City of Walnut Creek

Development Review Services

1666 N. Main Street, Walnut Creek, CA 94596

(925) 943-5834 *phone* (925) 256-3500 *fax*

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Common Questions and Answers Regarding Suspended Systems for Acoustical Tile and for Lay-In Panel Ceilings Under the 1991 UBC*

Q1: The UBC 1991 Edition inadvertently deleted the prescriptive vertical support and lateral bracing provisions for the subject ceilings from the previous 1988 UBC. It was put back into the 1994 UBC. This results in the 1991 UBC requiring specific designs for such suspended ceiling, without reference to a national prescriptive standard. Is there a prescriptive approach available for use with the 1991 UBC that is similar to the 1988 UBC Standard 47-18 for such systems?

A1: In absence of a specific design in accordance with UBC Chapter 23 provisions, the City of Walnut Creek will accept designs based upon the 1994 UBC Standard 25-2. Detailing meeting these requirements must be on the plans.

Q2: When are existing suspended ceilings required to be analyzed per UBC 1991 Chapter 23 Table 23-P requirements for seismic loads or, alternatively, upgraded to the 1994 UBC Standard 25-2 in lieu of such analysis?

A2: Existing ceiling grids will be required to be upgraded to present code when the existing system is determined not to be installed in accordance with the code in effect at the time of its original installation and the current permit application is for a complete change in tenant. Where a tenant space is expanding in area only and there will not be a complete change in tenant, then only that area associated with the expansion shall be subject to upgrading per the conditions stated. For practical purposes, the occupied area will not be required to be upgraded. The burden of proof to show that the existing ceiling system was originally installed per the codes in effect at that time will be on the applicant.

Exception: When the scope of work performed results in the need to remove most of the lay-in tile for access purposes, such as when HVAC duct systems located within the ceiling area are being repaired, altered, or newly installed, then the ceiling system must be upgraded too, even if there is not a change in tenant.

Q3: Assuming that the existing ceiling grid has been determined to be installed per the codes at that time, what are the specific requirements for alterations to an exiting ceiling system?

A3: Alterations will be considered to be one of the following projects:

a. Complete removal and reinstallation of a portion of an existing suspended system.
b. Relocating or adding light or HVAC fixtures within an exiting suspended ceiling grid.
c. Alterations which require the removal of most of the lay-in tile for access purposes, such as when HVAC duct systems located within the ceiling area are being repaired, altered, or newly installed.
d. Adding partition walls which are to be braced by the ceiling grid.

For these types of projects, the altered area must be installed per the present code. If the altered area is less than 144 square feet, then no lateral bracing will be required. Only the vertical support system of the grid and fixtures would be required in this case. If the altered area exceeds 144 square feet, then the altered are must be brought up to the current code provisions for vertical and lateral support.

Responsibility of Designer

It is the designer's responsibility to clearly indicate on the plans the extent of the upgrade to an existing ceiling system consistent with the above policy. If details for vertical and/or lateral support of suspended systems is provided on the plans but the designer has not specifically indicated the region of the suspended system for which the details apply, then the City will assume it applies to the entire ceiling grid and fixtures and require all the grid and fixtures to be upgraded per the details. It is therefore important that the designer clearly show where the upgrade is to occur.

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* The term system is meant to include extra wiring and connection requirements for lights and HVAC diffusers in addition to the grid and tiles.