

OFFERED BY COUNCILORS LIZ BREADON, SHARON DURKAN, BRIAN WORRELL,  
FERNANDES ANDERSON, MEJIA, PEPÉN, WEBER AND LOUIJUENE



## CITY OF BOSTON IN CITY COUNCIL

### ORDER FOR A HEARING TO DISCUSS LEGALIZING MID-RISE SINGLE-STAIR HOUSING IN THE MASSACHUSETTS STATE BUILDING CODE

*WHEREAS*, The Massachusetts State Building Code (MSBC) consists of a series of international model codes and state-specific amendments adopted by the Board of Building Regulations and Standards (BBRS), with the 10th Edition becoming effective on October 11, 2024, and building permit applications filed after July 1, 2025, must comply with the 10th Edition; *and*

*WHEREAS*, The MSBC is divided into two distinct volumes: the Residential Volume, which governs one- and two-family structures, townhouses, and their accessory structures of three stories or less, and the Base Volume, which governs all other structures not covered by the Residential Volume; *and*

*WHEREAS*, In October 2024, the report *Legalizing Mid-Rise Single-Stair Housing in Massachusetts* was released by Boston Indicators, the research center at the Boston Foundation, in collaboration with the Joint Center for Housing Studies at Harvard University and the Boston-based design firm Utile, advocating for the modernization of Massachusetts' building codes to allow 'single-stair' construction for buildings up to six stories with no more than 24 units; *and*

*WHEREAS*, The report highlights how the current building code requirement for two separate stairways in mid-rise buildings limits housing potential, while advancements in construction materials, smoke detection, and sprinklers have made this regulation increasingly outdated and open to reconsideration across North America; *and*

*WHEREAS*, The dual egress requirement, which mandates two staircases, results in inefficient use of space, limiting flexibility in floor plans, reducing housing production, particularly on smaller-sized parcels, while increasing construction costs, making smaller or more diverse developments financially unfeasible, and hindering housing diversity by making it harder to include varied housing typologies; *and*

*WHEREAS*, Point Access Blocks (PABs) use a single central staircase instead of long corridors with staircases at each end, offering more efficient and flexible layouts with better use of natural light, improved ventilation, and opportunities for larger, family-sized units, while increasing density with a variety of unit sizes; *and*

*WHEREAS,* Allowing for single-stair construction unlocks the Greater Boston region’s abundant smaller parcels for development that fit their scale, especially in denser, transit-rich neighborhoods, and the report estimates that the Greater Boston area could net upwards of 130,000 new homes by adopting the single-stair typology on undeveloped small-to-mid-sized parcels within 0.75 miles of transit; *and*

*WHEREAS,* Countries like Switzerland, Japan, and many across Europe allow single-stair buildings up to six or nine stories tall, demonstrating that single-stair buildings can provide equal or better fire safety outcomes than those in the U.S., and cities like New York, Seattle, and Honolulu have already implemented single-stair provisions for buildings up to five or six stories, while several states have passed legislation to allow single-stair buildings; *and*

*WHEREAS,* The report recommends legalizing single-stair buildings up to six stories, with a maximum of four units per floor, while maintaining other existing fire mitigation requirements, such as those for sprinklers and fire-treated materials, reducing travel distance for egress by capping at 75 feet the maximum travel distance from the furthest point in a unit to the exit, and limiting floor plate size to 4,000 square feet per floor to ensure that buildings remain compact and efficient; *and*

*WHEREAS,* The Pew Charitable Trusts, in a January 2025 article and a February 2025 report, has highlighted that single-stairway apartment buildings, when combined with modern fire safety features, have demonstrated a strong safety record in cities such as New York and Seattle, and that building code revisions to allow such structures could reduce construction costs by 6 to 13 percent, providing a viable solution for increasing housing supply in urban areas, particularly in high-demand, transit-accessible locations; *and*

*WHEREAS,* According to the Pew Charitable Trusts report, in October 2024, the International Building Code Means of Egress Code Committee approved a compromise proposal to allow single-stair buildings up to four stories tall, with up to four units and 4,000 square feet of floor space per story, citing legislative intervention as a factor in the decision, and the proposed change will proceed through the development process for the 2027 edition of the code; *and*

*WHEREAS,* Building code reforms in Massachusetts could be made by the Board of Building Regulations and Standards or through state legislation, or the Legislature could enable municipalities to adopt the reforms individually at the local level; *NOW, THEREFORE BE IT*

*ORDERED:* That the appropriate committee of the Boston City Council hold a hearing to discuss legalizing mid-rise single-stair housing in the Massachusetts State Building Code, and that representatives of the Building Division of the Inspectional Services Department, the Massachusetts Board of Building Regulations and Standards, Boston Indicators, the Joint Center for Housing Studies at Harvard University, Utile, and interested members of the public be invited to attend.

Filed on: March 31, 2025