

TO: COUNCIL

FROM: MAYOR HURLEY

**SUBJECT: REQUEST TO THE PROVINCE OF BRITISH COLUMBIA TO
REPEAL THE SINGLE EXIT STAIRWAY BUILDING CODE**

PURPOSE: To request UBCM to call upon the Province of BC to repeal the single exit stairway building code.

RECOMMENDATION

WHEREAS the Province of British Columbia has amended the British Columbia Building Code (BCBC), effective August 27, 2024, to permit the construction of residential multi-family buildings up to six storeys with a single exit stairway under certain conditions; and

WHEREAS this amendment has generated significant concern amongst local governments and emergency response professionals, including the British Columbia Professional Fire Fighters' Association (BCPFFA), , and the Fire Chiefs Association of BC (FCABC), the Greater Vancouver Fire Chiefs' Association (GVFCA), BC Chiefs of Police Association and the BC Police Association (BCPA), as well as federal associations such as the International Association of Fire Fighters (IAFF), Canadian Association of Fire Chiefs (CAFC) and the National Police Federation (NPF) regarding potential risks to public and firefighter and police officer safety within our communities; and

WHEREAS the safety and well-being of residents and first responders are paramount considerations for all British Columbia municipalities; and

WHEREAS local governments have a vested interest in ensuring that building codes within their jurisdictions reflect the highest standards of safety and facilitate effective emergency response; and

WHEREAS the single-egress stairway concept is complex and should have been properly evaluated through the national code change process, ensuring thorough scrutiny and consideration of all implications; and

WHEREAS British Columbia's adoption of single-egress stairways moved too quickly, did not have supporting data specific to the British Columbia context, and did not adequately consider all stakeholder concerns nor the latest Canadian data, as referenced in various Single Stair Egress Reports; and

WHEREAS local governments have developed their fire services based on the BCBC requirement for apartment buildings to have a minimum of two stairwells, and a sudden change to this critical building safety component states a higher level of response than what is typically available in all BC fire departments is required; and

WHEREAS nearly 9% of fires in British Columbia residential buildings start in the hallway or stairwell, areas critical for evacuation; and

WHEREAS smoke from fires originating in hallways and stairwells can rapidly flood these essential egress routes, severely jeopardizing the ability of occupants to evacuate safely; and

WHEREAS the majority (68%) of residential fire-related deaths are a result of smoke inhalation alone, while an additional 10% are reported to be caused by both smoke inhalation and burns, underscoring the critical danger posed by smoke in building fires; and

WHEREAS fire inspection data indicates that a concerning 40% of fire and life safety systems in apartment buildings are not compliant with the British Columbia Fire Code (BCFC) and may not function properly, including essential systems like smoke detectors, heat alarms, and automatic sprinkler systems, further increasing the risk associated with inadequate egress; and

WHEREAS the BCBC does not adequately consider or control other critical aspects of fire response capacity and the realities of building upkeep once a building is completed, potentially leading to a degradation of safety over time; and

WHEREAS emerging issues such as the increasing prevalence of lithium-ion battery fires, which contribute to rapid fire spread, can be intense and difficult to extinguish, and release toxic gasses, make this proposal for single egress even riskier; and

WHEREAS human movement research on evacuations has demonstrated a negative impact on evacuation efficiency and safety for the whole population, including those persons with disabilities, when relying on a single exit point; and

WHEREAS the potential for increased risks associated with single exit stairways in multi-family residential buildings, compounded by the aforementioned data and considerations, has significant implications for the safety and livability of our communities; and

WHEREAS the Union of British Columbia Municipalities (UBCM) is the collective voice of local governments in British Columbia, advocating for the interests and well-being of our communities;

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED THAT the Union of British Columbia Municipalities (UBCM) hereby formally calls upon the Province of British Columbia to:

1. **Immediately suspend the implementation of single exit stairway provisions** until a review is completed, incorporating input from UBCM, BCPFFA, FCABC, and other stakeholders. Engage in a transparent consultation process with these groups to evaluate safety implications.
2. **Conduct a comprehensive review** of the British Columbia Building Code amendments allowing single exit stairways in residential multi-family buildings up to six storeys. This review should reference and utilize the research scope and methodology developed by the National Research Council, and focus on public and responder safety, consider evacuation options for persons with disabilities, consider fire incident data, smoke inhalation fatalities, compliance rates for fire safety systems, fire response capacity, risks in egress pathways, lithium-ion battery fire risks, and human movement research on evacuations.
3. **Prioritize a thorough evaluation of the single-egress concept through national code change processes**, ensuring any adoption is supported by BC-specific data and stakeholder feedback. Consider other building design options or changes that would allow the mandating of at least two independent exit stairways in multi-family buildings over a certain height or occupancy to enhance safety.
4. **Collaborate with local governments and the fire service to improve compliance rates of fire and life safety systems**, recognizing their importance in ensuring safety. The BC Building Code must adequately address fire response capacity and emerging risks like lithium-ion battery fires.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED THAT UBCM advocate to the Province of British Columbia for a building code that prioritizes the safety and well-being of all British Columbians and provides clear, consistent, and robust standards for fire safety and egress in multi-family residential buildings, taking into account all the significant risks and concerns outlined in this resolution.

BACKGROUND

In 2024, the Province of British Columbia made amendments to the British Columbia Building Code (BCBC). The modifications allow the construction of residential multi-family buildings up to six storeys with a single exit stairway under specific conditions. While this change aims to address housing affordability and density challenges in the

province, it has raised significant concerns among various stakeholders regarding public safety and emergency response efficacy.

The concept of single-egress stairways simplifies the design of multi-family buildings by reducing construction costs and maximizing usable space. However, this design poses risks in emergency situations, such as fires, earthquakes, or other hazardous events, where multiple pathways for evacuation are critical.

FINANCIAL IMPACTS

None at this time.

Respectfully submitted,

MAYOR HURLEY

ATTACHMENTS

Attachment 1 – Positions on Single Egress Stairway Buildings (Fire, Police, Other)