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SF Bay Structural Engineers Respond to High-Rise Building Challenges

San Francisco, September 29, 2006 -- In response to the recent surge in new high-rise building construction in San Francisco and other Bay Area cities, members of the Structural Engineers Association of Northern California (SEAONC at www.seaonc.org) have been actively participating in several concurrent initiatives to help ensure that these tall buildings for residential, office, hotel, and related mixed-use occupancies are designed to protect the safety of future occupants as well as the public at-large. These initiatives include the creation and review of innovative designs, the development of new codes, and the participation in public forums to promote seismic safety.

1. Structural Engineers Create Innovative High-Rise Designs to Improve Views and More

This tall building boom has created a demand for structural engineers to employ innovative techniques in their design of framing systems. These systems allow buildings to be constructed without bulky perimeter members that partially obstruct views as would traditionally be required by building codes. Most commonly, variations of a concrete “core-wall” earthquake-resisting system--where an internal core of heavily reinforced concrete walls surrounds elevators, stairs, and mechanical/service areas--are being employed for these structures, which reach heights of over 500 feet. Detailed computer models allow the design engineer to subject a representation of the structure to actual large earthquake motions that have been recorded in California, Japan, Taiwan, and elsewhere around the world.

2. Structural Engineers Review Designs for Safety

Reviewing the strategies being proposed for the design of these new buildings by the “peer review” process is another of the important tasks performed by structural engineers. While innovative framing systems offer the advantage of lower cost, faster construction, more flexible architectural layouts, and enhanced aesthetics, jurisdictional authorities require that expert members of the structural engineering community make certain that they meet safety and functionality standards as well. Ron Hamburger, a former president of SEAONC, as well as other structural engineers in the area are currently actively assisting building departments in their review and approval of these high-rise structures.

3. Structural Engineers Develop New Codes to Guide Future Building Designs

Developing new codes and structural design criteria for these tall buildings to help ensure that they will be safe and usable following major earthquakes is yet another area where local structural engineers are heavily involved. Professor Jack Moehle of UC Berkeley is spearheading one of these efforts in the context of a 24-month collaborative study organized by the Pacific Earthquake Engineering Research Center headquartered at UC Berkeley which commenced in August 2006. The study's recommendations are expected to guide the structural engineering community in the design of tall buildings for years to come.

4. Structural Engineers Provide their Expertise and Leadership in Public Forums

Participating in public forums, which lend support to the efforts of city building departments in maintaining high standards for new construction, is a final way in which local structural engineers are involved with the high-rise building issue. The City of San Francisco's Department of Building Inspection, for example, has scheduled a panel presentation entitled "DBI's Peer Review Expertise is Changing the City's Skyline" during their "Meet the Pros at Building Inspection" seminar on October 25, 2006. The panel will include UC Berkeley Professor Jack Moehle, also a member of SEAONC, and Dr. Joe Maffei, another SEAONC member and practicing structural engineer who has participated in the peer review of several high-rise structures.

Founded in 1930, SEAONC is committed to advancing the art and science of structural engineering.

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