Legislation: HB0489

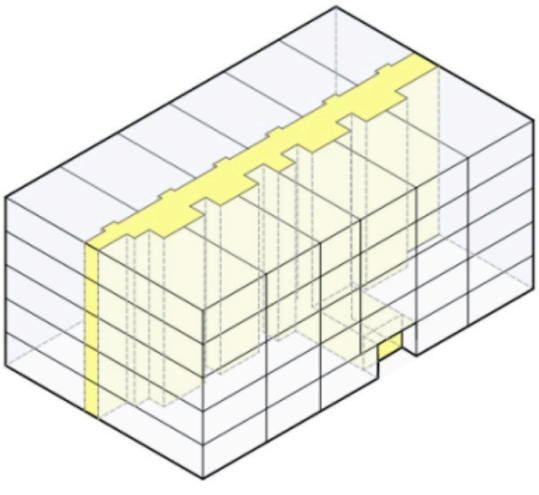
Title: Maryland Department of Labor - Study on Building Code Requirements for Single-Staircase Buildings

Position: **Favorable**

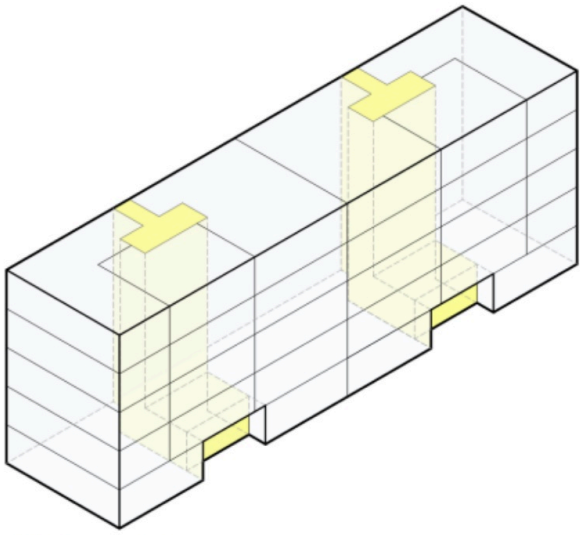
Members of the House Environment and Transportation Committee,

HB0489 represents an opportunity for the General Assembly to implement a no-cost building code reform that would address our state's struggles with housing affordability, livability, and economic growth. The bill mandates the Maryland Department of Labor to study conditions for allowing the construction of multi-family buildings that are up to six stories above grade plane with a single exit staircase. Allowing such building designs will bring Maryland in line with states that have already adopted these rules, including Washington, New York, Hawaii, Tennessee, Minnesota, and Virginia.

Most multi-family buildings constructed today are laid out with small dwelling units oriented on opposite sides of long hallways, a configuration known as the double-loaded corridor [Below left and Figure 1]. In contrast, single-staircase buildings are served by a central circulation core – the single staircase – that provides direct access to units. The result is a narrower building footprint that allows for units with natural light and ventilation which may occupy the full depth of the building [Below right and Figure 2].



Double-Loaded Corridor Building



Single-Staircase Building(s)

The single-staircase configuration is incredibly common around the world, especially in cities noted for their walkability and healthy small business environments - such as Berlin and Tokyo. Much of Maryland's naturally occurring (i.e., unsubsidized) affordable housing stock is, in fact, comprised of single-staircase buildings. And yet, under the current building code, they are illegal to build.

Recognizing the unique advantages and efficiencies of the single-staircase layout, HB0489 takes steps to allow single-staircase construction up to six stories high, legalizing a time-tested building typology that will play a critical role in fulfilling our state's demand for housing.

Addressing the Housing Affordability Crisis

Single-staircase buildings are a critical piece in the puzzle of addressing our state's housing affordability crisis. These smaller buildings require fewer materials and less labor to construct than double-loaded corridor buildings with the same rentable square footage. This is because eliminating the excess circulation space found in double-loaded corridor buildings (i.e., the long central hallways) reduces construction costs.

