AIA Maryland

6 February 2025

The Honorable Delegate Marc Korman
Chair of the Environment and Transportation Committee
250 Taylor House Office Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

Re: Letter of Support for HB 0489
Environment – Study on Building Code Requirements for Single-Staircase Buildings

Dear Chairman Korman and members of the Environment and Transportation Committee:

I am writing to voice AIA Maryland's support for House Bill 0489 with proposed amendment to enable review of this issue with a broad perspective and include important stakeholders. AIA Maryland represents over 2,000 architects in the state of Maryland and advocates for the profession and the quality of the built environment.

Our state currently has a housing shortage of approximately 96,000 homes and we need to creatively explore options to get more housing to the market. The state adopted building code currently allows single staircase structures of a limited footprint to be 4 stories tall. This legislation would enable property owners to add 2 additional floors, potentially increasing by 50% the number of units / homes provided. There are many factors that have enabled this added height to increase the number of homes to be allowed in several jurisdictions across the US including Seattle, NYC and Honolulu. Taller single stair buildings are currently being considered in more cities and regions. This legislation asks for consideration to allow taller multifamily buildings up to 6 stories. We also ask for support to investigate what additional measures may be needed to make the added height safe for persons living in the units and for first responders whose job it is to perform rescues and extinguish fires in these buildings.

We strongly believe that reviewing the issue of single-staircase buildings requires assessing the issue from multiple perspectives. Bringing together professionals who work and are familiar with the housing development arena including funding, planning, designing, building, servicing and rescuing from these structures will provide an outcome from creatively looking at the issue. The goal will be to ultimately yield a safe solution.

The design and construction industries in the US work with the international building codes; these are consensus based documents and the code development process influences what is ultimately adopted and or amended. The building code regulates and affects the health, safety and welfare of all who occupy buildings.

Historically the ready availability of wood for construction, combined with our urban planning practices and economics, has established a tendency in the US to build long multifamily buildings extensively in wood or combustible construction. The wood construction, in large part, led building codes in the US to diverge from the building codes of many European and Asian regions. US codes typically require two exit stairs in most multifamily buildings. Multifamily buildings in the US are typically organized with a central double-loaded corridor (units on each side of the corridor) and that often precludes windows on more than one wall of most apartments. Our European and Asian counterparts often build on smaller footprints using noncombustible construction and other safety measures, making a single exit / single stair less of an issue

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and enabling construction with very efficient layouts and providing windows on multiple walls of units. US code requirements for two stairwells frequently makes smaller sites economically infeasible because the rentable area is often reduced and cannot competitively offset the cost of building a small footprint building with two stair towers.

Multiple issues will need to be addressed to solve the puzzle of whether smaller footprint sites can be safely developed up to 6 stories with a single stair tower. some of the issues include:

- Is the road infrastructure sufficient to handle a ladder truck to the site if rescue is needed.
- Does the Fire department have sufficient proximity and record of response time to enable them to reach a site for rescue if needed.
- Construction materials and design issues can also contribute to safer opportunities for exiting.
  • Can the stairwells be built to be noncombustible with a fire resistance rating of 2 hours or more,
  • Can the stairwells be pressurized such that smoke from a fire within a unit would not overwhelm the stair with smoke, precluding residents from exiting.
- What components of stairwell design / space / size will allow safe egress while allowing first responders adequate and essential access
- Will sprinkler protections of various configurations in and around stairwells either extinguish a possible fire, or extend the duration of safe exiting a unit and a building.
- Will new design requirements be appropriately managed by building owners and residents?

There are jurisdictions in Maryland where these smaller footprint, single-stair buildings may make economic sense, and they may be constructed in a way to provide meaningful, safe options for affordable housing. We believe this is an appropriate issue to explore and ultimately recommend means to enable such housing to be developed as the state moves forward to provide more housing. We are pleased to support this bill as amended and we ask for your to vote in favor of HB 0489 with amendments.

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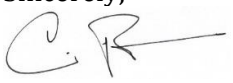
Sincerely,



Chris Parts, AIA
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