



The Honorable Stephen M. Casey  
Chair, House Committee on Municipal Government and Housing  
Rhode Island State House  
Providence, RI 02903

**Re: Support for H7893 (Building Code Reform)**

Dear Chairman Casey and Members of the House Committee on Municipal Government and Housing:

Neighbors Welcome! Rhode Island is a network of neighbors advocating for abundant housing in Rhode Island. We are excited to write in support of H7893, a bill that proposes several key steps to reform our state building code.

For context, the Rhode Island building code is adopted at the state level and sets critical guardrails for protecting resident health and safety. At the same time, certain elements are significantly dated—predating, for example, the widespread availability of sprinkler systems—and impose high costs on new residential construction, particularly for small multifamily homes. In fact, some standards were intentionally designed that way:

“The question is, ‘How are we going to stop [multifamily housing]?’ I think there is a way . . . [i]n framing our laws to regulate the construction of dwellings of all kinds, do everything possible in our laws to encourage the construction of private dwellings and even two-family dwellings . . . [and] penalize so far as we can in our statute, the multiple dwelling of any kind. I recommend that method to the conference.” *Lawrence Veiller, Proceedings of the National Housing Association, 1913 (discussing implementation of one of the nation’s earliest building codes).*

H7893 would address this problem in two ways. **First, the bills would reclassify small multifamily buildings (three to six units) under the residential building code alongside single-families and duplexes.** Three-to-six-unit buildings are currently subject to the commercial building code, meaning that a triple-decker must satisfy the same criteria as a large-scale apartment complex. Satisfying commercial standards entails significant additional expense, making it cost-



prohibitive to build the type of mid-sized “gentle density” that was once a staple of Rhode Island homebuilding. A revised approach would align our code with states such as North Carolina and Washington, where legislators have also recognized that code classifications present an obstacle to housing production.

**Second, the bill directs the state fire marshal and building code commissioner to study and make recommendations as to how Rhode Island can safely implement “point access blocks,”** or buildings with a single stairwell. While this may seem like an odd proposal, the current two-stairwell requirement makes it schematically difficult to build efficiently and affordably on compact lots. Point access blocks also enable more family-sized apartments (three and four-bedrooms) as well as apartments with windows on multiple sides, increasing residents’ access to natural light and ventilation. In other words, single-stair buildings are often cheaper to build and nicer to live in, factors that have contributed to the design’s worldwide popularity.

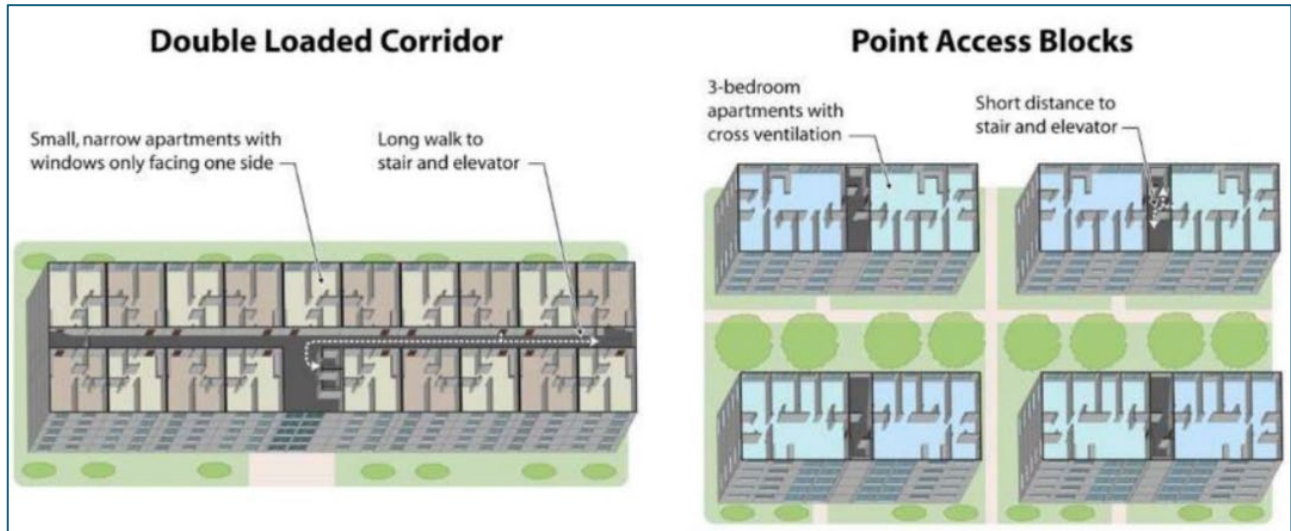


Figure 1: Accommodating two stairwells often requires costly land assembly, bulky building design, and less livable units.

