Lending against a San Francisco building

For lenders and underwriters · about 3 minutes · reviewed August 22, 2026

The obligations that transfer with a parcel, the ones with a deadline attached, and why San Francisco publishes no lien, default or foreclosure record at all - which changes what due diligence has to cover.

Most of what changes an underwrite in San Francisco is a public filing about the parcel. Almost none of it is indexed anywhere a lender would naturally look, and one whole category that exists in other counties does not exist here at all.

START WITH WHAT DOES NOT EXIST

San Francisco publishes no lien, no notice of default, no tax-default auction list and no foreclosure record in its open data. Not delayed, not partial - absent. Those records live with the Assessor-Recorder's document system and the county tax collector, and they are obtained by a title search, not by reading the city's published datasets.

This matters because the absence is easy to misread as good news. A report drawn from open data showing nothing encumbering a parcel is not evidence that nothing encumbers it; it is evidence that the encumbrance register is somewhere else. Title work is not optional here and nothing in a records report replaces it.

THE OBLIGATIONS THAT TRANSFER WITH THE BUILDING

1. Open permits. A permit filed and never closed goes with the property. Closing somebody else's unfinished paperwork is a real cost and occasionally a condition of sale. The report separates open from complete, and flags the datasets where a large share of records carry no recorded outcome at all - nearly half of all plumbing permits - because those must be counted as neither, not quietly assumed finished.
2. Active notices of violation. These attach to the building. A borrower's plan to remedy is a schedule and a budget item, and the count of open items across separate inspections is the useful figure.
3. The soft-story retrofit obligation. Wood-frame, five or more units, three or more storeys, permitted before 1978. If the parcel is on the program and reads Non-Compliant, there is a mandatory six-figure structural project ahead of it with a deadline attached.
4. Maher ordinance area. A parcel inside it carries a soil investigation requirement on certain work, which is a cost and a delay on anything involving excavation.

WHAT THE BUILDING MAY CHARGE, AND WHO DECIDES

Income is the underwrite, and in San Francisco income is constrained by ordinance rather than by the market alone. Two protections that are commonly treated as one:

- Price control. A building with a certificate of occupancy issued before 13 June 1979 is presumed under the Rent Ordinance's limit on increases. The report gives the date and says why the presumption applies.
- Just cause. Eviction protection is a separate protection with a wider reach. Costa-Hawkins commonly exempts single-family homes and condominiums from the rent cap while just-cause protection continues to apply to the tenancy.

Underwriting one and inheriting the other is the familiar and expensive version of this mistake. Where a landlord has petitioned the Rent Board - for a capital improvement passthrough, or for a Costa-Hawkins exemption ruling - those petitions are published, and they are a direct statement about what the owner believes the building can charge.

THE TAX LINE IS ABOUT TO CHANGE

Under Proposition 13 an assessment is anchored to the last transfer and rises by at most about two per cent a year. A long-held building carries a tax bill with no relationship to a new buyer's. The borrower's basis is what they pay, so the reassessment is the number to model, and the current bill is only useful as evidence of how long the anchor has held. The report shows the anchor and its age.

READING THE SURROUNDINGS WITHOUT READING THE NEIGHBORHOOD

The report compares counts within a radius against the city as a whole and shows the arithmetic that produced each comparison. What it will not do is turn that into a rating, a grade or a characterization of a place, and the reason is not modesty. School quality and area crime scores are the most common proxies for characteristics the Fair Housing Act protects, and a lending decision built on one is a lending decision built on a proxy. Counts and sources; the judgment stays with you.

DATES, AND THE LAG

Every filing carries the date it was filed with the city, which is not the day it became readable. Permits and violations run about two days behind, Rent Board petitions three, eviction notices about eight, and buyout agreements nearer twelve. For a file closing this week that gap is the whole story: the absence of a filing from the last fortnight is not evidence that none was made.

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.