

March 14, 2024

To: Chair McEwen and Members of the Senate Labor Committee

Re: Support for SF 3538

We represent a large and diverse coalition of Minnesotans and organizations who care about people in our state having access to abundant, accessible, and affordable homes.

Minnesota has a severe housing shortage. We need nearly 100,000 units of new housing to fill the gap. With too few homes, everyone pays more for housing. Many people have to accept poor quality homes, double up with friends or family, or pay significantly high percentages of income just to cover housing costs.

But we can fix this.

Part of the solution is a proven building code reform that is safe and eliminates unnecessary stairway rules. **Point Access Blocks are built around a single stairway** and elevator core and enable housing options for families of all sizes. They are safe, mid-rise buildings and are common world-wide.

They make large family apartments possible in mid-rise buildings, and lower construction costs. Point Access Block buildings can also be built on smaller lots enabling infill developments to build abundant homes in Minnesota.

What is the problem?

While mid-rise (3-8 story) multi-family buildings can provide high-quality homes for families, longstanding building code requirements make mid-rise multifamily housing difficult and cost-prohibitive to develop. Minnesota building code requires every unit in a multifamily dwelling to have access to two sets of stairs. That requires most new multifamily buildings in the United States to have double loaded corridors, with units bridging the hallway and the exterior.

- Homes in these buildings are more expensive: Double-loaded corridors take up to 10% of the building area. Corridor space cannot be leased and is infrequently used. This adds cost to rent or home prices.
- 4-6 story buildings are economically viable only if they are large because they need extra space for mandated corridors. It is hard to secure adjacent land parcels for 4-6 story buildings. This makes mid-rise buildings expensive and difficult to build.

SF 3538 Will Lead to More Options and Safe Housing Opportunities

Since the advent of the current building code mandating double corridors, improved fire safety and technology now make single stair the safer option. A 2009 U.S. Fire administration report

noted that countries allowing Point Access Blocks higher than 65 feet have lower death rates than the United States.¹

Point Access Blocks allow more windows and balconies, more efficient floor plans, larger “family sized” units, and better energy efficiency. They allow builders to shift space now mandated for corridors into a third or fourth bedroom. This lowers housing costs for families and builds better quality homes, while reducing building and maintenance costs. Combined with sprinklers and pressurized stairwells, they can be safer than current double-corridor structures.

We strongly encourage the passage of SF 3538 to help increase housing access and decrease housing costs throughout the state.

Signed:

Neighbors for More Neighbors

ISAIAH

Move MN

Sierra Club North Star Chapter

Sustain Saint Paul

¹ <https://www.usfa.fema.gov/downloads/pdf/statistics/v12i8.pdf>