

Meeting Minutes

AIA Massachusetts – Government Affairs Committee (GAC)**Date:** Wednesday, October 15, 2025**Location:** Virtual (Zoom)**Topic:** The Single-Stair Debate in Housing Design**Attendance:** Approximately 82 registered; 50 present during meeting; large public interest noted.**Chair:** Larry Spang, AIA**Guest Presenters:**

- **Stephen Smith**, Executive Director, Center for Building in North America
- **Jennifer Hoyt**, P.E., Fire Protection Engineer, Code Red Consultants

I. Opening and Announcements

Larry Spang opened the meeting, noting the unusually high registration and public interest in the topic of single-stair residential buildings.

John Nunnari began with a brief advocacy update on AIA MA's partnership with Sen. Joanne Comerford, emphasizing her leadership on design, preservation, and equity issues.

- A fundraiser for Sen. Comerford will be held **Tuesday, October 21**, at **Carrie Nation, Boston**, hosted by Senate President Karen Spilka and Senate Ways and Means Chair Michael Rodrigues.
- AIA MA's goal is to raise \$10,000 collectively; John will personally coordinate contributions.
- Personal checks (no corporate donations) should be made out to *The Committee to Elect Jo Comerford*.
- John reviewed Comerford's past legislative collaboration with AIA MA, including work on:
 - Gender-neutral bathrooms (2018)
 - Healthy and Green Public Schools (2020–2022)
 - Historic District Commissions bill (2025 Session)

2. Main Discussion: Single-Stair Residential Design**Context Overview – John Nunnari**

- House Bill 1542 – An Act to study single-stair residential buildings, filed by Rep. Meghan Kilcoyne) would establish a special commission to examine under what conditions single-stair multifamily buildings (up to six stories) could be legalized in Massachusetts.
- The study would draw on the 2024 Harvard Joint Center for Housing Studies / Boston Indicators / Utile report, and be funded at \$250,000.
- The bill received a June 25 hearing and has been extended through October 31, 2025, meaning it remains active in committee.
- AIA MA has not taken a formal position on legalization but supports HB 1542 as a data-driven step toward informed policy.

****Note: Links to reference documents are at the end of the minutes**

3. Guest Presentation #1 – Stephen Smith**Topic:** Housing and Design Benefits of Single-Stair Buildings

- Shared that New York City has permitted up to six-story, single-exit buildings since 1938; he personally lives in one.

- Noted that modern sprinklered multifamily buildings have extremely low fire-death rates, significantly safer than single-family homes.
- Key data points:
 - Fire deaths per capita are 4–6x higher in single-family homes than in newer multifamily structures.
 - Construction costs in the U.S. rise sharply with height—unlike in Europe or Asia—creating affordability challenges.
 - Requiring a second stair can add ~10% to total construction cost and reduce livable area, particularly on small infill sites.
- International comparisons:
 - U.S. requires two stairs starting at 3–4 stories; in Europe, thresholds are 8–16 stories, sometimes higher.
 - Countries like Switzerland and South Korea have no single-stair height limit.
- Code implications:
 - The International Building Code (IBC) limits to 3 stories; NFPA 101 allows 4; Puerto Rico and Vermont allow 5–6.
 - The 2027 IBC draft may increase the limit to 4 stories.
- Massachusetts proposal is conservative, seeking only a study, not legalization.
- Concluded that independent, state-funded research is necessary since current code development is often driven by vendor or trade interests (timber, sprinklers, etc.).

4. Guest Presentation #2 – Jennifer Hoyt

Topic: Fire and Life Safety Considerations

- Represented the fire service perspective and emphasized the need for empirical study before changing codes.
- Stressed that redundancy (two exits) is foundational to life safety and based on lessons from past fire tragedies.
- Key concerns and discussion points:
 - A single stair eliminates redundancy; any blockage or smoke infiltration poses serious risk.
 - Firefighter operations require clear, unencumbered egress; charged hoses and narrow stairs impede this.
 - Rescue limitations: U.S. firefighting equipment is not designed for frequent aerial rescues as in Europe.
 - Aging and mobility-impaired populations make ladder or aerial rescues impractical.
 - Active systems (sprinklers, alarms) require regular maintenance—often neglected.
 - Passive systems (fire-rated stairs, compartmentation) are reliable but costlier.
- Hoyt suggested requiring more robust system maintenance and stair pressurization testing, referencing NFPA 4 commissioning standards.
- Concluded that a middle ground may exist, but only if supported by data and enforceable maintenance requirements.

5. Discussion and Q&A Highlights

Commission Recommendations:

- **Smith** urged the commission to compare single-stair risks to single-family homes, not just multifamily buildings.
- **Hoyt** emphasized evaluating risk tolerance, redundancy, and maintenance obligations, especially for older or vulnerable residents.

Building Materials:

AIA Massachusetts is the consortium of the Boston Society of Architects, the Central Massachusetts Chapter of the AIA and the Western Massachusetts Chapter of the AIA

- Discussion on light wood-frame vs. non-combustible construction; both speakers noted trade-offs between affordability and safety.
- **Smith** favored performance-based fire resistance rather than material-based code language.
- **Hoyt** cautioned against expanding combustible construction in dense urban contexts due to exposure risk.

Data Quality:

- Both noted poor national data quality (e.g., NFIRS reporting), making evidence-based decisions difficult.

Code Maintenance:

- Shared skepticism over the reliability of stair pressurization systems, even at installation.
- **Hoyt** praised new 10th Edition BBRS adoption of NFPA 4 requiring regular commissioning and testing.

Audience Questions:

- Concern raised: “What if the single egress stair is filled with smoke?”
 - **Hoyt**: “That’s the central issue—codes assume redundancy. We must find tested systems that maintain smoke-free egress.”
 - **Smith**: “Even two-stair buildings have had smoke-fatality events (e.g., Twin Parks, Bronx). Risk must be balanced, not eliminated.”
- Cost inquiry: \$230,000 average cost per second stair (4–6 stories) derived from multiple contractor quotes.

6. Closing Comments

Both presenters expressed support for a formal Massachusetts study as a model for other states.

John Nunnari summarized:

- The House bill (**HB 1542**) remains active with an extension through Oct. 31.
- The Senate companion bill is identical but inactive under Senate rules until December.
- Future GAC involvement will depend on legislative action and the structure of the proposed commission.

Larry Spang thanked presenters and attendees, encouraging ongoing collaboration between architects and fire professionals.

7. Adjournment

Meeting adjourned at **10:00 a.m.**

Reference Documents:

- The Pew Charitable Trust Study - [Small Single-Stairway Apartment Building Have Strong Safety Record](#)
- 2024 Harvard Joint Center for Housing Studies / Boston Indicators / Utile report - [Legalizing Mid-Rise Single-Stair Housing in Massachusetts](#)
- 2024 NFPA Report - [One Stair, Two Perspectives: Single Exit Stair Symposium](#)
- [House Bill 1542 - An Act to study single-stair residential buildings](#)