

Getting a project through in San Francisco

For developers and builders · about 3 minutes · reviewed August 22, 2026

What the parcel allows, what is already approved on the block, and the sequence of public filings a project leaves behind - read as a schedule rather than as a list.

From Scan the Block

Every public record on one San Francisco address, in a single report: the Assessor's file, permits and violations, zoning, hazards and the published earthquake maps, rent-control indication, and ten years of the surrounding blocks - each count compared with an average San Francisco area of the same size, and none of it scored. scantheblock.com

A project in San Francisco leaves a trail of public filings in a fairly predictable order. Read as a list it is bureaucracy. Read as a sequence it is a schedule, and it is the most honest one available - because it records what actually happened to comparable projects on comparable parcels rather than what anybody expected to happen.

■ WHAT THE PARCEL ALLOWS

The zoning district and the height limit come from the Planning department's own map service rather than from a copy, together with historic status where it applies. Those set the envelope. The Assessor's unit count is the figure any addition is measured against.

Read the historic line first, not last. A building in an Article 10 or Article 11 district, or carried on a survey, brings a review process that is a schedule item and a cost item. It is the single most common reason a feasible-looking parcel is not.

■ THE CONSTRAINTS THAT ARE ABOUT THE GROUND

- The Maher ordinance area triggers a soil investigation requirement on work that disturbs ground, which is most of what a project does.
- Liquefaction and landslide zones are state-mapped and change what a structure must be designed to withstand.
- Alquist-Priolo fault zones restrict building for human occupancy across a mapped trace and require a fault investigation.
- The FEMA flood layer is the one a lender and an insurer will use, and is distinct from the city's own storm and sea-level work.

The report names which apply to a parcel. What each costs on a given scheme is your engineer's answer, and no records report should pretend otherwise.

■ WHAT IS ALREADY APPROVED ON THE BLOCK

The development pipeline shows projects filed nearby and the net new homes they propose. It reads two ways at once and both are true: supply arriving in your submarket, and evidence that entitlement is

achievable on this block with this kind of scheme. The second is the more useful of the two at feasibility stage, because it is the closest thing to a precedent you can obtain without asking anybody.

■ THE FILING SEQUENCE, AND WHAT EACH STEP TELLS YOU

1. An eviction on no-fault grounds - demolition, or substantial rehabilitation. Rare, unambiguous, and the earliest public signal that a site is being cleared rather than improved. The Rent Board publishes these to the block rather than the address; that anonymisation is theirs and cannot be undone.
2. A demolition permit. Keyed to the parcel, with the description of what is coming down.
3. A new construction permit, carrying the proposed unit count - the pipeline at its earliest addressable point.
4. Major work permits, declared cost over half a million, which is the marker for serious money going into an existing building rather than a replacement of it.

Each of these is published within about two days of filing, except the Rent Board's, which run about eight. Watched as a stream rather than searched per address, the sequence tells you which blocks are moving before any of it reaches a listing.

■ THE OBLIGATIONS THAT SURVIVE A CHANGE OF HANDS

Open permits transfer. Active notices of violation transfer. A soft-story obligation transfers, and reads Non-Compliant until the work is done and signed off. On a value-add thesis the gap between the permit record and the physical building is the first thing to price, because unpermitted work is simultaneously a financing question, an insurance question, and a question about what you are allowed to keep.

■ WHAT THE RECORD WILL NOT DO FOR YOU

It will not tell you what will be approved. Entitlement is a decision made by people applying discretion, and no dataset predicts it - the pipeline shows what was filed and what was built, which is evidence and not a forecast. There is no score here, no site ranking, and no owner is named. What it gives you is the same set of facts the planner across the table already has.

■ READ THE RECORD ON AN ACTUAL ADDRESS

Everything described in this guide comes out of one report on one San Francisco address. Type an address at scantheblock.com and it takes a few seconds; re-opening a report you have already run is free, always. Reports are a web page and a PDF you can share, and every figure carries the caveat that qualifies it.

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■ ABOUT THIS GUIDE

Last reviewed August 22, 2026. Every rule described here is San Francisco's, not ours, and the city changes them - where a date or a threshold matters to a deal, confirm it against the city. This is general information about public records and not

legal, tax or investment advice.

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