



ITEM FOR DISCUSSION

| | |
|---------------------|---|
| Meeting Date | April 23, 2024 |
| Agenda Item | C-1 |
| Attachment | See below. |
| Submitted By | Hannah Lynch, Community Development Coordinator |

| | |
|----------------------------|--|
| Item | City Code Updates - Discussion |
| Description | <p>The City Code frequently needs updates as issues are raised and code is enforced by Staff. This is a discussion about topics that could be addressed in code and how the Planning Commission wishes to move forward.</p> <p>Topics Include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accessory Dwelling Units • Parking Requirements • Signs |
| Budget Impact | None. |
| Attachment(s) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family Housing Fund Handout - ADU Info by City • Article - <i>APA - Quicknotes - Accessory Dwelling Units</i> • Article - <i>What Happened to the Push for Accessory Dwelling Units?</i> • Article - <i>ADUs Can Help Address the Lack of Housing. But They're Bad Urban Design</i> |
| Action(s) Requested | Staff requests the Planning Commission discuss these topics and potential amendments to City Code. |



| Local Cities | Where are ADUs allowed? | Special Permit Required? | Parking for ADU | Owner Occupancy | Water/ Sewer | Min. Lot Size | Lot Coverage | Min. ADU Size | Max. ADU Size | Type | Ordinance Section | Notes | # Built or legalized |
|---------------------|--|--------------------------|---|-----------------|--|---|-------------------|---------------|---|--|---|--|-------------------------------|
| Apple Valley | In R-1 zoning district | Conditional Use Permit | 2 off-street for the ADU and 2 off-street for the main home | Yes | Must connect to main house | 40,000 SF | Cannot exceed 35% | 300 SF | Shall be no larger than 40% of the main home's footprint | Attached, Internal | 155.382 | ADU occupancy limited to 3 people; ADUs must be two bedrooms or fewer | 2 |
| Bloomington* | In R-1 and RS-1 zoning districts | | Primary home must have 4 off-street parking spaces | Yes | Must connect to main house | 11,000 SF | | 300 SF | 960 SF or 33% of the 4-season living area of the main home | Attached, Internal | § 21.302.03 | ADU occupancy limited to 2 people; ADUs must be two bedrooms or fewer | 1 permitted and constructed |
| Burnsville | In R-1 and R-1A zoning districts | | 1 off-street for the ADU and 2 off-street for the main home | Yes | Must connect to main house. If not on municipal lines, must meet private well and septic standards | 10,000 SF for attached 1 acre for detached | | 300 SF | 960 SF or 33% of the footprint of the main home | Attached, Detached, Internal | 10.7.52 | ADUs must be two bedrooms or fewer; require park dedication and utility fees | 0 |
| Chaska | In Planned Unit Developments | | | Yes | | | | | 768 SF | Detached, above garage with alley access | Ord. #708 | | 10 |
| Crystal | In R-1 and R-2 zoning districts | | 1 additional for the ADU | No | Can be connected to property or utility main | 6,000 SF | | | Shall not exceed 50% of the finished floor area of the primary home | Attached, Detached, Internal | Chapter V, Subsection 515.23, Subdivision 3 | | 1 permitted |
| Eagan | In Estate and R-1 zoning districts | Annual Registration | 2 off-street for the ADU and 2 off-street for the main home | Yes | Must connect to main house | | Cannot exceed 20% | 300 SF | 960 SF or 33% of the 4-season living area of the main home | Attached, Internal | Section 11.70, subdivision 32 | ADU occupancy limited to 2 people; ADUs must be two bedrooms or fewer | 1 constructed and 1 legalized |
| Inver Grove Heights | In the A, E-1, E-2, R-1A, R-1B, and R-1C zoning districts | | 2 off-street for the ADU and 1 off-street for the main home | Yes | Must share with main house | 1 acre for detached | | 250 SF | 1,000 SF | Attached, Detached, Internal | 10.18.1 | ADU occupancy limited to 3 people | 5 registered |
| Lakeville | In RS-1, RS-2, RS-3, and RS-4 zoning districts and Planned Unit Developments | | 3 garage stalls for the ADU and main home | | Must share with main house | | | | | Attached, Internal | 11.50.11.F, 11.51.11.F, 11.52.11.F, 11.53.11.F | Must be accessed from inside the main home | 2 permitted |
| Long Lake | In the R-1, R-1A, R-2, R-3, and R-4 zoning districts | Conditional Use Permit | 2 for the ADU | Yes | | x2 the minimum lot size required by the zoning district | | | 900 SF | | | Cannot be rented to non-family members | |



