



# INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF FIRE FIGHTERS

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**September 14, 2025**

To: The Honorable Mayor of Los Angeles and Members of the Los Angeles City Council

From: Stephen Gilman, 10th District Vice President, IAFF

Subject: Critical Safety Concerns Regarding Proposed Single-Stairwell Apartment Designs

## Overview

As Los Angeles continues to grapple with a housing crisis, proposals to allow *single-stairwell* apartment designs are being presented as a way to reduce construction costs and increase housing supply. While increasing housing is vital, any policy that sacrifices life safety for marginal cost savings is unacceptable. A single-stairwell design presents severe and foreseeable risks for both occupants and first responders, risks that cannot be justified by speculative savings.

## Life Safety Risks of a Single Stairwell

A single-stairwell building provides only one path of egress in an emergency. If that sole escape route is blocked by fire, smoke, explosion, or structural failure, residents and firefighters face catastrophic consequences:

- **Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire (1911):**

The dangers of limited egress are not new. At the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory in New York City, 146 garment workers, mostly young immigrant women, perished when a fire broke out in the upper floors.

- Locked exit doors trapped workers inside, and the building had only one exterior fire escape, which quickly collapsed under the weight of fleeing workers.



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- Many victims were forced to jump from windows to escape the flames. This tragedy spurred some of America's first modern fire codes and reinforced a lesson still relevant today: multiple, reliable escape routes save lives. A single-stairwell apartment design recreates these same deadly conditions—one narrow escape path where any obstruction, structural failure, or act of negligence can turn a building into a death trap.

- **Historical Context – 9/11 Lessons:**

As we recently marked the 24th anniversary of September 11, 2001, we must remember the critical role of redundant escape routes.

- In the South Tower, only 18 people managed to escape from above the impact zone because one stairwell remained partially passable.
- In the North Tower, where all stairwells were destroyed, *no one* above the impact zone survived.

Imagine a similar scenario in a modern apartment: a single explosion or rapidly spreading fire could take out the only means of escape, leaving every resident above the fire trapped.

- **Firefighter Safety:**

Los Angeles firefighters routinely enter burning structures to rescue occupants. A single stairwell creates a deadly “choke point,” concentrating smoke, heat, and evacuees in the same space firefighters must use to enter and exit. This dramatically increases the risk of firefighter injury or death and complicates rescue operations.



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## Cost-Cutting at the Expense of Human Life

History repeatedly shows that when cost savings are prioritized over safety, tragedy follows:

- Boeing 737 MAX:

To compete with Airbus, Boeing cut corners on pilot training and concealed a critical flight-control system flaw to save money and speed production. Two crashes killed 346 people, leading to a global grounding of the fleet and billions in losses.

- Ford Pinto Fuel Tank:

In the 1970s, Ford executives knowingly decided not to reinforce or redesign the Pinto's fuel tank, despite internal crash tests showing it would rupture in low speed rear-end collisions. Strengthening the tank with a protective shield or relocating it would have cost roughly \$11 per vehicle, but company executives concluded, based on a now-infamous cost-benefit analysis, that it was cheaper to pay legal settlements for burn deaths and injuries than to fix the defect. Hundreds of people died in fiery crashes that were entirely preventable. Los Angeles must not repeat these lessons in their housing policy. Safety shortcuts may save dollars in the short term but cost lives and public trust in the long run.



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## Questionable Economic Benefits

Advocates for single-stairwell construction argue that the design will lower development costs and increase affordability. There is zero guarantee that these cost savings will be passed on to renters.

Today's housing market is heavily influenced by venture capital and private equity firms that:

- Drive up demand by aggressively acquiring apartment buildings,
- Boost profits through rent hikes and “value-add” renovations,
- Prioritize quick returns through cost-slashing and rapid resale at higher valuations.

Unlike traditional “mom-and-pop” landlords, these investors often treat housing as a short-term financial instrument, not a long-term community asset. Their practices have already contributed to escalating rents across Los Angeles and other major cities. Allowing single-stairwell construction would hand these investors another tool to cut costs while continuing to raise rent.

## Recommendations

1. **Reject Single-Stairwell Proposals:** Maintain the requirement for multiple means of egress in all new multifamily construction.
2. **Prioritize Firefighter and Resident Safety:** Enforce design standards that protect both residents and first responders in emergencies.



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## Conclusion

Housing affordability is critical, but human life is priceless. The pursuit of lower construction costs must never come at the expense of fundamental safety. The lessons of the, 9/11, the Boeing 737 MAX, and the Ford Pinto are clear: when cost-cutting overrides safety, lives are lost. Los Angeles must lead with courage and reject any proposal that compromises the well-being of their residents and the firefighters who protect them.

## Stephen Gilman

10th District Vice President

International Association of Fire Fighters

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