

PORT CODE PROCEDURE

NO. PCP-029

DATE : January 30, 2026

SUBJECT : Plan Review and Inspection

TITLE : Building Code Requirements for Temporary Events at the Port of San Francisco

PURPOSE : The purpose of this Port Code Procedure is to summarize code requirements that are commonly applicable to temporary events at the Port of San Francisco. The current version of this PCP focuses on temporary structures, but may be revised in the future to address other building code topics. This PCP provides summary information for event organizers who may not be familiar with building codes, and provides code citations where detailed requirements can be reviewed.

REFERENCES : 2025 California Building Code (CBC): dgs.ca.gov/BSC/Codes
 2025 Port of SF Building Code (PoSFBC): sfport.com/codes-guidelines-regulations
 2025 San Francisco Fire Code (SFFC) and Administrative Bulletins

PERMITTING : The Port of San Francisco frequently hosts events that involve the construction of temporary structures and temporary uses in existing buildings or marine structures. Examples include performances, conferences, sporting events, marketing events, and others. Temporary structures and temporary uses are regulated by the CBC, primarily in Chapter 31 *Special Construction*.

At the Port of San Francisco, permitting for both temporary and permanent construction is managed by the Building Permit Group (BPG), within the Port's Engineering Division (Port Engineering). Information on construction permits, application forms, and BPG contacts are on the Port's website at sfport.com/permitservices, and the BPG team can be contacted directly at permit-desk@sfport.com.

San Francisco Fire Department has a dedicated Port Fire Marshall and fire prevention staff assigned to the Port, who should be consulted for all temporary events (email: PortFireMarshal@sfgov.org).

Definition of *Temporary* in the Building Code

Refer to 2025 CBC Section 3103.1. Temporary structures may only be erected for a period of less than 180 days. Extensions up to a total duration of 1 year are allowed by the CBC, but are at the discretion of the Port's building official (the Chief Harbor Engineer) and Fire Department's Port Fire Marshall, must be specifically requested, and shall comply with the requirements of CBC Section 3103.1.1. Even after an approved extension a temporary structure may not be in place for more than 1 year, after this point it must comply with all building code requirements applicable to permanent construction or cease occupancy and be removed.

Port Building Permits vs. Encroachment Permits

The Port of San Francisco has two types of construction permits, and a temporary event may require one or both permit types. An Encroachment Permit is required for

any use of the public right-of-way, primarily streets and sidewalks. A Building Permit is required for any construction on land or in/on existing structures outside the public right of way, or any change of use / occupancy of an existing structure / building. Some common examples related to special events are listed below:

- Any temporary construction and/or change of use in/on a pier: Building Permit
- Partially blocking a sidewalk for a queuing zone needed for a temporary event in a pier: Encroachment Permit (in addition to any Building Permit required for event in the pier)
- A exempt-from-permit small tent outside the public right of way: no permit
- An exempt-from-permit small tent located in the public right of way: Encroachment Permit (unless in a pre-approved temporary vending location with license from Port of SF)
- Temporary structure 8 feet tall, in the public right of way: Encroachment Permit, with engineering package demonstrating compliance with CBC requirements for outdoor temporary structures

When an event requires both a Building Permit and an Encroachment Permit, two separate applications are required and the submittal documents should be separated between construction in the public right of way (Encroachment) and outside the right of way (Building). The same site plan may be used for both permit submittals, with the public right of way area clearly shown.

In addition to Port and Fire Department, other City Agency approvals may be triggered by a temporary event. Requirements of other City Agencies are outside the scope of this document, but Port Special Events staff can provide guidance.

STRUCTURES:

Exempt and Non-Exempt Temporary Structures

Refer to 2025 PoSFBC 106A.2 for a full list of “work exempt from permit”. Common exempt vs. non-exempt thresholds for temporary events are detailed below. An event consisting entirely of exempt temporary structures may still require a permit due to other factors such as encroachment into the public right of way, or a temporary change of use.

Tents and Membrane Structures:

Port aligns with San Francisco Fire Department Administrative Bulletin 5.10.

Tents and membrane structures less than or equal to 400 square feet are exempt from permit, and permit is required for tents greater than 400 square feet

Note that multiple tents must be separated by at least 12 feet, or will otherwise be counted together as a single tent to evaluate the 400 square feet threshold.

Platforms and Stages:

2025 PoSFBC Section 106A.2 Item #6.

Platforms and stages 30 inches or less above grade or floor surface, and not used for public assembly (e.g. public standing or seating), are exempt from permit. Permit is required for platforms and stages taller than 30 inches require permit.

Other Temporary Structures:

2025 PoSFBC Section 106A.2 Item #3.

Any other type of temporary structures shorter than 5 feet 9 inches is exempt from permit, and permit is required for temporary structures 5 feet 9 inches or taller.

The height limit is based on CBC requirements and is intended to address any object that could fall or tip over onto a person's upper body.

Engineering Requirements for Non-Exempt Temporary Structures:

For event organizers, it is important to understand that the structural design of non-exempt temporary structures is governed by building codes and requires a California-licensed Civil or Structural Engineer to evaluate or design such structures and demonstrate code compliance, and to inspect the construction of such structures.