| Local Cities | Where are ADUs allowed? | Special Permit Required? | Parking for ADU | Owner Occupancy | Water/ Sewer | Min. Lot Size | Lot Coverage | Min. ADU Size | Max. ADU Size | Type | Ordinance Section | Notes | # Built or legalized |
|--------------|--|-------------------------------------|--|-----------------|---|---------------|--------------|---------------|--|------------------------------|--------------------------------|--|---|
| Minneapolis | As an accessory to a permitted or conditional single-family or two-family dwelling. | | 0 for the ADU, 1 space each for other units | Yes | Connect to main home or the street | | | 300 SF | Internal: 800 SF not to exceed the first floor of the main home. Attached: 800 SF Detached: 1,300 SF (incl. parking areas) or 16% of the lot area. Footprint not to exceed 676 SF or 10% of the lot area, not to exceed 1,000 SF | Attached, Detached, Internal | 537.11 | | ~120 permitted and built |
| Minnetonka | In R-1 and R-2 zoning districts | Conditional Use Permit | Determined on a case by case basis | Yes | Must connect to main home | | | | No more than 35% of the gross living area of the home, including the ADU or 950 SF, whichever is smaller. | Attached, Internal | Section 300.16.3.d | | 30 |
| Plymouth | Within residential subdivisions in RSF-R, RSF-1, RSF-2, and PUD zoning districts, that have received preliminary plat approval on or after June 1, 2001 and that include 10 or more single-family lots | | 2 off-street for the ADU | Yes | Detached must connect to utility main | | | | Shall not exceed the gross floor area of the main home or 1,000 SF, whichever is less | Attached, Detached | 21190.04 | Can only be constructed at the same time as the primary home, as part of a subdivision of 10 or more homes | 0 |
| Richfield | In R and R-1 zoning districts | | 3 off-street spaces are required | Yes | Attached and Internal may connect to home | | | 300 SF | 800 SF or the gross floor area of the principal dwelling, whichever is less | Attached, Detached, Internal | 514.05 Subd. 8, 518.05 Subd. 8 | Detached units are only allowed as part of a garage. | 2 existing |
| Roseville | In the LDR-1 zoning district | | 1 additional off-street space for the ADU | Yes | Attached and Internal may connect to home | | | 300 SF | 650 SF or 75% of the 4-season living area of the main home | Attached, Detached, Internal | 11.011.12.B.1 | ADU occupancy limited to 2 people; ADUs must be one bedroom or fewer | 5, 2 of which were legalized; 1 in processing |
| Shoreview | In RE and R-1 zoning districts | Accessory Apartment Permit | 3 off-street spaces are required | Yes | Must share with main house | | | 500 SF | No more than 30% of the building's total floor area nor greater than 800 SF | Attached, Internal | 207.01 | ADUs must be two bedrooms or fewer | |
| St. Paul | R1-R4, RT1, RT2, RM1, RM2 | Annual affidavit of owner-occupancy | No additional spaces if principal home meets minimum parking requirement | Yes | Must connect to principal home | 5,000 SF | | | 800 SF; if interior to the principal structure, the principal structure must be at least 1,000 SF and the ADU must not exceed 1/3 of the total floor area | Attached, Detached, Internal | Chapters 61, 63, 65, and 66 | | 1 |



| Local Cities | Where are ADUs allowed? | Special Permit Required? | Parking for ADU | Owner Occupancy | Water/ Sewer | Min. Lot Size | Lot Coverage | Min. ADU Size | Max. ADU Size | Type | Ordinance Section | Notes | # Built or legalized |
|---|---|---|---|-----------------|--|--|--------------|--|---|--|-------------------|------------------------|---|
| Stillwater | In TR, CTR, and RB zoning districts | In CTR and RB: Special Use Permit | 4 off-street for the ADU and main house | No | Can be connected to property or utility main | TR and RB: 10,000 SF CTR: 15,000 SF | | | CTR: 500 SF, one story attached or 720 SF above a detached garage RB: 800 SF | TR and CTR: Attached, Detached, Internal RB: Detached, above garage | Sec. 31-501 | | 16 approved, but likely more that were permitted by right in RB |
| White Bear Lake | Where single-family homes are permitted | Conditional Use Permit Annual Certificate of Occupancy renewal | Determined on a case by case basis | Yes | Can be connected to property or utility main | | | 200 SF for the first occupant plus 100 SF for each additional occupant | 880 SF or 40% of the habitable area of the main home | Attached, Detached | Section 1302.125 | Maximum of 4 occupants | 10 permitted |
| | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| * Updated policy is currently under consideration as of February 2019 | | | | | | | | | | | | | |

