

Meeting Summary
Single-staircase Advisory Group
November 6, 2024
12:00 PM
Twin Hickory Area Library
5001 Twin Hickory Road, Glen Allen, VA

Advisory Group Member Present:

William Abrahamson, American Institute of Architects Virginia
Hampton Barclay, Private Developer
Eric Cavallo, Private Contractor
Ron Clements, Virginia Building and Code Officials Association
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
Lyle Solla-Yates, Charlottesville Planning Commission
Dan Willham, Virginia Building and Code Officials Association

DHCD staff attending for all or part of the meeting:

Jeff Brown, State Building Codes Office Director
Andrew Malloy, Policy Analyst
Florin Moldovan, Code and Regulation Specialist
Chase Sawyer, Policy and Legislative Services Manager

Key Takeaways

- The Advisory Group made technical corrections to the draft report to improve its accuracy and limit potential misunderstandings.
- The Advisory Group made additions to the report to provide future workgroups more research and information on this topic.
- The Advisory Group agreed on the contents of the report and the recommendations included within it.

Summary

Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) staff opened the floor for public comments at the beginning of the third meeting of the Single-staircase Advisory Group (Advisory Group). DHCD staff shared the draft Advisory Group report with the public prior to the meeting, allowing them the opportunity to comment on its contents.

Two fire service professionals made public comments. The first fire service professional listed the fire service organizations that oppose single-staircase proposals and the concerns they have with escape and rescue operations in single-stair structures. He commended the current code

development process in Virginia and emphasized that Virginia has a consensus-based approach. The fire service professional further noted the lack of consensus among stakeholders and urged attendees to hear the concerns of fire safety professionals. He highlighted that current limits on single-stair construction are based on decades of research and investigations of fires in multifamily buildings. The second fire service professional supported the intentions behind this proposal to help address housing affordability. She shared her concerns that more people are experiencing homelessness because of unaffordable housing, especially in northern Virginia. However, she shared concerns that single-stair construction would put occupants at risk. She shared her experience as a first responder needing to block/shut down a staircase in order to transport a patient. She also shared concerns that victims of domestic violence would be limited in their escape options if only one staircase/exit were available.

After the public comments, DHCD staff provided a brief overview of the draft report. DHCD staff invited Advisory Group members to share feedback, comments, edits and additions to the report.

During the discussion, the following edits were made to the draft report:

- i. In the background section, Advisory Group members clarified that a model single-staircase proposal was not *developed* by the Advisory Group. Even though different model proposals were discussed in general terms, it would not be accurate to say that the Advisory Group disagreed on specific elements of a proposal.
- ii. In the history section, updates were made to reflect the recent efforts of the ICC at the 2024 International Code Council's Committee Action Hearings in Long Beach, CA.
- iii. In the section on fire safety considerations, the description and definition of Emergency Escape and Rescue Openings (EEROs) was corrected.
- iv. In the list of potential (upgraded) fire safety protections, "ISO class 1 rating" was added to describe the capability of fire departments. This was added to reflect the official industry designation.
- v. In the list of potential (upgraded) fire safety protections, Advisory Group members added clarification that future workgroups should work to define occupied floors, roofs, stories, podiums, and grades. As discussed in prior Advisory Group meetings, there are several nuances and differences between occupied stories, occupied floors, occupied roofs, stories above grade, and podium construction as it relates to the parameters defined in the authorizing legislation.
- vi. Regarding the list of potential fire safety protections, Advisory Group members said that a cost/benefit analysis should be performed on these requirements. Advisory Group members shared concerns that some of these potential requirements would be overly burdensome for builders and would make single-staircase structures too costly. Advisory Group members also shared that some items on the list may have negligible fire safety benefits that would not outweigh the costs they would impose. Advisory Group members

clarified that the list of added fire safety protections is not exhaustive, nor should it be interpreted that all of these protections need to be added in order to reach consensus on this issue. Additionally, the fire safety protections may not all be necessary to mitigate safety risks. DHCD staff also noted that the list of upgraded protections is not presented in any particular order, level of importance, or effectiveness. The list serves as a starting point for future workgroups to consider.

- vii. The Advisory Group discussed the specific elements of ICC code change proposal E24-24 as modified by AMC2 (Shapiro MC-1). This proposal as modified would allow single-staircase (exit) buildings up to four stories with additional requirements including limiting net floor area, requiring sprinklers compliant with combustible stairways regardless of construction type, prohibiting electrical receptacles in the stairway, certain requirements for fire alarms and smoke detection systems, and certain requirements for the openings to the stairway. The Advisory Group added to the report that the provisions of floor modification E24-MC1 may provide a beneficial framework for a future single staircase code change proposal.
- viii. Advisory Group members suggested additions to the benefits sections to more fully summarize the positions in the attached research articles included in the appendix of the report. Advisory Group members shared benefits of single-stair construction including the flexibility to add more types of multifamily housing, more natural light and ventilation, and adding to the historical appeal of downtown areas.
- ix. The Advisory Group made one edit to the recommendations. Advisory Group members specifically named the ICC code change proposal E24-24 as modified as a proposal that a special workgroup in the 2024 building code update cycle should discuss and consider.

After no other edits or additions were proposed by Advisory Group members, DHCD staff again opened the floor for public comments. No additional public comments were made.

Next Steps

The Advisory Group approved of the report's contents following the incorporation of the revisions discussed and agreed to during the meeting. DHCD staff discussed a deadline for accepting additional statements and research items to be included in the report appendix.