

NAHB| AB 2252 (California) | Bill Analysis

California Assembly Bill 2252 (AB 2252) seeks to amend several sections of the Health and Safety Code relating to housing. Principally, it allows for the drafting of regulations that would permit single-exit stair buildings up to six stories, rather than the current two-stairway requirement.

BACKGROUND

The first regulations on stair egress in urban buildings date to 1860 due to concerns related to fire safety.¹ Since then, most localities have required two sets of stairs in buildings over three stories to ensure that in the event of a fire, both paths of egress are not easily blocked.² However, according to a recent analysis of safety records, modern four- to six-story buildings with only one stairway do not impose a greater risk on residents and are at least as safe as other types of housing.³

The new evidence, coupled with the current housing supply shortage, has led to the reexamination of building code regulations. AB 2252 is a byproduct of that reexamination to increase the housing stock. In California, AB 2252 represents one of several bills introduced to remove regulatory barriers to housing development.

THIS BILL

This bill does not directly legislate to allow for the construction of a single-stair in apartment buildings that are above three stories, but it paves the way for its potential.

What it does directly legislate is,

- For the California state agency, the Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD), to develop building and safety standards for multifamily buildings up to six stories with one set of stairs.
- It also requires State Fire Marshall consultation on the development of these standards

¹ [The Basis for Egress Provisions in U.S. Building Codes | NIST](#)

² [The staircase rule that's limiting housing growth](#)

³ [Small Single-Stairway Apartment Buildings Have Strong Safety Record | The Pew Charitable Trusts](#)



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- It allows local governments to adopt the state changes to the building code once they are released, whereas most local-based changes are currently blocked by HCD.

ARGUMENTS in SUPPORT

The primary goal of AB 2252 is to update housing safety regulations and responsibly remove barriers to increasing the housing supply. Federal, state and local regulation add \$131,734 to the cost of a new single-family home, equivalent to 26.4% of the average sales price of \$499,500, according to the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB).⁴ The United States has a structural housing deficit of 1.2 million units.⁵ Any legislative or regulatory action that promotes the construction of new housing units while simultaneously decreasing the cost of regulation should be enacted. AB 2252 helps accomplish this goal without jeopardizing safety when coupled with modern building techniques and materials.

Requiring two stairways can consume a disproportionate share of the floor plate in smaller multifamily buildings, reducing the space available for homes and making infill projects on narrow or irregular parcels more difficult to finance. A carefully regulated single-stair option could allow more efficient layouts, additional units within the same building envelope and a broader mix of unit sizes, including family-sized apartments with more exterior walls, windows and opportunities for natural light and ventilation. These design benefits could make more housing proposals feasible without increasing a building's height or footprint.

The bill also takes a measured approach rather than immediately authorizing single-stair construction statewide. It directs HCD to develop standards in consultation with the State Fire Marshal, allowing technical experts to evaluate building height, unit count, travel distance, stair enclosure, sprinklers, alarms, smoke protection, emergency access and other life-safety features before projects may use the alternative design. Because local governments would be permitted, not required, to adopt the resulting standards, communities could consider local fire-response capacity and development conditions while gaining an additional code-compliant housing option.

A clear state-developed pathway could also improve predictability for builders, designers, building officials and fire authorities by replacing project-by-project uncertainty with transparent

⁴ [Regulatory Costs Jump 40% in Five Years, Add \\$131,734 to New Home Prices | NAHB](#)

⁵ <https://www.nahb.org/-/media/NAHB/news-and-economics/docs/housing-economics-plus/special-studies/2026/special-study-government-regulation-in-the-price-of-a-home-june-2026-updated.pdf?rev=f3fafcb436c4440b82cfca2255998e34&hash=111CA2E0C7822D67DEDD7FA0DA8742FA>

and consistently applied criteria. Greater design flexibility may lower construction costs, expand competition among feasible projects and help smaller developments proceed on sites that cannot efficiently accommodate two stairs. More compact infill housing can also use existing infrastructure, place homes closer to jobs and services, and reduce pressure for outward development. Therefore AB 2252 is a practical, performance-based reform that preserves rigorous safety review while giving jurisdictions another tool to address housing supply and affordability.

ARGUMENTS in OPPOSITION

A second stairway functions as a critical layer of redundancy: if smoke, fire, debris or firefighting activity blocks one exit, residents and first responders still have an alternative route. The concern is particularly acute in buildings approaching six stories, where ladder access may be limited, evacuation takes longer and a greater number of occupants may depend on the same enclosed stair. A single stair could also create conflicts between residents moving downward and firefighters carrying equipment upward, potentially slowing both evacuation and emergency response.

Some may argue that modeling and modern fire-protection systems cannot eliminate real-world risks. Sprinklers, alarms, smoke-control systems, fire-rated doors and emergency power require regular inspection, maintenance and code enforcement to perform as designed. System failures, improperly maintained equipment, propped-open doors, combustible contents or fires originating in common areas could undermine the assumptions supporting a single-exit design. Evacuation may also be more difficult for older adults, people with disabilities, families with young children and residents who need assistance, making the loss of an alternate route especially consequential.

The most notorious question is whether a statewide pathway gives sufficient weight to local conditions, including fire-department staffing, apparatus capability, response times, water supply, wildfire exposure, building configuration and neighborhood access. The opposition may urge HCD and the State Fire Marshal to require conservative safeguards, such as limits on unit count or travel distance, enhanced compartmentation, smoke-protected stairs, firefighter access and robust inspection requirements before local adoption is permitted. Finally, the bill's housing and cost benefits remain uncertain: eliminating a second stair can improve design flexibility and usable floor area, but those gains should be quantified and weighed against potentially severe consequences if the sole means of egress becomes unusable during an emergency.

SIMILAR LEGISLATION or ENACTED LAWS

- Colorado
- New Hampshire
- Texas
- Montana

COURT CASES

California Restaurant Association v. Berkeley (9th Cir. 2023)

- This case effectively holds that local building codes can be struck down if they conflict with a higher-level law.

POTENTIAL SUPPORTERS

Home Builders Associations, Realtor Associations, Pro-Housing Advocacy groups, Chambers of commerce

POTENTIAL OPPOSITION

International Association of Fire Fighters (IAFF), International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC), National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), Local Fire Departments, and Local Code Officials