

How to read a report

For anyone holding a report · about 5 minutes · reviewed August 21, 2026

Forty-two sections in the order they matter, what each comparison actually claims, and the three places the report is deliberately silent.

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

■ FORTY-TWO SECTIONS, AND THE FOUR THAT CARRY MOST OF IT

A report is long because a property is. But it is not a document to read front to back, and the order on the page is the order a first-time reader needs rather than the order a decision needs. Four sections carry most of the weight.

1. What will come up. The transaction, compressed: retrofit obligations, permits left open, point-of-sale requirements, mapped hazard zones, a long-anchored assessment. If you read one section, read this one - it is assembled from the others precisely so you do not have to.
2. The last 90 days. Everything else is a decade. This is the quarter, set against what this block's own decade predicts for a quarter. It is the only section that answers "what is it like there now".
3. The building on record. The Assessor's file. Year built decides rent control. The last sale date explains the tax bill and predicts what yours would be. Square footage that disagrees with a listing is worth knowing before somebody else notices.
4. The summary at the top. Written from the report's own figures, pulling the obvious things forward. It concludes nothing and scores nothing - it surfaces.

■ WHAT A COMPARISON ACTUALLY CLAIMS

Every area count carries a ratio - 1.7x the San Francisco average. That number has a precise and narrow meaning: this many records fell inside your radius, against the number you would expect if the city's total for that dataset were spread evenly across the city's area, scaled to a circle of your size.

It is arithmetic about a dataset, not a judgment about a place. A dense downtown block will read high on almost everything because more of everything happens where more people are. A ratio of 4x is a fact about record density; what it is worth is yours to decide.

Note

Where a radius is small enough that fewer than one record is expected, the report omits the ratio rather than dividing by a fraction and producing a number that looks meaningful and is not.

Direction, not verdict

Trends compare the last three full years with the three before them, and report the direction and the

magnitude - 24% down against 2020-2022. The current year is excluded, because a part-year against a full one always reads as a collapse. Nothing is called an improvement or a decline, because those are opinions about a number rather than the number.

■ WHICH SECTIONS ARE THE PARCEL, AND WHICH ARE THE AREA

This is the distinction that decides what a section is actually claiming, and it is not the same for every section.

- The parcel, keyed to block and lot, so it is this building and nothing else: the Assessor's record, building permits, electrical and plumbing permits, complaints and notices of violation, soft-story status, energy benchmarking.
- The area, counted inside the radius you chose: police, fire, 311, evictions, buyouts, Rent Board petitions, fire-safety violations, collisions, businesses, storefront vacancy, street trees.

Two are worth knowing about specifically. Fire-safety violations are the area, even though they sound like a building fact - the fire datasets key on ragged free-text addresses, so asking for one parcel returns nothing even for buildings with a long history, and nothing would read as a clean record. And buyouts and petitions are the area for the same reason evictions are: they describe a market, not the flat you are looking at.

Note

Where a section is the area, the report says so on the section itself, with the radius. It never quietly presents an area figure as a fact about the address.

■ THREE PLACES THE REPORT IS DELIBERATELY SILENT

- It never scores. No safety rating, no letter for the block, no school ratings. In the United States, characterizing a neighborhood is how somebody ends up on the wrong side of the Fair Housing Act, and school quality is the most common proxy for characteristics the Act protects.
- It never describes a person. No owner names, no residents, no demographics. The census section describes buildings - how many homes a tract holds, how many stand empty - and stops there.
- It refuses sex-offender data outright. California Penal Code 290.46(j)(2) makes it unlawful to use the state's database for anything to do with housing. A property report is exactly that use.

■ THE CAVEAT IS PART OF THE FIGURE

Every number that needs qualifying carries its qualification beside it, on the page and in the PDF. Police data is anonymised to the block, so a count near an address is not a statement about that address. An assessment is a Proposition 13 figure and not a valuation. A permit is filed paperwork, and filed is not built.

This is why the report can be forwarded. A figure travels with the sentence that limits it, so the person you send it to reads both.

■ ASK IT, RATHER THAN HUNTING

Every report takes questions in plain words - is this rent controlled, are there open permits, what does the liquefaction zone mean here. The answer comes from that report's own figures, and when something is not in the report it says so rather than guessing. It will not price anything or characterize an area, deliberately.

Draft a message does the opposite job: it turns the report into a short, neutral note you can send someone, with the facts already in it and nothing you would have to defend later.

■ TWO CONTROLS WORTH MOVING

Radius. A thousand feet is the default and suits a mid-block address. On a corner, a main road, or anywhere the character changes within a block, two or three blocks tells you more than one does. Two hundred feet is tighter than a block and useful when you want the immediate frontage only.

Years. Ten is the default. Shorten it when a neighborhood has changed and the old years are drowning the recent ones; lengthen it when you want to see a long arc.

Note

Changing either re-runs the report and spends one from your allowance. Re-opening a report you have already run is free, forever, and never counts.

■ 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.

Run a report

Every guide, free to read

The 41 neighborhoods, a decade each

Plans

Questions, or a correction

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■ ABOUT THIS GUIDE

Last reviewed August 21, 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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