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To: "Direct to Mayor and Council"

Date: 2/20/2025 4:58:06 PM

Subject: Council Prep Package: Potential update to VBBL to enable Single Egress Stairs (DBL)

Dear Mayor & Council,

The [Council Agenda](#) for February 26 is now live on Vancouver.ca. In preparation for the report titled "Potential Update to VBBL to Enable Single Egress Stairs", staff have prepared a briefing package with key messages, key facts and relevant Q&As that may be helpful to you in media interviews or conversations with stakeholders and constituents.

Item in brief

On October 9, 2024, Council directed staff to explore provisions in the BC Building Code to allow single egress stair buildings. Next week, staff will report back with recommendations that Council decline to adopt this provision, as it is not well suited to the Vancouver context. Staff will also present an alternative recommendation for Council to direct them to explore modifications that better align with Vancouver's needs.

Communications approach in brief

The City will take a reactive approach to communications. Staff will respond to media inquiries seeking clarification on technical aspects of the report and will note that the item will be decided on by Council.

Key messages

- In response to Council direction, City staff will present a report to Council recommending that Vancouver does not adopt the BC Building Code's single egress stair provision. Staff will also be presenting an alternative recommendation that Council direct staff to explore potential modifications, including additional safety measures, to align with Vancouver's specific needs.
- Vancouver is unique in that we have our own building code which allows us to adopt regulations that respond to opportunities and challenges for our local context.
- While single egress stair design may work in some municipalities, Vancouver's narrow lots with minimal street frontage limit the space available for fire rescue operations to set up and use external lift equipment. As a result, internal stairs remain the primary evacuation strategy for buildings, making multiple egress points critical to safety.
- While eliminating a second stairwell could allow more space for housing units and reduce construction costs, any potential benefits are offset by increased risk to residents and firefighters.
- Having only one stairwell means that in emergency situations, residents would only have one

- exit route. This can be dangerous if the sole stairwell becomes blocked by fire, smoke or debris. Additionally, firefighters using the only set of stairs to carry out lifesaving operations may also make it difficult for residents trying to evacuate.
- The City is actively working with VFRS to explore alternative ways to achieve the same goals as the provincial single egress stair provisions for small footprint buildings without removing the second stair, or to provide additional design parameters that will achieve an acceptable level of safety.

Key Facts & Timeline

- In August 2024, the Province updated the BC Building Code to allow municipalities to voluntarily opt-into allowing single egress stair design, provided that local fire and rescue services have capacity to support this change. To date, no municipality has adopted single egress stair design.
- On September 3, 2024, the Fire Chiefs Association of BC (FCABC) and the BC Professional Fire Fighters Association (BCPFFA) raised concerns regarding the BC Provincial Government amendment of the BCBC to allow a single egress stairs in multi-residential building.
- On October 9, 2024, Council made motion to direct staff to investigate the potential to update the Vancouver Building By-law (VBBL) to enable single egress stairs for low and mid-rise buildings to align with provincial changes to the BC Building Code (BCBC). Space-saving benefits of single egress stair design could be achieved through other efficient design options.

Questions & Answers

Are there alternatives to single egress stair design for space-efficient egress?

Yes, alternatives such as scissor stairs or exterior egress stairs have been identified, which may achieve similar benefits without compromising safety.

The report mentions that Vancouver's narrow lots make it difficult to adopt single egress stair design, but proponents say that it is perfect for narrow lots – why is that?

Vancouver has many small, narrow lots where access to non-road facing exterior walls makes it difficult for VFRS to set up ladders and other equipment, making internal stairs critical in emergency evacuations. The Province's single egress stair provision rely on the ability to use aerial ladders for rescue operations.

Advocates for single egress stair design say that there are other lifesaving measures that can offset the risk of single egress stair design. Why can't the City adopt those?

The BCBC's single egress stair provision relies heavily on additional mitigating features such as pressurization fans with an emergency power supply, and magnetic door hold open devices for every suite and connected to the fire alarm system. All these additional requirements are expensive. While builders may be able to afford the initial installation costs, the long-term costs for testing and

maintaining these measures have not been fully assessed. The concern is that financial pressures may lead to delayed upkeep of testing and maintenance by property owners.

Related links

Province of BC News Release: <https://news.gov.bc.ca/releases/2024HOUS0158-001410>

BC Professional Fire Fighters Association News Release: <https://www.bcpffa.net/news/media-advisory-to-single-exit-stairway-building-plan-design?>

Media coverage:

- <https://vancouver.citynews.ca/2024/10/08/vancouver-council-single-stairwell-developments>
- <https://storeys.com/bc-building-code-single-egress-announcement>
- <https://canada.constructconnect.com/joc/news/government/2024/11/are-recent-bc-building-code-changes-to-single-egress-stairs-playing-with-fire?>

If you have any questions about the foregoing, please reach out to Maria at maria.pontikis@vancouver.ca.

Best,

Paul

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The City of Vancouver acknowledges that it is situated on the unceded traditional territories of the x m k y m (Musqueam), S wxwú7mesh (Squamish), and s lilw ta (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations.