CITY OF LOS ANGELES
CALIFORNIA

DEPARTMENT OF
BUILDING AND SAFETY
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September 5th, 2025

Honorable Members of the City Council
City of Los Angeles City Hall, Room 395
Los Angeles, CA 90012

REPORT ON PROPOSED ORDINANCE AMENDING THE CALIFORNIA BUILDING CODE PERMITTING SINGLE-EXIT, SINGLE-STAIRWAY, MULTIFAMILY RESIDENTIAL BUILDINGS OF UP TO SIX STORIES.

Honorable Councilmembers,

On August 12, 2025, the PLUM Committee approved recommendations contained in the Los Angeles Department of Building and Safety (LADBS) report dated August 7, 2025 which recommended that the LADBS and the Los Angeles Fire Department (LAFD), in consultation with the City Attorney and the Department of City Planning (DCP) prepare and present a draft ordinance, including the necessary findings based on local climatic, topographical, and geological conditions, to amend the applicable provisions of the relevant Building Codes and Fire Codes to permit the use of a single exit in residential apartment buildings up to six stories in height using the City of Seattle's codes as a model.

On August 20, 2025, the City Council adopted an amended motion that directs the participating departments to (1) prepare and present a draft ordinance, including the necessary findings based on local climatic, topographical, and geological conditions, to amend the applicable provisions of the Los Angeles Building Codes and Fire Codes to permit the use of a single exit in residential apartment buildings up to six stories, (2) seek feedback from the State Fire Marshal and any other state agencies responsible for fire and life safety regarding the draft ordinance and (3) report on the feasibility of excluding Fire Hazard Severity Zones from the potential ordinance.

STATE AND LOCAL BUILDING CODES

In California, the California Building Standards Commission (CBSC) oversees the publication of the California Building Standards Code, also referred to as Title 24 of the California Code of Regulations, as mandated by the Health and Safety Code (HSC) Division 13, Part 2.5, starting with Section 18901. The 2022 edition of Title 24 comprises 12 parts that implement the design and construction regulations of buildings throughout the state. Title 24, Part 2, is the California Building Code (CBC), and Part 9 is the California Fire Code (CFC).

The Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD) establishes building standards for residential occupancies. The Office of the State Fire Marshal (SFM) is responsible for adopting building standards that focus on fire and panic safety for residential occupancies.

California Health and Safety Code Sections 17958.5 and 17958.7 authorize the City to make reasonably necessary changes or modifications to the provisions of the California Building Standards Code (Title 24, California Code of Regulations) upon finding these changes are reasonably necessary due to local climatic, geological or topographical conditions

Section 1006.3.4 of both the CBC and the CFC currently restricts apartment buildings to a maximum of three stories and four units per story when only one exit is provided. In order to permit single-exit apartment buildings that exceed three stories, amendments to both the CBC and CFC are necessary.

The LADBS, in collaboration with the LAFD and DCP, has drafted a proposed ordinance (shown in the attachment) amending Chapter 10 of the CBC. This proposed amendment introduces a new section, Los Angeles Municipal Code (LAMC) Section 91.1006.3.5, which would allow for single-exit apartment buildings of up to six stories under specific conditions. Additionally, the LAFD will submit a separate proposed ordinance to amend Chapter 10 of the CFC. The DCP has provided express findings to support the proposed amendment to the CBC.

STATE FIRE MARSHAL

A meeting with the SFM staff could not be scheduled in time for this transmittal, however, engagement is ongoing.

California AB 835 mandates that the SFM research and develop standards for multi-unit residential buildings with a single stairway that exceed three stories in height. Additionally, AB 835 requires the SFM to submit a report to the Senate Committee on Governmental Organization, the Assembly Committee on Emergency Management, the Joint Legislative Committee on Emergency Management, and the CBSC by January 1, 2026.

FIRE SEVERITY HAZARD ZONES

According to the LAFD, single-exit buildings over three stories should not be permitted in any High, or Very High Fire Severity Hazard Zones. This is because many sites within Fire Severity Hazard Zones are more challenging to access due to narrower streets in these areas.

PROPOSED ORDINANCE

In collaboration with the LAFD and DCP, DBS is proposing the attached ordinance for revisions to the 2022 California Building Code, in compliance with the Council instruction provided on August 20, 2025.

For additional information or questions, please contact Rodolfo Arias in the Department of Building and Safety at rodolfo.arias@lacity.org.

Osama Younan, PE
General Manager
Department of Building and Safety

ORDINANCE NO. _____

An ordinance amending Chapter IX of the Los Angeles Municipal Code to amend portions of the 2022 Edition of the California Building Standards Code and to allow for single-exit apartment buildings of up to six stories due to local climatic, geological, or topographical, changes.

WHEREAS, California Health and Safety Code Sections 17958.5 and 17958.7 authorize the City Council to make reasonably necessary changes or modifications to the provisions of the California Building Standards Code (Title 24, California Code of Regulations) upon finding these changes are reasonably necessary due to local climatic, geological or topographical conditions; and

WHEREAS, Climate change effects in Los Angeles, including more frequent and intense heat waves and increased wildfire risk, necessitate a shift toward building forms that consume less energy and reduce urban heat island effects; and

WHEREAS, the state building code requires multiple stairwells in multifamily buildings taller than three stories, a requirement that has been shown to constrain housing design, increase construction costs, and limit the development of "missing middle" housing types on otherwise eligible urban infill lots; and

WHEREAS, Most other countries in the world allow single-stair buildings, alternatively called "point access blocks," taller than the three stories currently permitted in Los Angeles, and this building typology has been found to offer many significant benefits to cities with similar topography, geology and climate, without any documented safety concerns; and

WHEREAS, Single-stair buildings are designed to take advantage of Southern California's temperate climate, allowing for more corner units and through-units, and thereby increasing opportunities for cross-ventilation, access to natural light, and opportunities for outdoor circulation. In doing so, single-stair buildings support climate-adaptive design by reducing dependence on mechanical heating and cooling, and lighting systems, reducing electricity use, thereby aligning with the City of Los Angeles' Green New Deal and climate resilience goals; and

WHEREAS, the climate of Los Angeles is characterized by mild winters, limited snowfall, and temperate seasonal conditions, which reduce the need for enclosed, mechanically ventilated circulation corridors in residential buildings. These conditions support the safe and effective use of single-stair designs with operable windows and natural ventilation, and.

WHEREAS, Southern California also experiences periods of intense heat waves, high winds, wildfires and other phenomena associated with climate change that cause power outages with increasing frequency, while buildings that provide survivable indoor conditions

without dependence on the electrical grid can protect residents without access to or those who can not afford to run air conditioning units; and

WHEREAS, Single-stair buildings allow for shallower unit depths, narrower building footprints, and more efficient floor area ratios. These characteristics promote smaller building envelopes, lowering material use and its associated embodied carbon and enable greater site efficiency and infill density, which reduces per-capita infrastructure demands; and

WHEREAS, By enabling housing types (e.g., 4–6 story single-stair multifamily buildings) suited for urban infill on small and irregular sized single lots, single-stair reform fosters transit-oriented, walkable development patterns. This reduces dependency on automobiles and directly supports greenhouse gas reduction, consistent with state goals around VMT reduction and location-efficiency; and

WHEREAS, Los Angeles's current housing stock contains many older buildings, typically lacking systems like fire alarms and fire sprinklers, and many more buildings built in the last 20-30 years are now coming of age and their exits, and exit access corridors are behind current code requirements and/or have been compromised since construction. A new single-stair ordinance would provide safer exiting when compared to existing conditions; and

WHEREAS, Single stair buildings are required to be fully sprinklered and designed with shorter travel distances to an exit, allowing occupants to evacuate more quickly in an emergency. The proposed height limits for single stair buildings ensures that fire department aerial ladders can provide access to upper floors under typical conditions, while internal sprinklers and other protections provide additional life-safety measures; and

WHEREAS, the current building code allows large double-loaded corridor buildings that allow for extremely long dead end corridors and have many more residents sharing the same stairs than comparable single-stair buildings; and

WHEREAS, the proposed ordinance would significantly limit the number of occupants leaving an exit stairwell. Compared to the currently adopted building code, which allows up to 500 occupants (equivalent to 100,000 square feet) per floor to share two exits, the ordinance limits floor plates to 4,000 square feet (equivalent to 20 occupants) per floor for a single exit, resulting in 92% fewer occupants per exit; and

WHEREAS, cities around the US, including the City of Seattle, for decades, have successfully permitted single-stair (or "point access block") construction for apartment buildings up to six stories, demonstrating a safe and effective alternative to the more restrictive state standard; and