QUICKNOTES

Accessory Dwelling Units

Accessory dwelling units (ADUs) are small, self-contained living units that typically have their own kitchen, bedroom(s), and bathroom space. Often called granny flats, elder cottage housing opportunities (ECHO), mother-daughter residences, or secondary dwelling units, ADUs are apartments that can be located within the walls of an existing or newly constructed single-family home or can be an addition to an existing home. They can also be freestanding cottages on the same lot as the principal dwelling unit or a conversion of a garage or barn.

The benefits to the home owner and the ADU occupant are many. For the home owner, ADUs provide the opportunity to offer an affordable and independent housing option to the owner's grown son or daughter just starting out or to an elderly parent or two who might need a helping hand nearby. The unit could also be leased to unrelated individuals or newly established families, which would provide the dual benefit of providing affordable housing to the ADU occupant and supplemental rental income to the owner. Supplemental income could offset the high cost of a home mortgage, utilities, and real estate taxes. Finally, leasing an ADU to a young person or family can provide an elderly home owner with a sense of security and an opportunity to exchange needed work around the house and yard for a discount on rent.

Despite the benefits, some communities resist allowing ADUs, or allow them only after time-consuming and costly review procedures and requirements. Public resistance to ADUs usually takes the form of a perceived concern that they might transform the character of the neighborhood, increase density, add to traffic, make parking on the street more difficult, increase school enrollment, and put additional pressure on fire and police service, parks, or water and wastewater. However, communities that have allowed ADUs find that these perceived fears are mostly unfounded or overstated when ADUs are actually built.

ADUs are a particularly desirable option for many communities today considering the current economic climate, changes in household size, increasing numbers of aging baby boomers, and the shortage of affordable housing choices. They provide a low-impact way for a community to expand its range of housing choices.

LOCALITIES AND STATES GET INTO THE ACT

Towns, cities, and counties across the country have done the right thing by proactively amending local zoning ordinances to allow ADUs. This is typically done either as a matter of right or as a special or conditional use. In either case, reasonable conditions may be imposed. Some states, including California, have enacted legislation that limits the ability of localities to zone out ADUs.

In 2001 AARP retained APA's Research Department to write a guidance report for citizens interested in convincing local and state officials of the benefits of allowing ADUs and showing them how to do it. *Entitled Accessory Dwelling Units: Model State Act and Model Local Ordinance*, the monograph provides alternative statute and ordinance language useful to implementing all forms of ADUs.

The Model Local Ordinance suggests recommendations for communities. Additionally, the intent of the ordinance describes the permitting process for eligibility and approval, and further outlines standards for ADU approval pertaining to lot size, occupancy, building standards, parking and traffic, public health, and how to deal with nonconforming ADUs. *The Model State Act* provides findings and policies encouraging the approval of ADUs and names local governments as the entities entitled to authorize

"Towns, cities, and
counties across the
country have done
the right thing by
proactively
amending local
zoning ordinances
to allow ADUs."



