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Maryland Apartment Fires Renew Calls for Stronger Building Codes

Build With Strength Urges State Lawmakers to Require Resilient Construction Methods for Residents

Annapolis, MD – Yesterday, [a five-alarm fire broke out at a wood-framed apartment complex under construction in College Park](#), Maryland, leaving the building at risk of collapse. The incident comes on the heels of [another fire over the weekend in Fort Washington](#) that injured 4 people, including a firefighter, and displaced 30 residents, and unfortunately could have been prevented had state legislation championed by Build With Strength, a coalition of emergency service professionals, engineers, architects, and industry experts, passed into law.

In March, the Maryland General Assembly considered [House Bill 1311](#), a bill introduced by Delegate Cory McCray of Baltimore City, seeking to establish and adopt statewide building code regulations related to fire safety features for lightweight combustible wood construction in low- to mid-rise residential buildings throughout the state. Concurrently, the Maryland State Senate weighed its own piece of legislation on the issue, [Senate Bill 722](#), a bill introduced by State Senator Joan Carter Conway of Baltimore City.

“Yesterday’s fire in College Park makes it abundantly clear the need for stronger building codes in Maryland,” said Kevin Lawlor, a spokesman for Build With Strength, and a Maryland resident who testified before the Maryland State House Environment and Transportation Committee on HB 1311. “Wood-framed structures are not a safe alternative to resilient construction materials like concrete. Unfortunately, the lobbying efforts by the Maryland Building Industry Association and their allies for the use of combustible material in buildings like this one puts local residents at risk and costs local taxpayers. Maryland residents lose, while the Maryland Building Industry’s members win. That’s not acceptable.”

During the committee process, the Maryland Building Industry Association advocated for wood-framed construction, claiming lower costs were more important than building structures with more safe and resilient construction materials. However, those cost savings are not necessarily passed on to the residents who occupy these buildings.

“The Maryland General Assembly and State Senate have a responsibility to their constituents to protect everyone from the dangers of hazardous construction methods,” continued Lawlor. “The onus to refine the codes is on these lawmakers’ shoulders. It’s up to them to ensure fires like the ones over the last couple days do not happen again.”

[According to Fire Chief Ben Barksdale of Prince George's County](#), in addition to the fact that the fire suppression system and sprinklers were not yet operational, the layout and building materials of the structure played a significant role in the intensity of the fire. In regards to the structure, he said "we can see today how much of a problem it is. Once that fire gets to those void spaces, and starts attacking those structural components and all that wood, it's very hard to catch up to it. Especially if you don't have access to get right up to it."

"There have been enough events like this around the country and in our backyard to know that it's past time to find some meaningful solutions that prevent more fires like this from happening in the future," said Steve Lohr, Fire Chief for the City of Hagerstown and the former Fire Chief for Montgomery County. "The Maryland state legislature missed an opportunity to do this, but it's not too late to ignore the special interests that threaten the well-being of state residents."

For more information or to arrange an interview, please contact Kevin Lawlor at klawlor@buildwithstrength.com.

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