



THE GOLDEN GATE CHAPTER  
AMERICAN SOCIETY OF HOME INSPECTORS, INC.

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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: California's New Building Code Might Give You a Bigger House**

**A recent change in the California building code** may give you an extra room – at least on paper. The minimum ceiling height for living rooms, bedrooms, and other living space has been 7 feet 6 inches, but the latest California code that took effect in January allows 7 feet. Some jurisdictions, including San Francisco and Oakland, have amended local codes to keep the higher minimum.

**Existing Rooms.** If your home has a finished room with a ceiling lower than 7 feet 6 inches but higher than 7 feet, it may now be possible to count it as living space. The “added” space could affect the home’s value if you sell or refinance. In order to qualify, the room must have adequate windows for light and ventilation. Requirements for heating, structural components, and other features may also apply; contact your local building department for details.

**Is It a Bedroom?** To count as a bedroom, the “added” room also must have at least 70 square feet and no dimension less than 7 feet. It must have a smoke alarm and an exterior door or an ‘escape and rescue’ window large enough to meet current standards. The code does not require a closet, but some Realtors ® and appraisers consider a closet part of the definition of bedroom. The rules are subject to interpretation by the local building department. Again, contact them for details.

**Converting Unfinished Spaces.** The new standard makes it easier, or even feasible, to convert unfinished space to a habitable room, since structural changes to increase the height of a ceiling can be very expensive. In all other respects, the requirements for the new space are the same as for any addition or alteration. You will need a set of plans prepared by a qualified architect showing how the new space complies with current requirements for light, ventilation, heating, fire protection, insulation, and California’s Title 24 energy standards, among other things. Many building departments have handouts addressing these issues.

**About Attics and Basements.** Developing attics and basements may present challenges beyond headroom. Among the special concerns are insulation and structural adequacy. Also, a converted attic may constitute an added story that requires a foundation upgrade and it may trigger other requirements of local building, planning, or zoning agencies. In basements, adequate drainage is often overlooked. A certain amount of moisture may not be a problem in an unfinished basement, but it is unacceptable in living space. Pumps or other measures may be necessary.

**Coordinating Improvements.** When planning any significant alteration, you should consider upgrades that can be highly cost effective when coordinated with other work. Improvements such as a seismic upgrade and updating electrical, water, and sewer services.

**Get professional advice.** To make sure your project goes smoothly, consider hiring an independent property inspector. A qualified inspector can evaluate your home to determine feasibility of the project before design work begins. Some inspectors also help review contracts, perform progress inspections, and help assure quality and safety on the job site. To find a qualified Bay Area home inspector, visit [www.ggashi.org](http://www.ggashi.org). To find an inspector outside the Bay Area, visit [www.ashi.org](http://www.ashi.org).

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