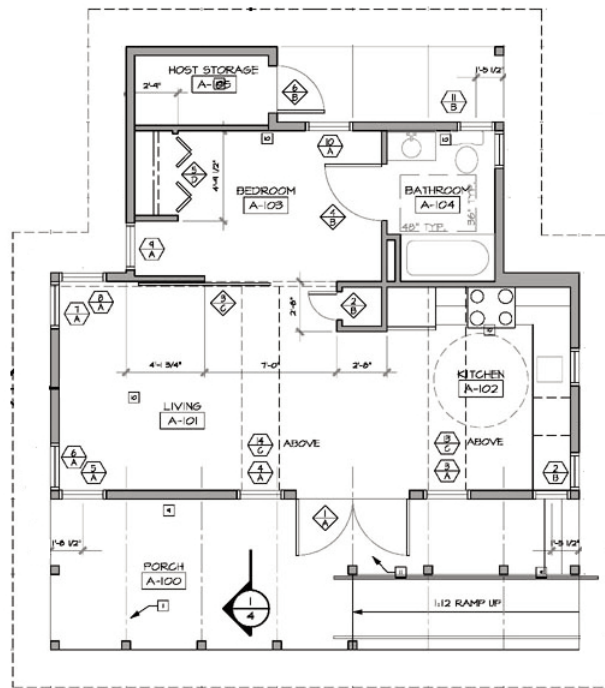
American Planning Association

Making Great Communities Happen

adoption of an ADU statute. It specifies the limits to which local governments may prohibit ADUs and outlines default permitting provisions if a locality does not adopt an ADU ordinance. It details optional approaches for adopting ADU ordinances, certifying local ADU ordinances, gathering data on ADU efforts, preparing reports and recommendations, and forming a statewide board overseeing ADUs.

WHAT ISSUES ARISE WHEN A PROPOSED ADU ORDINANCE IS CONSIDERED?

ADU ordinances offer a variety of benefits to local communities but the road to implementation may not be an easy process. While ADUs are more widely accepted now than in years past, skeptics still remain and some still oppose ADU zoning. The following describes some issues or decision points that communities must address in order to successfully navigate the perilous waters of public acceptance. The approach that is right for your city or town will be unique, based on local physical, political, social, and economic conditions.



Single story ADU floor plan.

By-right Permitting. Should permits for ADUs be issued as a matter of right (with clear standards built into the ordinance) or should they be allowed by discretion as a special or conditional use after a public hearing?

Occupancy. Should ordinance language allow an ADU only on the condition that the owner of the property lives in one of the units?

Form of Ownership. Should the ordinance prohibit converting the ADU unit into a condominium?

Preexisting, nonconforming ADUs. How should the ordinance treat grandfathered ADUs? How do you treat illegal apartments that want to apply for an ADU permit?

Unit Size: Should the ordinance limit the square footage of the ADU to assure that the unit is truly accessory to the principal dwelling on the property?

Adequacy of Water and Sewer Services. How do you guarantee there is enough capacity in sewer lines, pumping stations, and treatment facilities to accommodate ADUs?

These are not easy issues. However, communities would do well to seriously consider adopting an approach that: allows ADUs by right with clear written conditions; does not require owner occupancy; prohibits condominium ownership on the basis that a condo could not be considered accessory; provides a simple procedure for legalizing preexisting or formerly illegal apartments provided the unit is inspected; provides a generous size standard; and provides a water and sewer adequacy standard. □

PAS QuickNotes is a publication of the American Planning Association's Planning Advisory Service (PAS). Copyright © 2009. Visit PAS online at www.planning.org/pas to find out how PAS can work for you. American Planning Association staff: W. Paul Farmer, FAICP, Executive Director and CEO; William R. Klein, AICP, Director of Research and Advisory Services; Tre Jerdon, QuickNotes Editor; Tim Mennel, Senior Editor; Julie Von Bergen, Assistant Editor; Susan Deegan, Senior Graphic Designer.

For a complete list of references visit <http://www.planning.org/pas/quicknotes/>

REFERENCES

1. Published by American Planning Association

American Planning Association. "Affordable Housing Reader: Articles from Zoning News and Zoning Practice. Available at <http://myapa.planning.org/affordablereader> (members-only access).

American Planning Association. 2006. *Policy Guide on Housing*. Chicago: American Planning Association. Available at www.planning.org/policy/guides/pdf/housing.pdf.

Baggett, Sharon, Nancy Chapman, and Deborah Howe. 1994. *Planning for an Aging Society*. Planning Advisory Service Report no. 451. Chicago: American Planning Association.

For more information on this topic visit www.planning.org.

QUICKNOTES

References: Accessory Dwelling Units

1. Published by American Planning Association

American Planning Association. "Affordable Housing Reader: Articles from Zoning News and Zoning Practice. Available at <http://myapa.planning.org/affordablereader> (members-only access).

American Planning Association. 2006. *Policy Guide on Housing*. Chicago: American Planning Association. Available at www.planning.org/policy/guides/pdf/housing.pdf.

Baggett, Sharon, Nancy Chapman, and Deborah Howe. 1994. *Planning for an Aging Society*. Planning Advisory Service Report no. 451. Chicago: American Planning Association.

