

Meeting Summary
Single-staircase Advisory Group
September 9, 2024
10:00 AM
Virginis Housing Center
4224 Cox Rd, Glen Allen, VA

Advisory Group Members Present:

William Abrahamson, American Institute of Architects Virginia
Hampton Barclay, Private Developer
Eric Cavallo, Private Contractor
Andrew Clark, Home Builders Association of Virginia
Rick Hinson, American Council of Engineering Companies of Virginia
Alex Horowitz, Pew Charitable Trusts
Billy Hux, State Fire Marshal
Jason Laws, Virginia Building and Code Officials Association
Andrew Milliken, Virginia Fire Services Board
Steven Sites, Virginia Fire Services Board
Lyle Solla-Yates, Local Planning Professional
Schuyler Van Valkenburg, Senate of Virginia (16th District)
Dan Willham, Virginia Building and Code Officials Association

DHCD staff attending for all or part of meeting:

Jeff Brown, State Building Codes Office Director
Trisha Lindsey, Policy and Legislative Services Director
Andrew Malloy, Policy Analyst
Paul Messplay, Code and Regulation Specialist
Richard Potts, Code Development and Technical Support Administrator
Chase Sawyer, Policy and Legislative Services Manager

Key Takeaways

- Advisory Group members agree that any findings or recommendations from the Advisory Group should be reviewed and considered during the normal code development process.
- The primary reasons discussed for not allowing a single stair exit for multifamily residential structures above current limits are fire safety concerns.
- Advisory Group members created a preliminary list of topics to be reviewed by the Advisory Group when considering allowing a single-staircase above current limits. The topics relate to fire safety, resident health/safety/welfare, accessibility, and general building code considerations.

Summary

Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) staff provided a summary of the purpose of the meeting and introduced the topic before the Single-staircase Advisory Group

(Advisory Group). During the 2024 General Assembly Session, [HB368](#) and [SB195](#) were approved by the General Assembly and signed by the Governor. The identical bills directed the Board of Housing and Community Development (Board) to convene a stakeholder advisory group to provide findings and recommendations for allowing a single stair exit for Group R-2 (multifamily residential) structures up to six stories in height. The Advisory Group is directed to submit its findings and recommendations to the Board and General Assembly by December 1, 2024. DHCD staff emphasized that the Advisory Group is tasked with only making findings of fact and recommendations. The findings of the Advisory Group could then be used by the Board when considering proposals during the normal code development process. DHCD staff further emphasized that the Advisory Group is not a part of the normal code development cycle, rather it serves as an opportunity to discuss this topic in more detail, laying some groundwork for future code cycle workgroups.

The Advisory Group discussed the background and history of the single-staircase proposal. Advisory Group members shared examples of single-staircase construction in other parts of the country such as Seattle, Washington, and New York City, as well as internationally in Europe. The Advisory Group discussed how many single-staircase buildings are being built in these areas; however, there is a lack of information on the prevalence of these structures in the United States. Some Advisory Group members questioned whether single-staircase construction would be used if allowed by the building code. Advisory Group members discussed alternative methods for complying with the current staircase requirements that could also yield similar benefits as allowing a single staircase, such as interlocking stairwells or stairs connected to an elevator lobby with an alternative stairwell only for residents. Advisory Group members also noted that a proposal of this nature related to residential buildings could have implications associated with non-residential building uses.

The Advisory Group discussed the benefits and safety concerns associated with allowing a single staircase for multifamily structures up to six stories. Advisory Group members noted that the current building code, which allows a single exit in multifamily structures up to three stories, creates challenges for builders in some areas due to zoning constraints. Some Advisory Group members shared that single-staircase structures can in some instances be more economically feasible in higher-density localities where lots are small and zoning restrictions prevent larger production-style multifamily development. Advisory Group members reasoned that single-stair structures could be more economically feasible because they allow for additional square footage, more units, and more efficient use of space, which creates more revenue opportunities and higher margins for builders/developers. Some Advisory Group members also suggested that allowing these structures could rehabilitate existing structures and provide opportunities for in-fill units on lots that would otherwise go untouched, which would increase the housing supply, making housing more affordable generally. Advisory Group members acknowledged that additional fire safety measures would be required for single-staircase buildings greater than three stories, including, but not limited to, sprinklers, mechanical smoke ventilation systems, and higher fire-rating building materials.

The Advisory Group discussed concerns that exist related to allowing a single staircase for buildings up to six stories. The reasons for concern shared by Advisory Group members were

primarily regarding the health, safety and welfare of residents in addition to the safety of firefighters and other first responders accessing a building with a single staircase during emergencies. Some Advisory Group members noted that one point of entry and exit for firefighters and evacuating residents is a significant concern. Advisory Group members also noted that some city lots do not have adequate fire department access, making the need for at least two means of egress more important. Concerns were also raised that the capabilities and resources of individual fire departments may vary, creating problems of access for fire departments with fewer resources or inadequate equipment. Advisory Group members shared that a reason for allowing a single staircase for up to three stories is because self-evacuation and exterior escape ladders are still options at that height and may not be viable options for taller heights.

There was consensus within the Advisory Group that any proposals or recommendations related to the Uniform Statewide Building Code (USBC) should still go through the standard code development process. Advisory Group members expressed concerns with efforts to “legislate the building code.” Advisory Group members suggested establishing a specific workgroup during the next code update cycle related to the single-staircase issue. Additionally, there was consensus that the USBC should still be uniform in nature and not have exceptions or different building requirements for different regions of the Commonwealth.

During public comment, a member of the public spoke in opposition to a single-staircase code change. He said this change would lead to reduced public safety. He expressed concerns that the proposed systems designed to protect residents in single-staircase buildings (i.e. mechanical smoke ventilation) might fail in the future due to maintenance issues. He shared that safety should be the main priority.

Future Considerations

A key takeaway of the meeting was that fire safety concerns are the primary reasons for not allowing a single staircase for multifamily residential structures above current limits. Advisory Group members created a list of topics to consider in more detail at future meetings regarding the proposal to allow a single exit for Group R-2 (multifamily residential) structures up to six stories in height.

- Fire Safety Considerations
 - Building construction/design:
 - Exterior grades; stories at or above grade; podium construction; occupied roofs
 - Construction type; combustible vs non-combustible construction materials
 - Locations and types of fire separations (fire barrier, fire wall, fire partition)
 - Egress:
 - Egress width; exit configuration; exit access; and exit travel distance
 - Egress above ground/patio egress; egress through mixed occupancy

- External vs. internal stairs
 - Areas of refuge; emergency communications
- Fire sprinkler and fire alarm requirements
- Special inspection (IBC Chapter 17) of fire rated assembly penetrations
- Providing prop alarms on stairway doors
- Providing smoke control in stairway; skylight technology; pressurization
- Mixed uses (occupancy classifications)
- Occupant loads (maximum)
- Capacity and capability of jurisdiction and fire department(s), including fire apparatus and water availability
- Firefighter and first responder access to the building (internal and external)
 - Open perimeters
 - Elevator size and type
 - Emergency escape and rescue openings (EERO)
- Other Considerations
 - Cross connection within units
 - Accessibility (non-firefighter)
 - Relative safety for different housing types
 - Benefits