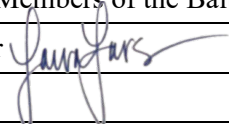




CITY OF BALTIMORE
MAYOR BRANDON M. SCOTT

TO	The Honorable President and Members of the Baltimore City Council
FROM	Laura Larsen, Budget Director 
DATE	September 3 rd , 2025
SUBJECT	25-0062 Building Code – Single Exit from Residential Occupancy

The Honorable President and
Members of the City Council
City Hall, Room 400

Position: Does Not Oppose

The Department of Finance is herein reporting on City Council Bill 25-0062, Building Code – Single Exit from Residential Occupancy, the purpose of permitting certain residential buildings to have a single exit or access to a single exit, so long as certain conditions are met regarding the construction of the exit.

Background

‘Single exit’ or ‘single stair reform’ is the effort to amend the building codes to allow for more construction of multi-family residential buildings with only one staircase in conjunction with fire safety improvements. There is a national standard for building construction called the International Building Code (IBC), many jurisdictions adopt and modify the IBC, including Baltimore City. ‘International,’ it should be noted, is a misnomer as the IBC is rarely used outside of the United States.

Currently single exit from residential occupancy is laid out in Section 1006.3.4 in Chapter 10 of the IBC, which restricts the height of an apartment building to a maximum of three stories, with no more than four units on each story, when only one exit is provided. To support higher-density housing, some major cities, such as Seattle (1970’s) and Honolulu (2012), have amended their codes to allow single-exit buildings up to six stories, while it has always been allowed in New York City. In addition to those three cities, the table below lists other cities that have recently adopted the measure as well, and many more have the measure under consideration.

City	Single Stair Reform Adoption
Jackson, Tenn	Jan 2025
Knoxville, Tenn	Jan 2025
Memphis, Tenn	April 2025
Austin, Texas	April 2025
Nashville, Tenn	July 2025

25-0062 Building Code – Single Exit from Residential Occupancy

The legislation allows for new small apartment buildings in Baltimore to be built that have just one exit stairway, instead of the usual two, as long as the enhanced fire safety rules, proscribed in 25-0062, are

followed.

Under 25-0062, a building can have one exit if all of these conditions are met:

1. Size and Type
 - a. It can be up to 6 stories tall if built with fire-resistant materials (Types I, II, III-A, or IV).
 - b. It can be up to 4 stories tall if built with standard wood construction (Type V).
 - c. No more than 4 apartments per floor.
2. Fire Safety
 - a. The whole building must be built to resist fire for at least 1 hour.
 - b. It must have sprinklers in every part of the building.
 - c. The stairway must be in a 2-hour fire-rated enclosure, with 1-hour fire-rated doors.
 - d. The stairway must be pressurized, meaning air is pumped in to keep out smoke during a fire.
 - e. Doors into the stairway must swing inward, except the door to the outside, which must swing outward.
3. Layout
 - a. No apartment door can open directly into the stairway.
 - b. Apartments must be connected to the stairway by a hallway.
 - c. The hallway from any unit to the stairway must be 20 feet or less.
 - d. The total distance to exit the building can't be more than 125 feet.
4. Elevators and Roof Access
 - a. Elevators must also be pressurized or open into a separate lobby.
 - b. The stairway must reach the roof, either through a roof hatch with a ladder or a full stair bulkhead.
5. Other Uses
 - a. Other types of businesses or uses can be in the building, but they must be separated from the residential area and cannot use the same stairway.
 - b. The garage or rooftop (if part of the apartments) can share the stairway.