A policy brief by the Seattle-based architecture firm Larch Lab [1] estimates that these long central hallways add tens of thousands of dollars per floor to the cost of constructing a building. As such, allowing developers to go without them lowers their costs of construction, financing, and land acquisition, translating to lower rents or sale prices for future residents.

In order to absorb the extra costs forced by the existing building code, developers are often compelled by simple economics to construct buildings with more floors than they want, as the additional floors allow them to dilute the overhead costs inherent to a double-loaded corridor building across more floors. The resultant buildings frequently have a "massing" and height that can be jarring and objectionable to existing neighbors, breeding opposition. In contrast, single-staircase buildings can be designed to blend into existing architectural and community fabric while keeping community housing costs low.

Creating Livable, Lovable Spaces for Households of all Shapes and Sizes

Most multi-family (double-loaded corridor) buildings constructed today are built around a long central corridor, resulting in deep, small units with limited access to natural ventilation and light. In contrast, single-staircase buildings allow units to have windows on multiple sides, increasing access to natural light and cross-ventilation, which is critical for residents' health and comfort.

Most multi-family (double-loaded corridor) buildings constructed today feature a preponderance of one-bedroom and two-bedroom units (because of the limited window access). In contrast, single-staircase buildings and their greater window options more easily accommodate a mix of studios, one-bedroom, and larger family units with 2-4 bedrooms, making them adaptable to a variety of household needs.

Most multi-family (double-loaded corridor) buildings constructed today feature a floorplate that begets an atomized, disconnected community. In contrast, single-staircase buildings have fewer

units sharing each entry, creating a more intimate, community-oriented living experience and reducing anonymity among the building's residents.

Putting More Marylanders in Modern, Safe Buildings

Thanks to advances in construction techniques and technology since the dual-egress (exit) rule was added to building codes in the 1930s, new single-staircase buildings would offer more affordable, safe housing for Marylanders. All newly-constructed multi-family buildings in Maryland are required to be built with countermeasures like 60-minute fireproof materials, sprinkler systems, and smoke detectors. Single-staircase buildings would not be exempt from these requirements.

There is a misconception that a second exit staircase is required for fire safety, but in other nations where these taller single-staircase buildings are legal and much more common (even those without a height limit such as the United Kingdom) have lower fire deaths per capita than the United States [1]. In the US in 2023, fires in one- or two-family homes, most of which do not have modern fire suppression or alert systems, resulted in 68% of civilian fire deaths despite those constituting just 18 percent of total fires [2]. Increasing Maryland's stock of modern, safe multi-family housing with a variety of unit sizes means fewer fire deaths and less strain on our first responders.

Strengthening Main Streets and Boosting the Economy

Many of the most popular places in Maryland, its historic main streets and city centers, have small lots that are undevelopable under the current building code. Legalizing taller single-staircase buildings would instantly bring countless small infill lots into play for potential development after decades of infeasibility. These lots are small or oddly-shaped parcels that make it impossible to build double-loaded corridor housing economically, since so much square footage would have to be dedicated to circulation space (hallways and redundant staircases).

Changing the building code to allow single-staircase construction will unlock harder-to-develop lots in constrained places, allowing developers to build housing on them without subsidies or incentives that are costly to the state or municipality. Increasing the number of residents in these places boosts the number of customers in proximity to the small businesses in/near them, improving their viability and encouraging community support.

Closing

Mandating a study by the Department of Labor to reform the building code to allow for taller single-staircase buildings is a prudent first step. This study will:

- Assess how this change can unlock more naturally occurring affordable housing while maintaining and improving safety standards
- Identify best practices from other jurisdictions to inform policy recommendations
- Evaluate how single-staircase buildings could integrate with our state's broader housing and development strategies

By supporting HB0489, we take a critical step toward addressing Maryland's housing crisis with innovative, community-oriented solutions. We urge the committee to recognize the potential of single-staircase construction to make housing more affordable, livable, and sustainable for the residents of Maryland.