Baron Pollak, Patricia. 1994. "Rethinking Zoning to Accommodate the Elderly in Single Family Housing." *Journal of the American Planning Association* 60 (4): 521–531.

Gorman, Alice, and Patricia Pollak. 1989. *Community-Based Housing for the Elderly*. Planning Advisory Service Report no. 420. Chicago: American Planning Association.

Howe, Deborah A. 1990. "The Flexible House Designing for Changing Needs." *Journal of the American Planning Association* 56 (1): 69–77.

Lubell, Jeffrey. 2006. "Zoning to Expand Affordable Housing." *Zoning Practice*. December. Chicago: American Planning Association.

Meyerson, Deborah. 2007. "The Ultimate in Accessibility." *Planning*, December, 44–45.

Wittenberg, Jason. 2002. "Garages: Not Just for Cars Anymore." *Zoning News*. August. Chicago: American Planning Association.

2. Other Resources

Center for Housing Policy. 2008. Ensuring Zoning Policies Allow Housing Diversity: Accessory Dwelling Units. Available at www.housingpolicy.org/toolbox/strategy/policies/diverse_housing_types.html?tierid=42.

Cobb, Rodney, and Scott Dvorak. 2000. *Accessory Dwelling Units: Model State Act and Local Ordinance*. Washington, D.C.: AARP. Available at http://assets.aarp.org/rgcenter/consume/d17158_dwell.pdf.

Cram, Leo. 1993. Missouri Gerontology Institute. "Accessory Apartments." University of Missouri Extension. Available at <http://extension.missouri.edu/explore/aging/gg0014.htm>.

Massachusetts Executive Office of the Environment. (N.d.) *Model Bylaw for Accessory Dwelling Units*. Massachusetts Smart Growth Toolkit Bylaw. Available at www.mass.gov/envir/smart_growth_toolkit/bylaws/ADU-Bylaw.pdf.

Minnetonka (Minnesota), City of. *A Citizen's Guide to Accessory Apartments*. Available at www.eminnetonka.com/community_development/planning/brochures/accessory_apartments.pdf

Municipal Research and Services Center of Washington. 1995. *Accessory Dwelling Units*. Report No. 33. Seattle: Municipal Research and Services Center of Washington. Available at www.mrsc.org/Publications/adu30.pdf.

Phillips, Jory. 2004. *Detached Accessory Dwelling Units: Director's Report*. Seattle: City of Seattle Department of Planning and Development. Available at www.mrsc.org/GovDocs/s42ADUrpt.pdf.

Portland (Oregon), City of. 2006. *Planning and Zoning Code*. Chapter 33.205. Accessory Dwelling Units. Available at www.portlandonline.com/auditor/index.cfm?a=53301&c=28197. Also see www.portlandonline.com/bds/index.cfm?c=dgghg.

Provo (Utah), City of. 2007. Zoning Code. Section 14.46.A. *Accessory Apartment Overlay Zone*. Available at www.provo.org/downloads/council/title_14_chapters_41-49c_combined.pdf.

Santa Cruz (California), City of. 2003. *Accessory Dwelling Unit Manual*. Available at www.ci.santa-cruz.ca.us/pl/hcd/ADU/PDF/ADU_Manual.pdf.

U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. 2004. "Accessory Housing is Part of the Solution." Available at www.huduser.org/rbc/newsletter/vol3iss1more.html



American Planning Association

Making Great Communities Happen

QUICKNOTES

3. Case Law

Anderson v. Provo City Corp., 2005 UT 5 (2005).

City of Wilmington v. Hill, 657 S.E.2d 670 (2008).

Coalition Advocating Legal Housing Options v. City of Santa Monica, 88 Cal.App.4th 451 (2001).

Desmond v. County of Contra Costa, 21 Cal.App.4th 330 (1993).