WHEREAS, a recent study by The Pew Charitable Trusts analyzed fire death rates in modern single-stair buildings in Seattle and New York City from 2012 to 2024, finding that fire-related fatalities in these buildings were "indistinguishable from those in other multifamily buildings"; and

WHEREAS, the Pew study further revealed that in the rare instances of fire-related deaths in these buildings, "the lack of a second stairway did not play a role" in any of the fatalities, as they all occurred in the unit of origin; and

WHEREAS, the City of Los Angeles has drafted an ordinance modeled after Seattle's single-stair code, and with additional provisions to address local conditions and firefighting resources availability, that is no less protective than the state building code because it includes a suite of enhanced life safety measures that mitigate the lack of a second stair, including but not limited to:

- A maximum of six stories.
- A limit of four dwelling units and 4,000 square feet per floor, which reduces occupant load and the time needed for residents to evacuate.
- Prohibition of single-exit buildings above three stories in High and Very High Fire Hazard Severity Zones.
- A requirement for positive pressurization of interior stairwells and allowance of an exterior stairway to prevent smoke infiltration, thereby creating a safe, smoke-free path for occupants to exit and for firefighters to enter.
- Increased setbacks where emergency escape and rescue openings occur above the third floor.
- Enhanced fire protection requirements.
- A limit on the maximum travel distance from a dwelling unit's entry door to the exit stair, ensuring rapid access to the protected egress path.

WHEREAS, in support of the following modifications and changes, the City Council hereby expressly finds that the following amendments and modifications to the California Building Standards Code are reasonably necessary due to local climatic conditions as well as to further green building standards.

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, that the single-stair construction type, as exemplified by the City of Seattle's code, is a safe and proven alternative to the State's more restrictive two-stair requirement, and that its demonstrated safety record and enhanced life safety features make it a viable and beneficial building option for increasing housing supply and improving residential design without compromising occupant safety.

NOW, THEREFORE,

THE PEOPLE OF THE CITY OF LOS ANGELES DO ORDAIN AS FOLLOWS:

Sec. 1. Division 10, Article 1, Chapter IX of the Los Angeles Municipal Code is hereby amended to read as follows:

DIVISION 10
MEANS OF EGRESS

Section
91.1000 Basic Provisions.
91.1006 Number of Exits and Exit Access Stairways.

Sec. 2. Section 91.1000, Division 10, Article 1 Chapter IX of the Los Angeles Municipal Code is amended to read as follows:

SEC. 91.1000. BASIC PROVISIONS.

Chapter 10 of the CBC is adopted by reference except as amended herein.

Sec. 3. Section 91.1006, Division 10, Article 1 Chapter IX of the Los Angeles Municipal Code is added to read as follows:

SEC. 91.1006. NUMBER OF EXITS AND EXIT ACCESS STAIRWAYS.

Section 1006 of the CBC is adopted by reference except as amended herein.

Sec. 4. Subsection 91.1006.3.5 of Section 91.1006, Division 10, Article 1 Chapter IX of the Los Angeles Municipal Code is added to read as follows:

91.1006.3.5 Single-exit buildings with Group R-2 dwelling units with an occupied floor or roof above the third story. Single-exit, R-2 occupancy buildings with an occupied floor or roof above the third story need not comply with Section 1006.3.4 and instead shall comply with all of the following in addition to the requirements of this code:

1. Only dwelling units or accessory dwelling units shall be allowed as defined in Chapter 2 of the CBC, and no other type of unit shall be permitted within the building.
2. R-2 occupancies, as defined in CBC Section 310.3, within the building shall be limited to apartment houses. R-2.1 and R-2.2 occupancies shall not be permitted.
3. The building shall not be classified as a high-rise building as defined in Chapter 2 of the CBC.
4. The net floor area of each floor (story or basement) shall not exceed 4,000 square feet (371.6 m^2).
5. There shall be no more than one single-exit building in compliance with this section per lot unless a yard or court of 10 feet (3.05 m) separates single-exit buildings from other buildings on the same lot. Firewalls shall not be used as an alternative to this provision.
6. Single-exit buildings over three stories are not permitted in any High or Very High FireHazard Severity Zones.