We hope the committee finds these points helpful and convincing and we urge its members to **vote in favor of HB0489**. Thank you for your efforts and the opportunity for us to testify on this legislation.

BaltPOP - Baltimoreans for People-Oriented Places

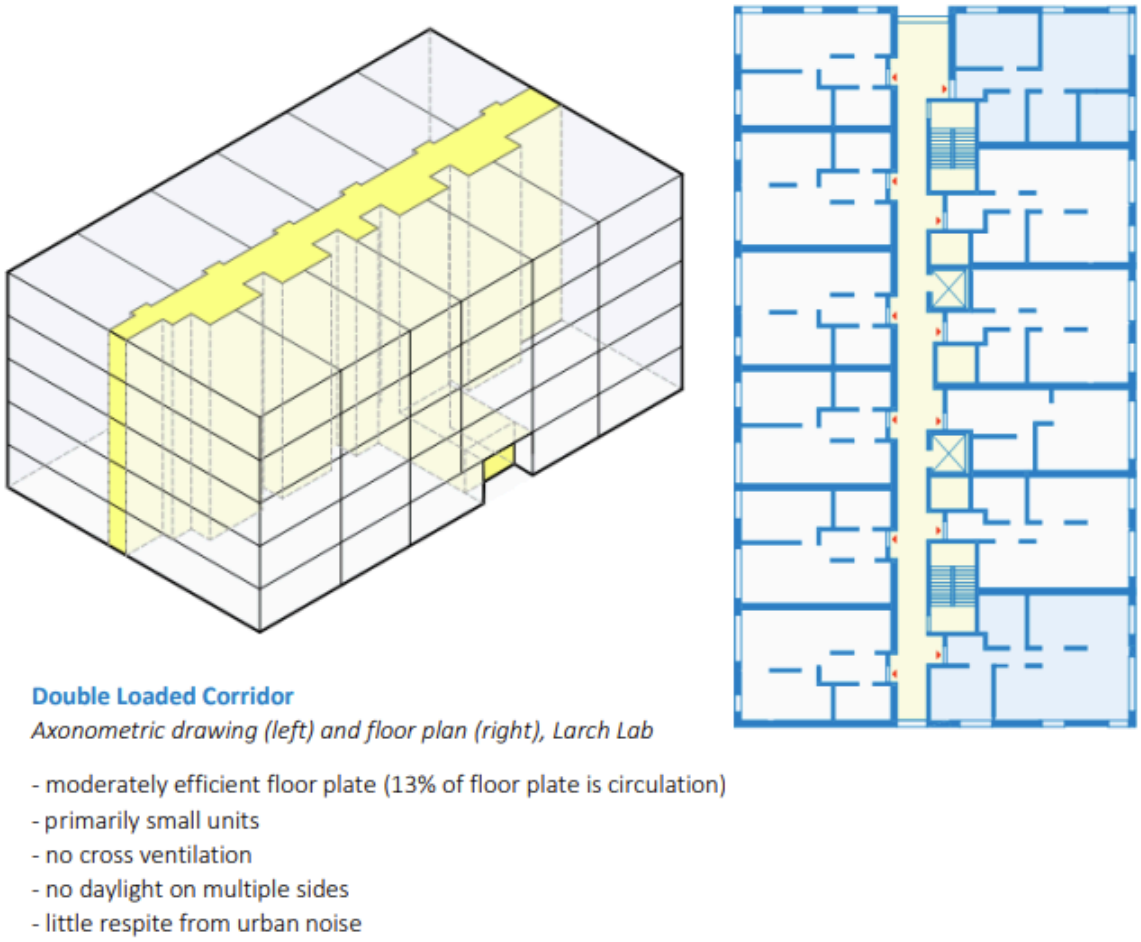


Figure 1: Example drawing of common double-loaded corridor layout.