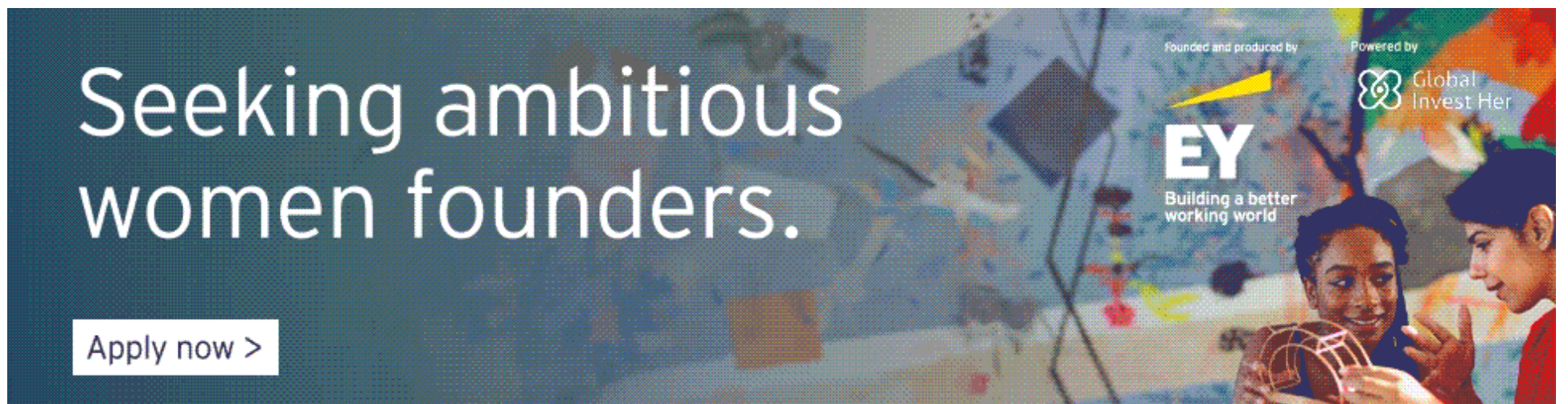
Harris v. City of Costa Mesa, 25 Cal.App.4th 963 (1994).

Kasper v. Town of Brookhaven, 142. A.D.2d 213 (1988).

Save Round Valley Alliance v. County of Inyo, 157 Cal. App. 4th 1437 (2007).

Sounhein v. City of San Dimas, 47 Cal.App. 4th 1181 (1996).

Village of Belle Terre v. Boraas, 416 U.S. 1 (1976).



Seeking ambitious women founders.

Apply now >

Founded and produced by **EY** Building a better working world

Powered by Global Invest Her



Just 13 ADUs were built in Minneapolis in 2022. When the city first permitted them in 2016, developers built nearly 50. **SHUTTERSTOCK**

REAL ESTATE

What Happened to the Push for Accessory Dwelling Units?

Minneapolis and St. Paul each permitted ADUs a few years ago, but construction has since slowed.

By **Madison Berg**
March 17, 2023

As home prices continue to rise, developers and policymakers continue to seek more affordable options. One potential option is the Accessory Dwelling Unit, or ADU: a housing type made to accommodate more people living on one property. ADUs have faced a number of regulatory changes since 2016, with many more changes on the horizon as the public calls for zoning amendments.

Minneapolis and St. Paul each changed their policies to allow construction of ADUs a few years back, but, according to the latest statistics from each city, the actual number being built has been waning. Whether ADUs are a realistic solution for the affordable housing crisis remains unclear. The future is just as unclear for the much-buzzed-about “tiny home.”

An ADU is a housing type that can be built on the property of an existing home, and comes in three different forms: interior, attached, and detached. An interior ADU is a unit inside an existing house and entails the remodel of the interior to make the space its own. An attached ADU, meanwhile, is an entirely new unit built onto an existing house. Finally and most commonly, a detached ADU is a separate unit residing on the property of an existing house. These are commonly built above a detached garage.

Accessory Dwelling Units, also known as accessory apartments, secondary suites, or “granny flats,” are most commonly used by homeowners who want space for additional family members. They are also commonly rented out or made into an Airbnb. Currently, they’re demographically most common among those who are educated and have high incomes, according to Will Annett, editorial director with [Minnesota Realtors](#).

“While [ADUs] might look like a great solution to the affordable housing crisis, construction costs and local regulations make it impractical to produce and price them at a rate that could make a difference to those most in need of homes,” Annett said in an email to *TCB*.

At its worst, an ADU can burn through a lot of time and money. At its best, it can be a way to offset a mortgage, provide a home for close friends and/or family, or pave the way for increased density in existing neighborhoods.

Declining numbers for ADUs

ADUs were first allowed [in Minneapolis in 2014](#), and St. Paul in 2016, but only in certain areas of each city. For Minneapolis, ADUs were initially limited to the North Phillips neighborhood; for St. Paul, they could be built along the Green Line transit route. Within recent years, construction of new ADUs has tapered.