For the licensed engineer, key code provisions are as follows:

- 2025 CBC Section 3103 – *Temporary Structures*. Note that there are exceptions for temporary structures within an existing structure. Structures on open pier decks shall be evaluated the same as an outdoor structure not within the confines of a building. *Public-occupancy temporary structures* are defined, with specific design requirements.
- 2025 PoSFBC 106A.1.8.2 – *Alternate Plan Review for Special Events*: Temporary structures are primarily self-certified by the licensed engineer responsible for their evaluation or design. Port plan reviewers perform a cursory review to verify that all required load cases have been evaluated, and that resulting reactions are suitable for the event site. Port staff typically do not review the structural design of the temporary structure itself, although staff may determine that additional review is required for exceptional cases.
- 2025 PoSFBC 106A.1.8.1 – *Additional Requirements for Special Events*: This section requires that a California-licensed Civil or Structural Engineer be on site to visually observe the completed temporary structures for general conformance with the approved construction documents, and furnish a letter to the Chief Harbor Engineer via Port's Building Inspectors. This is commonly known as a "post-build" letter. Although it is not required, it is strongly recommended that the same engineer or firm involved in the design / evaluation of the temporary structures also performs the post-build inspection.

Multiple Installations of Temporary Structures:

Special events such as a seasonal concert series or an annual holiday installation may use the exact same temporary structure for each event occurrence. A new permit application is required every time the event installation is erected and removed so that inspections of each installation event can be properly tracked. The engineering design documentation for any non-exempt temporary structures can be resubmitted for each recurrence, and will be accepted by Port plan reviewers, under the following conditions:

1. The initial event did not have any concerning conditions related to temporary structures.
2. Existing conditions at the event site have not changed.

3. The building code has not changed. The next major building code change is on January 1, 2029, but there can be interim revisions by both the State of California and by the Port of San Francisco.
4. The licensed engineer must provide a signed and sealed letter approving use of their design for multiple installation events at this specific site. Port plan reviewers will enforce any stipulations or caveats noted in the engineer's approval letter.

The requirement for a post-build inspection and approval letter by a licensed engineer is unchanged, and is required for each installation.

Temporary Structures and Uses on Piers, Wharves, and Other Structures:

Temporary loading added to an existing structure has the potential to cause overloading and damage if the existing structure is not properly evaluated. For events at the Port of San Francisco, the two most common cases are 1) loading added to pier or wharf decks from temporary structures or temporary occupants and 2) loading added to existing building trusses and other framing for event audio-visual and lighting equipment. In these and other similar situations, Port Engineering must be consulted early in event planning to assess feasibility, provide relevant information on Port structures to the event team, and to set expectations on the level of engineering analysis to be performed by the event team. In these consultations, Port Engineering serves as both the owner of the existing structure and the plan reviewer for the proposed event.

For events on pier decks, Port will often be able to provide general safe load limits for both distributed and concentrated loads added to the pier deck. Allowable distributed loads (pounds per square foot) will generally govern the types of temporary occupancy or use allowed. Refer to CBC Table 1607.1 under Assembly Areas for common distributed load requirements for events. Concentrated loads will generally govern both the maximum weight of equipment used for event setup, the maximum weight of exempt temporary structures, and the *maximum service-level reactions* calculated for any non-exempt temporary structures.

For equipment hung from existing trusses or other ceiling framing, Port often does not have allowable weight limits for a particular building's structural system. Event organizers must retain a licensed engineer to evaluate existing loads to the building framing plus the proposed additional loads and to demonstrate structural safety in accordance with the building code. Existing historic structures should not be assumed to have been designed for the live load or wind loads required by modern codes.

Dynamic Crowd Loading on Piers, Wharves, and Other Structures:

Concerts and other events may result in dense crowd loads. Crowds swaying in unison, jumping to their feet, or stomping can cause additional dynamic loading¹ that is not accounted for in Port's distributed load limits for piers and wharves. Event organizers that do not anticipate such crowd behavior shall have crowd control plans in place to, for example, monitor behavior and cut all music when unexpected crowd behavior may be increasing dynamic loads on a pier beyond safe limits.

Event organizers that do anticipate such behavior need to closely consult with Port Engineering. From a practical perspective, only piers capable of supporting very heavy distributed loads are suitable for events that may cause dynamic crowd

¹ ASCE 7-22 *Minimum Design Loads and Associated Criteria for Buildings and Other Structures* Commentary C4.6

loading. However, event organizers may undertake a detailed analysis of an existing structure at their own time and expense to demonstrate safety under dynamic crowd loading.

EXISTING SOILS: Port Sites Over Land with Unusual Ground Conditions:

Portions of China Basin Park and Bayfront Park Constructed with Geofoam Fill:

Portions of China Basin Park and Bayfront Park, both in the Mission Bay neighborhood, were constructed with lightweight geofoam underneath a thin layer of conventional soil. Excessive ground loading can compress geofoam, leading to costly repairs compared to filling a divot in conventional soil. To protect the long-term condition of these newly completed parks, Port will provide event organizers with maps showing where geofoam fill is located underground, and provide allowable ground pressures for these geofoam areas. Port should be contacted early in event planning at these sites so this information can be transmitted.

Pier 94 & 96 Land Side East of Amador Street:

The landward portions of Pier 94 and 96 have a history of sinkholes developing around certain storm drain lines. Any special event at this site should be closely coordinated with Port to avoid areas of potential sinkholes.

Allowable Ground Pressures at Other Sites Over Land:

Refer to 2025 CBC Section 3103.6.2.

Other than the sites listed in the previous section, a presumptive load bearing value of 1,000 pounds per square feet may be used in accordance with the referenced CBC section. This allowable ground pressure applies to structures supported on ground. Loading to the ground immediately adjacent to seawalls, retaining walls, underground vaults, or basements may require analysis of surcharge loading to the wall, at the discretion of the design engineer and the Port plan reviewer. Early coordination with the Port is highly encouraged, as the division between land and water, and the location of underground structures, may not be readily apparent.



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1/30/2026

Date

Originally Approved by Matthew Bell, Acting Chief Harbor Engineer January 30, 2026