

The planned construction for a wall inside of Washington and Lee University's chapel was stopped Monday night – at least for now.

In a unanimous decision, the Lexington and the Buena Vista Joint Board of Building Code Appeals denied the university's attempt to overturn a decision of building inspector Steve Paulk.

After an 11-month review, on Oct. 4, Paulk denied issuing a building permit that would have allowed the university to construct a wall separating the "University Chapel from the Chapel Museum." He concluded that the university's plans for the wall would have restricted people from exiting the auditorium portion of the chapel safely in the event of an emergency like a fire or mass shooting.

Even though the university planned to construct a hidden door in the wall, the board reasoned that in the event of an emergency it would still put people in danger. The board was concerned that since the door would only become unlocked if a fire alarm was pulled, it would create "life-safety" hazards. Also, the board reasoned that because of the narrowness of the door, it would create a bottleneck that would threaten both attendees to the chapel and first responders alike.

While the university argued that a small staircase to the left of the auditorium stage could serve as an additional exit in the event of an emergency, Fire Marshall Trent Roberts pushed back in his testimony before the board. Roberts argued that fire and rescue teams would be unable to carry people on a gurney up and down the stairs safely and efficiently.

The chapel enjoys a unique place within Virginia building codes as a historic landmark and is grandfathered into not having to comply with current buildings codes because there were no codes when it was constructed in the late 1870s. However, if a historic building is changed in a way that "constitutes a life safety hazard," renovations are subject to current code.

In order to be approved, the university would have had to have shown that the construction of the wall either maintained the current level of life-safety in the chapel today or improved the life-safety of the building. As the construction of a new wall, in the eyes of Paulk, would have "created two separate buildings with two occupancies and two different levels," it posed a substantial risk to "life-safety."

The attorney for Washington and Lee, Steven W. Blaine, explained after the decision was handed down that the university may appeal the local board's ruling to the State Building Code Technical Review Board or alter their renovation plans again.

The university's plan to renovate the chapel was outlined in June 2021 in an announcement made by the board of trustees.

"The planned renovation will physically separate the original 1868 chapel from the 1883 annex containing the Lee memorial sculpture and family crypt," the announcement stated. "Once complete, the structure will consist of two distinct spaces: a simple, unadorned chapel for university gatherings and a series of galleries, including the sculpture chamber and adjacent antechamber on the upper level of the annex. All parts of the building will remain accessible to the public."