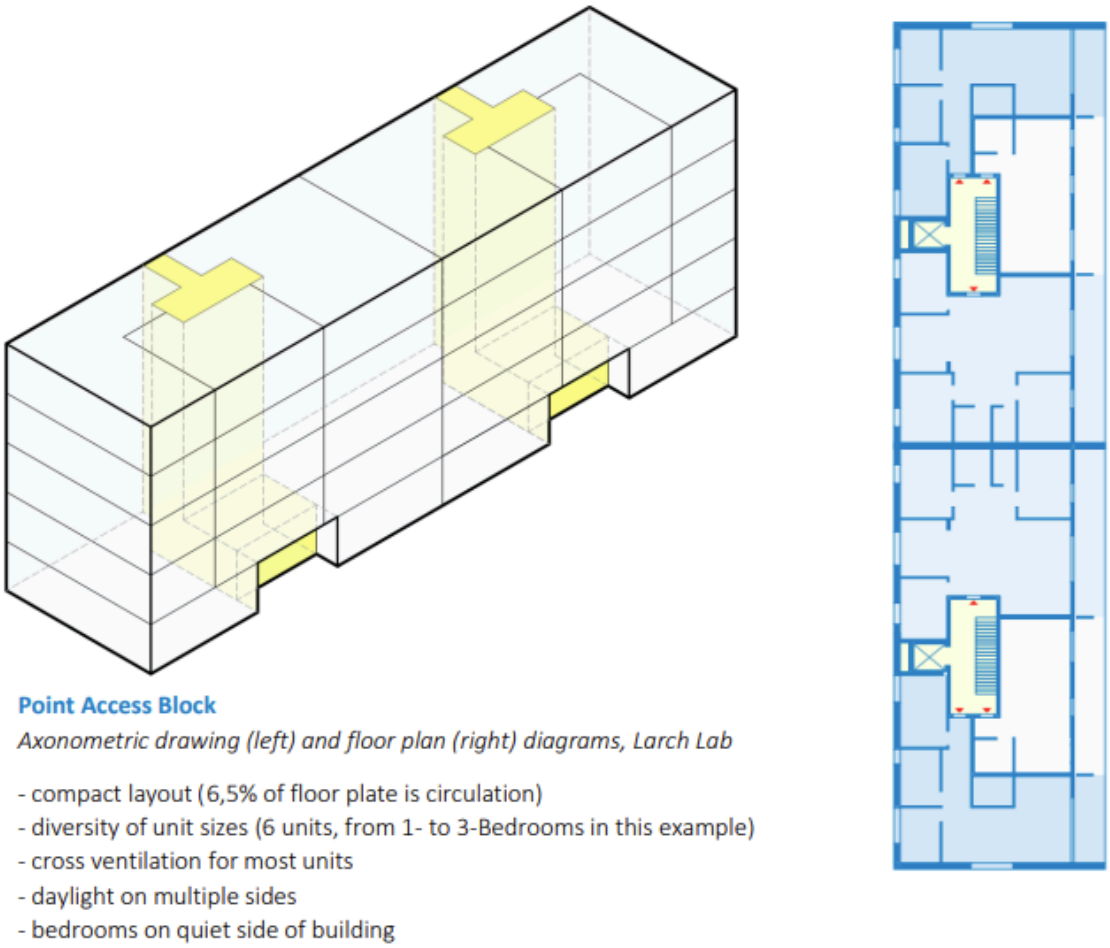


Figure 2: Example drawing of common single-staircase building(s) layout (also known as point access blocks).

References:

[1] Eliason, Michael. Larch Lab. “Unlocking livable, resilient, decarbonized housing with Point Access Blocks”. December 28, 2021. https://www.larchlab.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Eliason_CoV-Point-Access-Blocks-report_v1.2.pdf

[2] Hall, Shelby. National Fire Protection Association. “Fire loss in the United States”. November 1, 2024. https://www.nfpa.org/education-and-research/research/nfpa-research/fire-statistical-reports/fire-loss-in-the-united-states?l=83