



HOWARD COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICES

2201 Warwick Way, Marriottsville, MD 21104
410-313-6000

LOUIS G. WINSTON, FIRE CHIEF • CALVIN BALL, COUNTY EXECUTIVE

To: Brandee Ganz, Chief Administrative Officer

From: Louis G. Winston, Fire/EMS Chief

Subject: Testimony on Council Bill No. XX-2024

Date: March 26, 2025

Every three years, the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) updates its standards, which are comprehensive regulatory guidelines developed through industry research and consensus. These standards cover a wide range of areas, including building construction, safety features, inspection, maintenance, hazardous materials, and fire department access. The primary objective of these guidelines is to provide fire and life safety protection for the public, property, and first responders.

Maryland is one of the many states that adopt NFPA 1 as its fire code, with local amendments made in most jurisdictions to address specific local needs. In Howard County, these local amendments are detailed in Title 17, Section 104 of the Howard County Code, established as the "Howard County Fire Prevention Code." This essential legislation underpins numerous initiatives managed by the Office of the Fire Marshal, contributing to a safer community for all residents and visitors.

Beginning in early 2024, members of the Office of the Fire Marshal engaged with stakeholders throughout the state to participate in the 2024 code amendment cycle. Their contributions fostered consensus, and the Maryland State Fire Prevention Commission is currently adopting a revised state Fire Code, marking the first update since 2018. The Department of Inspections, Licenses and Permits (DILP) also collaborated in this process, providing input and support for the local amendments included in this year's edition.

After engaging in the statewide consensus process, the Department of Fire and Rescue Services (DFRS) dedicated extensive hours to reviewing every line of the fire code, ensuring it meets the highest standards. Although new issues arose in the latest edition of NFPA 1, they were fewer than those addressed in 2021, given the significant refinements already made. This allowed DFRS to ensure that each section aligns with our overarching public safety mission. Consequently, while over three hundred lines of locally amended code were revised, most amendments focused on enhancing clarity or updating numerical code references to align with the changes made in the 2024 NFPA 1.

Several proposed local amendments aim to bolster the mission of protecting life and property in Howard County:



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Collaboration with Private Sector: New language acknowledges that DFRS Fire Investigators may collaborate with private sector counterparts during fire and explosive investigations (Section 1.7.11.1).

Micromobility Device Safety: In response to the rising use of e-bikes and e-scooters, which pose fire risks due to lithium-ion battery malfunctions, the 2024 fire code will require new multi-family dwellings to provide fire-protected charging areas for these devices, isolating them from living spaces. Exemptions will apply to battery-powered devices essential for daily living, such as power wheelchairs (Section 10.21.4 (5)).

Repair Documentation Requirements: The current fire code necessitates the submission of certificates for annual fire protection system inspections. However, there is no requirement for companies to document off-cycle repairs, complicating enforcement for out-of-service systems. The new language mandates that contractors submit repair documentation upon request from Fire Marshals to ensure compliance, with a nominal fee for each certification submitted (Section 13.1.6.7).

Construction Inspection Program: Since 2018, the Office of the Fire Marshal has administered an inspection program for buildings under construction, renovation, or demolition, aligned with NFPA 1 Chapter 16 and NFPA 241. Proposed local amendments for 2024 will maintain existing changes not yet addressed in NFPA 1 2024 or NFPA 241, along with new requirements on lighting and stairway access to enhance safety for workers and first responders (Sections 16.1.6 through 16.1.10.5).

Fire Apparatus Access: Proposed language now requires that any changes to access for fire apparatus be reviewed and approved by the department. Additionally, amendments have clarified marking requirements for fire lanes to ensure consistency with information disseminated by the Office of the Fire Marshal (Sections 18.2.2.3, 18.2.2.4, 18.2.3.6.6(3)).

Electric Vehicle Fire Safety: Given the fire risks associated with lithium-ion batteries in electric vehicles (EVs), which can lead to prolonged extinguishment efforts, DFRS proposes that parking garages with EV charging facilities be equipped with early smoke detection systems (Section 29.1.1.1).

Fiscal Impact

Aside from the fees collected from fire protection contractors submitting repair certifications, these proposed amendments will not impose a fiscal impact on the county or necessitate additional positions. DFRS has collaborated closely with the Office of Law, County Administration, and relevant partner agencies to finalize this edition of the Fire Code for adoption. We appreciate your support for this vital legislative initiative.