qualified historical buildings and eligible to use the CHBC.

So, what are the advantages to using the CHBC over the current building code? The CHBC is divided into 10 chapters: Chapter 1 outlines the intent and administration of the code; and Chapter 2 provides code definitions. The bulk of the code requirements are contained in Chapters 3 through 9.

Chapter 3 deals with the use and occupancy of the building. Historic use may continue regardless of any period of time in which the building was unoccupied or occupied as a different use. This section was critical in restoring the historic Alameda Theater. Chapter 3 allows for reduced room dimensions as well as reduced light and ventilation requirements. This chapter also allows for the retention, replacement and extension of original materials, and the continued use of original methods of construction.

Chapter 4 deals with fire protection and allows the installation of an automatic fire sprinkler system to satisfy a number of fire code issues. Chapter 5 addresses means of egress from a building. Fire escapes and fire escape ladders can be used as one legal exit. Existing door, corridor and stairway widths may remain as is. Stairways can have different tread and riser dimensions than those required in current code. Handrails and guardrails either are not required or can be built to match the existing architecture of the building. Bedroom egress windows can be significantly smaller and closer to the property line.

Chapter 6 provides alternative accessibility provisions. Many historic buildings would be impossible to reuse if strict adherence to the current accessibility code was mandated. Chapter 6 provisions can be used if strict adherence to current code will

threaten or destroy the historical significance or character defining features of a building. For example, the provisions of this chapter were utilized in the renovation of City Hall. Code, at that time, required accessibility at the main entrance of the building through the addition of a ramp on the Santa Clara side of the building. By invoking the CHBC the City was able to provide accessible entrance on the Oak Street side that provided access without altering the historic character of the building.

Chapter 7 sets structural provisions that provide a reasonable level of safety while allowing for structural alternatives that are less than current code. Chapter 8 allows for the continued use of archaic materials and methods of construction. This would include the use of adobe, lath and plaster, and structural wrought iron. Both Chapters 7 and 8 require minimum levels of safety, but do not require buildings to meet full current code, a requirement that would make the renovation of many historical buildings financially unfeasible.

Chapter 9 regulates mechanical, plumbing and electrical systems in a building. This chapter allows existing systems that do not constitute a safety hazard to remain in place. For instance, knob and tube wiring can remain, plumbing fixtures that do not meet low-flow requirements do not have to be replaced, and masonry chimneys can still be used to vent fuel-burning appliances. One of the most significant provisions of Chapter 9 is the exemption of qualified historical buildings from complying with energy conservation standards. Chapter 10 allows for the CHBC to be applied to sites and open spaces surrounding qualified historical buildings.

The State of California adopted the first CHBC in 1979. The State realized the importance of protecting California's architectural heritage by recognizing the unique

construction problems inherent in historic buildings and by providing a specialized set of code requirements. While many cities in California use the CHBC once in awhile, the City of Alameda invokes this historical code on a daily basis. It is one of the most important tools the City has in allowing property owners the ability to rehabilitate, preserve, and restore those structures that define the character of Alameda.

Please feel free to contact us should you have any questions. I am available by email at buildingofficial@ci.alameda.ca.us or by phone at (510) 747-6850. The Planning & Building Department is located in Room 190 on the first floor of City Hall, at 2263 Santa Clara Avenue.