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String of New Jersey Wood-Frame Apartment Fires Prompts Call for Examination of State Building Codes

TRENTON, NJ – On Saturday, February 4th, [a six-alarm fire in Maplewood, New Jersey](#) destroyed part of an apartment complex under construction, reigniting the debate over the use of lightweight, wood-framing.

The fire marks a troubling recent history for wood-framed construction in New Jersey. In [January 2015, a fire destroyed a 240-unit apartment building in Edgewater](#), burning for seven hours and leaving 500 people homeless. Ironically, [the same apartment complex burned down 15 years prior](#), while it was still under construction using the same wood-frame construction methods. The two fires are considered the worst in Bergen County's history.

“These fires should cause state lawmakers and members of the building code community to pause and consider the consequences when analyzing regulations and legislation that permits the use of vulnerable construction methods,” said Kevin Lawlor, a spokesperson for Build with Strength. “Fortunately, no one was killed in these fires, but as long as the regulatory environment authorizes this type of development, the threat will remain, it's up to state lawmakers to protect their constituents.”

The Edgewater Zoning Board recently approved AvalonBay to rebuild the twice-destroyed Edgewater Apartment complex – [again using the same lightweight wood-frame construction](#) – although this time with added fire safety features beyond the state building code minimum, including an extensive fire sprinkler system, masonry firewalls, and storage space for fire ladders.

[According to reports](#), the Maplewood building, also an AvalonBay project, was built using a higher fire safety standard than what was featured at the 2015 Edgewater site, including additional sprinklers. It remains unclear whether the Maplewood complex was constructed at the same standard as the Edgewater complex currently under development.

“The Edgewater and Maplewood fires should serve as a catalyst for change to strengthen our building codes and fire prevention efforts. We can't wait for another tragedy where lives may be lost,” said Assemblyman John Wisniewski, chairman of the New Jersey Fire Safety Commission.

Assemblyman Wisniewski has [introduced legislation](#) seeking to amend the New Jersey state construction code for fire safety reasons.

A September 2016 [poll](#) of registered New Jersey voters found respondents were very supportive of the state making changes to construction codes in the wake of the 2015 Edgewater fire. According to the poll, ninety-five percent are supportive of changes to construction codes.

New Jersey voters overwhelmingly support legislative changes to make buildings in the state more resistant to fires and natural disasters. This includes support for a requirement for concrete and steel frames for buildings over three stories high, as well as proposed legislation that would place limits on construction with wood. In addition to the poll, a [new video](#) and [infographic](#) examining the Edgewater fire and the reaction from the community was released.

Additional Information:

- [Polling Report](#): New Jersey voter poll
- [Video](#): Support Safer Building Legislation in New Jersey
- [Infographic](#): Calling for a concrete change

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