

BUSINESS

It's time for Minnesota to allow taller buildings with a single staircase

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Many of my columns in 2023 described the effects of slow population growth on the Minnesota economy and businesses.

In 2024, I resolve to publish more solutions from Minnesotans with good ideas for keeping the economy moving in spite of our demographic challenges.

Here's the first: Change the state building code to allow buildings with a single staircase to be taller than three stories. The new limit should be six stories.

This is a tradeoff between the need for Minnesota to differentiate itself by remaining an affordable place to live with abundant housing choices and the fire risk for people in buildings that will be taller and have one way out.

There are building code experts at the Minnesota Department of Labor and Industry (DLI) who are already studying this as they prepare for once-every-six-year update to the code, due in 2026.

In recent months, a growing number of metro-area architects, planners and developers have been looking at Honolulu, Seattle and New York, where single-staircase buildings are allowed to reach six stories.

"It's a keystone kind of issue that cuts across so many of the challenges we face as a state, whether it's fostering more housing to address our shortage or allowing for increased density in places that we've already zoned to do it," said Cody Fischer, principal at Footprint Development in Minneapolis.

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Seattle allows multi-family buildings of up to six stories tall built around a single staircase. It limits the number of dwellings to four per floor.

In broad terms, the height restriction forces apartment builders to go wide instead of going up. New apartments built in downtown Minneapolis over the last five years have sprawled across most, if not all, of a city block.

That's because of the way the building code collides with economics. By requiring two staircases on any building above three stories, the only type of structure that makes financial sense is one with a long hallway between the stairs and many apartments coming off that hallway.

The result is apartments that are deep and that, except on the corner, have only one exterior opening — for windows, a balcony or both. Lighting is poor and there is no cross-ventilation.

That kind of design also leads developers to favor studio and one-bedroom apartments, rather than two- and three-bedroom units needed by families. Those units are known as "the missing middle" in the housing market, architects say.

The change would be most meaningful in Minneapolis and close-in suburbs, by opening up far more properties to redevelopment. St. Paul needs the change too, however it needs to get rid of rent control first. That damages its redevelopment prospects more than building restrictions do.

In most years over the past couple of decades, the metro region failed to build enough new housing to keep up with demand. This led to higher real estate values, which property owners love.

Without adequate building and redevelopment, however, the region becomes less affordable for new entrants. Growth, already being hurt by demographics and weather, comes under even more pressure.

Hoping to spur more redevelopment, Minneapolis in 2019 eliminated single-family zoning citywide. Last year, a judge sided with opponents [to thwart that change on environmental grounds](https://www.startribune.com/minneapolis-developers-to-lose-millions-without-2040-plan-as-judges-order-goes-into-effect/600317445/) (<https://www.startribune.com/minneapolis-developers-to-lose-millions-without-2040-plan-as-judges-order-goes-into-effect/600317445/>). As I noted [in a column about that fight](https://www.startribune.com/ramstad-minneapolis-2040-plan-mired-housing-vs-environment-clash-among-progressives-growth-economy/600304171/) (<https://www.startribune.com/ramstad-minneapolis-2040-plan-mired-housing-vs-environment-clash-among-progressives-growth-economy/600304171/>), the zoning change was neither as successful as proponents hoped nor as detrimental as opponents feared.

It led developers to build about 60 duplexes and triplexes in areas where they weren't previously allowed from 2020 through 2022. In many cases, developers had to buy adjoining properties to do so.

They went wide, instead of up.

Seattle, which has grappled with extreme housing shortage and affordability challenges for years, allows single-staircase buildings up to six stories, with sprinkler systems and other restrictions for fire safety. Six stories is the height of the ladders nearly all fire departments in U.S. cities have.

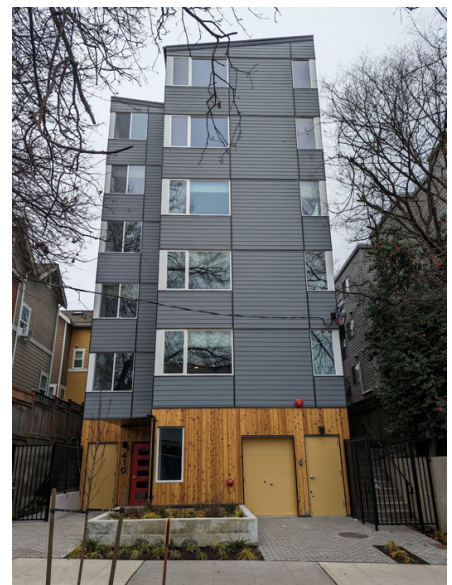
"Single-stair buildings are sprinkled all over the city," said Michael Eliason, founder of Larch Lab, an urban planning firm in Seattle. "You find them in high-end neighborhoods and in the ones that are not as in demand."

A state Labor Department spokesman told me it will convene technical advisory groups this spring to review models from the International Code Council for the 2026 update to the Minnesota code. State legislators can propose modifications via legislation, and several have expressed interest in the single-stair issue.

"Carbon-smart, climate-resistant communities. Reaching greenhouse gas reduction goals. The state's economic growth. It's astounding how intertwined all these things are with an esoteric building code issue," Fischer said.

He'd like to see the Legislature this spring direct this change in the building code, while leaving the details to experts in the Labor Department. "Not legislating the specifics, but saying "This is the intent," he said.

It's a bold and promising idea, and I hope more of the region's real estate players start looking into it. The contentment with current housing options and the underdevelopment of the Twin Cities needs to end.



(https://chorus.stimg.co/25181434/seattle_single_stai
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This multi-family dwelling in Seattle typifies the kind of building that's possible on a narrow city lot when one staircase is allowed for up to six stories instead of requiring two staircases on buildings above three stories.