7. The building shall be of VA (four stories maximum), IVA, IVB, IVC, IIIA, IIA, IB, or IA type of construction.
8. Recycling, waste, and linen chute access shall be located within a separate room and shall not be accessible from the exit stairway. The separate chute access room shall have no horizontal dimension less than five feet (1.53 m) nor be less than 25 square feet (2.32 m^2) in area.
9. Each dwelling unit or accessory dwelling unit shall be limited to a maximum of six habitable spaces as defined in Chapter 2 of the CBC.
10. When an elevator is provided, it shall comply with CBC Section 3002.4a, general stretcher requirements.
11. Elevator hoistway shall be pressurized in accordance with CBC Section 909.21 or shall open into elevator lobbies constructed to comply with CBC Section 3006.
12. There shall be no more than 20 feet (6.10 m) of travel distance to the exit stairway as measured from the entry/exit door of any dwelling unit to the exit stairway door or related passageway door.
13. Other occupancies are permitted in the same building provided they separately comply with all the requirements of this code. Other occupancies shall not communicate with the Group R occupancy portion of the building and shall be provided with a separate means of egress, distinct from the single exit serving the R-2 occupancy.
    Exception: Parking garages accessory to the R-2 occupancy are permitted to use the single-exit stairway.
14. Private roof decks up to 150 square feet (13.9 m^2) per unit are permitted at or below the sixth story. The private roof deck must be accessible only through that individual unit. Individual roof decks shall be separated from other private roof decks and any other areas by a minimum 42-inch (1067 mm) tall guardrail or walls.
15. There shall be no more than a total of four dwelling units (including accessory dwelling units) on each story or basement level.
16. The building shall not exceed six stories. Basement levels shall be counted as stories for the purpose of this limit.
17. Exit doors shall swing in the direction of egress travel at the exterior or interior exit stairway and any associated passageway, regardless of the occupant load served. Door swing shall not reduce or encroach into the required stair landing. Landings shall not be reduced by any amount when the door is in any position. Reductions in the minimum required landing dimensions, as allowed per CBC Section 1010.1.5 and CBC Section 1011.6, shall not be permitted.
18. The maximum exit access travel distance, measured in accordance with CBC Section 1017, shall not exceed 125 feet (38.1 m).
19. A corridor complying with CBC Section 1020 or an egress balcony complying with CBC Section 1021 shall separate each dwelling unit entry/exit door from the exit stairway, including any related passageway, on each floor. Corridor and egress balcony walls shall be of not less than 1-hour fire-resistance-rated construction. The egress balcony shall be separated from the interior of the building by walls and opening protectives as required for 1-hour fire-resistance-rated corridors.
20. Dwelling units, elevators, equipment rooms, storage rooms, trash rooms, and other similar rooms or spaces shall not open into the interior exit stairway enclosure.

21. An exterior exit stairway or interior exit stairway shall be provided. The interior exit stairway, including any related passageways, shall be a smokeproof enclosure in compliance with CBC Section 909.20.
22. Electrical receptacles shall be prohibited in an interior exit stairway.
23. Dwelling unit doors are permitted to open onto an exterior exit stairway as long as the dwelling unit doors do not encroach into the stairs and required stairway landings. Reductions in the minimum required landing dimensions, as allowed per CBC Section 1010.1.5 and CBC Section 1011.6, shall not be permitted.
24. Exits shall terminate directly onto a public way that is 20 feet (6.10 m) wide minimum or onto an egress court where the width of the egress court is equal to or exceeds the court length and terminates at a public way that is no less than 20 feet (6.10 m) wide.
25. The total horizontal travel distance from the edge of the roadway to the farthest unit door (at any level), excluding the vertical rise within a stairway (and associated landings), shall be less than 150’ feet (45.7 m).
26. Notwithstanding CBC Section 1031.2, all basement levels and sleeping rooms within any story or basement shall have not fewer than one emergency escape and rescue opening in accordance with CBC Section 1031. Exceptions 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, and 8, listed in CBC Section 1031.2, shall not apply.
27. All emergency escape and rescue openings provided above the third floor and in accordance with LAMC Section 1031 shall be accessible from an 8-foot-wide (2.44 m) yard.
28. The building shall be provided with a sprinkler system in accordance with NFPA-13 as adopted by the California Building Standards Commission and amended by the City of Los Angeles.
29. A manual fire alarm system and automatic smoke detection system that activates the occupant notification system in accordance with CBC Section 907.5 shall be provided. Smoke detectors shall be located in common spaces outside of dwelling units, including but not limited to gathering areas, laundry rooms, mechanical equipment rooms, storage rooms, interior corridors, interior exit stairway, and passageways.