



Council Member Motion
For the Committee of the Whole Meeting of September 4th, 2025

To: Committee of the Whole

Date: August 20th, 2025

From: Councillor Gardiner

Subject: Single Egress Stairway (SES)

BACKGROUND

The Provincial Government has updated the BC Building Code (BCBC) to remove the requirement for a second egress or exit stairwell in buildings up to six storeys.

While the change supports building housing on smaller lots and in different configurations, fire and police associations have objected to the change, citing safety issues and the bypassing of rigours of the National Building Code process. Among associations stating that the current requirement of providing a minimum of two means of egress is in the public interest are: *Fire Chiefs' Association of BC (FCABC)*, *BC Professional Fire Fighters Association*, *International Association of Fire Chiefs*, and *Canadian Association of Fire Chiefs*.

Safety:

When a fire of a residential structure occurs, there is need for smoke-free exits for residents (regardless of mobility limitations) and for firefighter access to both the exterior and interior of a building.

The SES single egress stairway must be shared by residents exiting the building at the same time as firefighters in full gear are entering the stairwell with fire equipment - including hoses. As residents from the floor with the fire enter the stairwell and/or firefighters fighting from within the building leave the stairwell to enter the floor with the fire, the stairwell would not be smoke-free. The egress pathway would be compromised.

A large proportion of Victoria residents have mobility limitations. The frail elderly, those with medical conditions (be they temporary or permanent), and others who need assistance leaving a building by the stairs. The stairwell may need to accommodate 2-3 people descending side-by-side while also accommodating firefighters going up the stairs.

Alternate fire rescue could occur from balconies. Safety issues are magnified in Victoria for two specific reasons, namely the above ground utility poles/wires and the absence of lane-ways throughout most of the city. Ground ladders reach only the third floor. Aerial ladders on trucks can reach the sixth floor. However, the truck must be able to get near the balconies and the ladders must not be near powerlines. Victoria has few laneways, and rescue from balconies would not be possible in the upper half of the building if power lines are along the street or if there is no rear lane.

While the BCBC requires specific safety measures for new SES designed buildings, including sprinklers, smoke-management systems and wider stairwells, these changes do not address the main issues of access to a building and a smoke-free exit.

Process:

On August 29, 2024, the Province of BC, via Ministerial Order, altered the BCBC to remove the code requirement for a second egress or exit stairwell in buildings up to six storeys. This change was NOT developed or sanctioned by the Canadian Board for Harmonized Construction Codes (CBHCC).

The CBHCC, responsible for the development of Canada’s National Model Codes which contain objectives related to health, safety, and the protection of buildings from fire and structural damage, and the protection of the environment, is made up of representatives from provincial, territorial, and federal public services. It works within a system of groups that provide oversight, advice, and develop/propose changes.

Regarding the Province’s action, Dan Derby, FCABC President stated *“Circumventing the code development process jeopardizes the public, building occupants, and first responders. Much like smoke alarms and carbon monoxide alarms, proper exiting is known to have saved thousands of lives and remains the fundamental building block to life safety.”*

While fire departments and associations were invited to comment on the Province’s SES policy, many have spoken of “deaf ears”. While the Ministry of Housing has stated it will undertake further engagement to address the safety concerns raised, the SES remains in the BCBC.

Recent Discussions with Municipal Councils:

UBCM, on behalf of BC Housing, invited Mayors and Councillors to a Webinar on August 7, 2025.

While the SES code change was intended to lower building costs, BC Housing staff confirmed that financial savings for developments would not occur. Future fire inspection costs to municipalities have not been estimated. It is anticipated that as equipment ages, routine fire inspections of SES buildings will be more frequent. Given the City of Victoria’s upcoming Official Community Plan focus on supporting 6-storey buildings throughout most of the city, this change to the BCBC could be costly for the City’s taxpayers.

BC Housing has several mitigative strategies under consideration; but they are “hope” and “if” strategies. Unlike many earlier changes to the BC Building Code such as changes related to energy (Zero Carbon Step Code), the SES policy is about safety. ***Safety of our residents must be paramount.***

Letters from the FCABC and the BC Association of Chiefs of Police (BCACP) are appended to this motion. Further background materials:

- FCABC September 12, 2024 presentation from the FCABC to the Metro Vancouver Board <https://metrovancover.org/media-room/video/1008949492>
- FCABC website with links including the August 7, 2024 letter to Hon Ravi Kahlon, then Minister of Housing <https://fcabc.ca/single-means-of-egress/>
- BCACP link to July 31, 2024 letter [Supporting Letter & Statement](#)
- UBCM resolution coming forward from Burnaby <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1i5zgpbh3QWdKZ8EI67x7iBkPq9soJz88Or-CHmR0eBs/mobilebasic>

RECOMMENDATIONS

That Council direct staff to:

1. Assess the Single Egress Stairway (SES) requirements with respect to:
 - a. city capacity of water access
 - b. impact on operational capability (including equipment and staffing), and
 - c. impact on fire inspection capacity (staffing)
2. Create local guidelines regarding siting constraints for development proposals involving SES
3. Pause consideration of any development proposals incorporating a SES until the proposal can be assessed against:
 - a. City of Victoria Fire Department local guidelines, or
 - b. National Model Codes as established by the Canadian Board for Harmonized Construction Codes

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of a stylized circular mark followed by a horizontal line.

Councillor Gardiner