HOUSING POLICY EXPLAINER

Single-Stair / Point Access Block Dwellings

Over the past few years, policymakers across the country have looked into modernizing nearly every type of housing policy imaginable to focus on increasing affordability and access. Many of these have touched on a single regulatory issue, sometimes complex and sometimes simple: density, lot size, setbacks, parking, aesthetics, and environmental reviews are all examples.

Yet each of these issues generally focus upon a single category: zoning, environmental, or building appearance and features. There is one, however, that simultaneously addresses two distinct barriers: Single-Stair (or Point Access Block) multi-family dwellings.

WHAT IS WHAT IS SINGLE-STAIR OR POINT ACCESS BLOCK HOUSING?

Single-stair Point Access Block is a design concept that centers around creating a single stairway within a multi-family dwelling structure, either a condominium or an apartment. This approach involves consolidating stair access to a single point within a residential or commercial block, provided it complies with local fire and building codes.

In traditional multi-story dwellings, multiple staircases are commonly dispersed throughout the building, leading to a network of access points on different floors. In contrast, the single stair point access block multi-family dwellings consolidate all staircases into a centralized location.

This type of design maximizes the useable square footage and can lead to increased density, which in turn increases both affordability and inventory in the communities where they can be built.

SINGLE-STAIR ROADBLOCKS

Single-stair multi-family dwellings have limitations imposed at both the land use and building code levels, making it a unique policy reform to examine.

LAND USE CONSIDERATIONS

The first barrier to Point Access Block is land use laws in the community where a building is to be built. From a land use perspective, single-stair multi-family dwellings are regulated by zoning controls. Various zoning-related policies can impact the ability to place a single-stair multi-family dwelling in a given community.

Single-stair multi-family dwellings are more likely to be planned for a smaller lot as a larger number of units would make a single staircase in a large occupancy building a challenge.

Simply, if a community will not allow small lot apartments, these structures will never be proposed and other barriers will never be encountered. Examples of land use controls that can impact the ability to build a smaller multi-family building include parking mandates, unit count, minimum lot size, and floor area ratios.

BUILDING CODE CONSIDERATIONS

From a structural perspective, single-stair multi-family dwellings are regulated by the building code's egress provisions of the city, county, or state, depending on the type of jurisdictional adoptions. Egress and traffic in an emergency are central concerns over point access block designs, making the concept limited to smaller multi-family dwellings.

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If land use controls allow for smaller apartments and single-stair multi-family housing, they cannot be built if the building code does not also permit their construction.

Specific code provisions will vary from city to city (where municipalities adopt and enforce their own building codes) and state to state (when a uniform state building code is enforced). The 2021 model International Building Code (IBC) prepared by the International Code Council (ICC) unamended permits:

- Single-stair multi-family dwellings up to three stories above grade in R-2 occupancy provided there are 4 or fewer units and 125 feet maximum egress travel.
- Single-stair occupancy in other occupancies is limited to two stories above grade.

Proponents of reforming building codes to allow for single-stair multi-family dwellings note that the prohibitions on point access block come from a time before multi-family dwellings included fire sprinklers. They also note that some European countries allow single-stair multi-family dwellings without mandating fire sprinklers:

> *"Fire doesn't burn differently in the U.S. than it does in Switzerland, a country with the lowest fire death rate in the world and where unsprinklered single-stair high-rises are legal. France, Italy, Germany, Spain, Singapore, Austria, and numerous other countries allow significantly taller Point Access Blocks while having better outcomes on life safety."*
> *Eliason, Michael. "Why does American multifamily architecture look so banal? Here's one reason." The Architects Newspaper. March 2023*

CONCLUSION

Single-stair multi-family buildings highlight the interplay between land use laws and building codes, as well as the slow modernization of building codes. The adoption of single-stair point access block to smaller multi-family dwellings provides a unique opportunity to examine the interplay between two distinct housing regulations.