Maryland Housing Needs Assessment

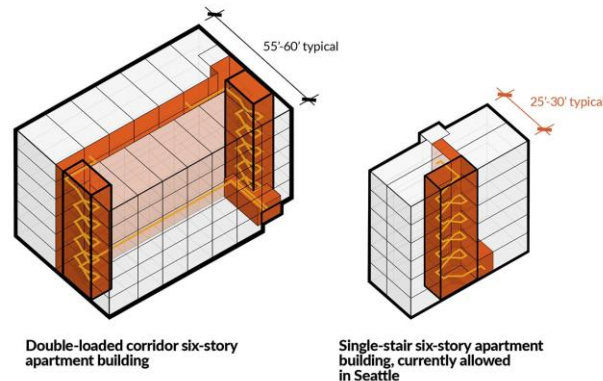
The State of Maryland commissioned the “2020 Maryland Housing Needs Assessment & 10-Year Strategic Plan”, via Maryland Department of Housing and Community Development (MD DHCD). The MD DHCD issued a follow up report in 2025 with updated numbers and revised policy recommendations. The report’s intent is to assess Maryland’s current and future housing needs and outline strategies to address them over the next decade. Its goals include identifying housing challenges, projecting future demand, and recommending policies to ensure all Maryland residents have access to safe, affordable, and appropriate housing. It also aims to guide state and local decision-makers in prioritizing investments, aligning resources, and coordinating efforts to meet diverse housing needs. The report discussed 70 actions designed to address priority needs by region in the state.

Council Bill 25-0062 touches upon three of the recommended actions in the report: enact zoning changes to allow or expand for higher density residential development, amend zoning codes to allow for the by-right development of diverse housing types, and revise land use standards to encourage small lot development.

Council Bill 25-0062 is a zoning changes that would allow for higher density residential development. Traditionally, residential buildings have been required to provide multiple exits, even when a single, well-designed exit could meet modern safety standards. This requirement often adds cost, physical size and space, and complexity to smaller-scale multifamily projects, which can discourage development in areas already struggling to produce enough housing.

By legalizing single-exit design, this expands the by-right development of diverse housing types. Single-exit building design allows for smaller denser buildings. The graphic below shows the differences in scale between a 6-story building that is currently allowed under the code, and a 6-story building that could be built with Council Bill 25-0062's passage.

Figure 1
Building Codes Limit Small Apartment Building Designs in Much of the U.S.
Single-stair design is allowed in 3-story buildings, but 4-to-6-story buildings must have two staircases and a corridor



Source: SAR+ Architects
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By allowing a safe single-exit design, the reform could make it feasible to build more small and mid-sized apartment buildings on small lots where a second exit would be physically or financially prohibitive. This aligns with broader zoning and housing reforms aimed at increasing density, expanding by-right development for diverse housing types, and reducing regulatory hurdles that keep much of Maryland's residential land locked into low-intensity use. In essence, the single-exit reform serves as another tool for creating more housing options without compromising safety—removing a technical but significant barrier that has long slowed the production of modest-scale multifamily housing.

Fiscal Impact

The Finance Department was not able to come up with a fiscal note for this legislation. There is not a variance that allows for the new construction of single exit buildings that 25-0062 allows. While there are existing structures that were built prior to the ban on single-exits, it is not feasible to estimate how many structures in the City are single stair buildings that were built before the adoption of the IBC. The Department of Finance reached out to both Seattle and Honolulu to see if there was a way to understand how many buildings and units overall were created by this change in policy, and the revenue impact derived from this policy change. Staff from Seattle's Department of Construction and Inspections stated that they do not track how many single stair structures have been built since adopting single stair reform. Honolulu's staff have also stated that they cannot track this type of construction. As New York City has always had some form of single stair exit legalized, so there is nothing to track post-legalization.

The fiscal impacts of 25-0062 are difficult to estimate, as other cities that have adopted single-stair reform do not track buildings that benefit from the reform or have adopted them so recently that no projects have been completed. Single stair reform is expected to lower construction costs, increase the diversity of residential building types, and encourage density. When undeveloped lots are improved and new people move into the City this will positively impact revenues like property taxes and income taxes. However, the lack of data, such as number of buildings built or their assessed value, from other cities' experience with single-stair reform makes it difficult to estimate the impact that the reform would have on Baltimore

Conclusion

Council Bill 25-0062 introduces a targeted update to Baltimore’s building code that would permit the construction of small apartment buildings with a single exit stairway, provided strict fire safety and design standards are met. The reform is intended to support the development of more compact, space-efficient housing types that are currently limited under existing code requirements. While the fiscal impact is difficult to estimate at this time due to limited data on past and potential single-stair construction, the proposed change offers a path to expand the city’s housing supply in a controlled and safety-conscious manner. This approach may be particularly useful for increasing housing options on smaller or irregular lots where conventional two-stair layouts are impractical.

For the reasons stated above, the Department of Finance does not oppose City Council Bill 25-0062.

cc: Michael Mocksten
Nina Themelis