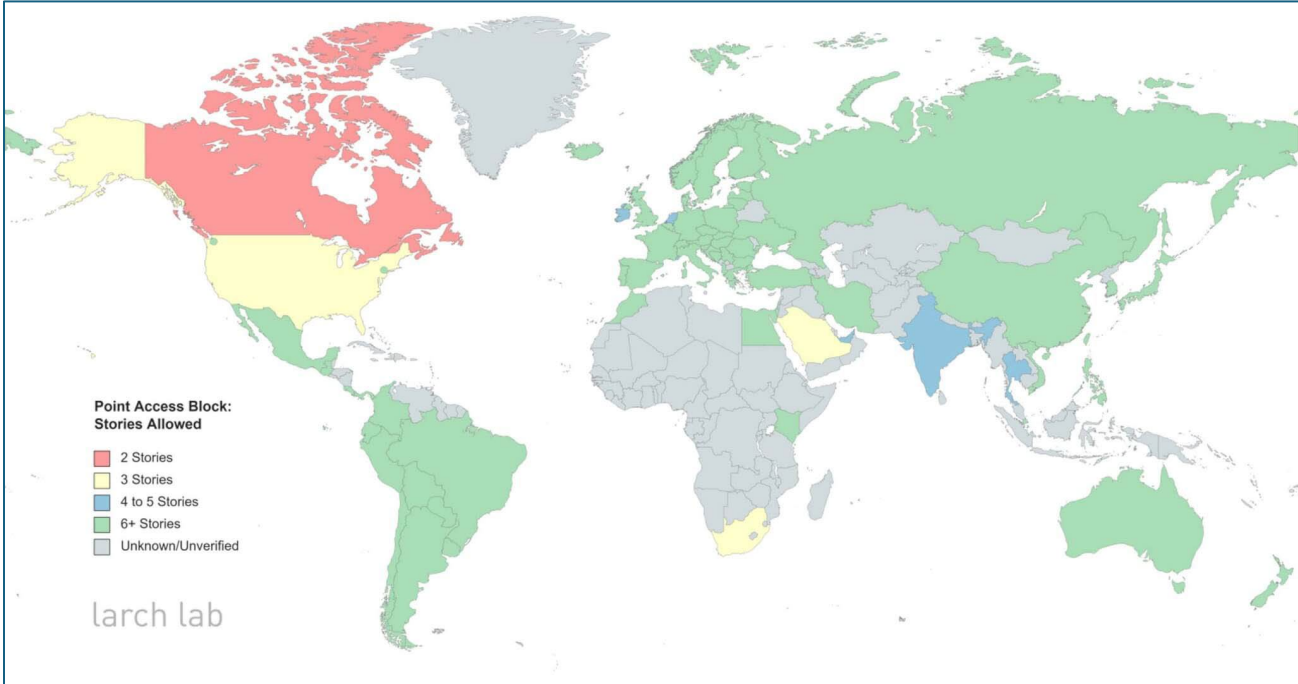


Figure 2: The United States is a global outlier in its prohibition of point access blocks. Note that, as of 2024, multiple Canadian provinces are now in the process of studying how to safely re-legalize point access blocks.

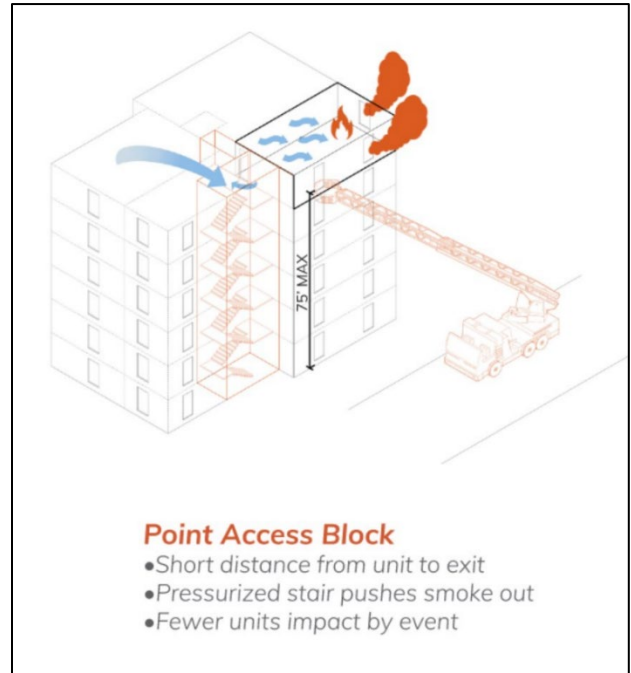
United States	
Already Legal	Legalization Proposed in 2024
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seattle, Washington</li> <li>• Honolulu, Hawaii</li> <li>• New York City, New York</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• California</li> <li>• Colorado</li> <li>• Connecticut</li> <li>• Minnesota</li> <li>• New York State</li> <li>• Oregon</li> <li>• <b>Rhode Island (H893)</b></li> <li>• Virginia</li> <li>• Washington</li> </ul>

Importantly, it would only be advisable to legalize point access blocks in conjunction with appropriate safety regulations. H7983 directs state leaders to seek guidance on this matter from longstanding precedents such as the Seattle Building Code, under which point access block have



been legal without incident since 1977. Seattle’s code only permits buildings to be served by a single stairwell if they meet the following life safety criteria, among others:

1. The building does not contain more than six stories above grade;
2. The building does not contain more than four dwelling units per floor;
3. The building is equipped with an automatic sprinkler system throughout, including in all habitable spaces of each dwelling unit;
4. The building stairwell (and any elevator) is pressurized by a fan that prevents smoke accumulation;
5. The building is constructed with not less than a 1-hour fire-rated wall assembly;
6. There is no more than twenty feet of travel distance to the stairwell from the entry/exit door of each dwelling unit; and
7. The travel distance to exit within the stairwell does not exceed one hundred twenty-five feet.



By learning from these types of best practices, Rhode Island can maintain resident health and safety while also capitalizing on the affordability and livability of single-stair construction. Thank you for your time and consideration of this important bill. Let’s build more housing—safely and smarter.

Yours,  
Claudia Wack, Director  
Greg Miller, Director  
Seth Zeren, Director