From 2015 to the present, the number of ADUs built has dropped, according to city data. When ADUs were first accommodated in zoning amendments in 2016, Minneapolis saw the construction of 47 of them, according to Jason Wittenberg, manager of code development with the [Minneapolis Community Planning and Economic Development](#).

In 2020, when duplexes and triplexes in Minneapolis’s lowest density residential zoning districts were legalized, only 15 ADUs were constructed. ADU construction has since dwindled even further, with a mere 13 being built in 2022.

Still that’s not to say public interest has entirely dissipated. In total, there are currently 232 ADUs in Minneapolis, with 174 building permits being processed, according to Wittenberg. In St. Paul, just 20 ADUs have been built, with five building permits issued.

Surrounding cities like Roseville permit ADUs as well, but have seen very little interest since they’ve been legalized, according to city staff there.

Prohibitive costs?

Smaller usually equals cheaper, right? In the ADU’s case, not necessarily.

“On average in the Twin Cities it costs about \$250,000 to build an ADU. And so that’s still fairly expensive, and equivalent to buying a single-family home in a lot of ways,” says Karyssa Scheck, development and communications officer at the Minneapolis-based [Family Housing Fund](#).

Utility costs play a big role in this, as ADUs in Minnesota must be built to withstand sub-zero temperatures. “We have some unique challenges and building ADUs here in this region that other regions in the country don’t have,” adds Scheck. That’s made ADUs a bit more popular in states like California and Oregon.

“The cost has been mostly prohibitive, and the regulatory requirements to meet to get an ADU stood up on your property has been kind of what’s been driving the lack of uptake here,” says Kirsten Burch, Family Housing Fund’s program director.

Still, Scheck and Burch highlight ADUs as one way of adding “gentle density” to neighborhoods that might not want to see large apartment complexes erected. Gentle density refers to the process of easing more housing into these areas through smaller dwellings like ADUs. “There’s a lot of folks that like single family zoning and don’t necessarily want to see multifamily housing be brought into their neighborhood, and there’s a lot of folks that really value the opportunity to have neighborhoods that have a variety of housing options available,” Burch says.

It’s worth noting, too, that the ADU is not technically the same thing as a tiny home. Many of the differences between these housing types lie in city zoning regulations. Despite being similar in physical characteristics, regulations on the two are very different. An ADU must be built on the existing property of a single-family home, while a tiny home caters to the zoning regulations of a single-family home, since it is not built with dependence on another structure. Additionally, tiny homes are (you guessed it) tiny, as they’re generally required to be 400 square feet or smaller. Some of these structures are built on wheels to be portable, while an ADU is built to last on one property. Furthermore, the size of an ADU is contingent on the size of the property it is on. It is allowed to take up 45% of the lot it resides on, according to the Family Housing Fund’s website.

While there certainly are financial obstacles to building ADUs and tiny homes, they still have numerous enthusiastic backers. Sean Dixon, CEO of Colorado-based company [Simply Tiny Development LLC](#), is among them. His company has been in the tiny homes business since 2019, and [it recently built the first of a series of them in Duluth, MPR News reported late last year](#).

“We can help cities with their taxable revenue,” Dixon says. “That’s a major thing. If this taxable revenue increases with these lots that were traditionally not used before, this can go back into the communities. ... I think that the Tiny Home and the ADU movement is something that’s going to be very, very popular in the future.”

Simply Tiny Development advocates for ADUs and Tiny Homes as being “a complete public housing solution,” with the belief that micro-housing is more affordable in the long run with the combination of asset appreciation and a lower cost of maintenance. “Housing for everybody is what we’re thinking about,” says Joshua Foreman, the company’s chief technology officer of smart home integration.

Of course, zoning issues still persist. Currently, much of the Twin Cities area is zoned for single and multi-family homes. According to the city of St. Paul’s website, as of 2017, single-family homes make up 54% of the capital city’s housing supply. Duplexes, triplexes, and fourplexes make up 11%, and multifamily with five or more units make up 35%.

But changes may be afoot. On April 14, the city of St. Paul will hold a public hearing on its “1-4 Unit Housing Study,” which is “evaluating the potential to add additional zoning flexibility to support the creation of additional smaller, neighborhood-scale housing types,” including ADUs.

The study will, of course, look into several different housing options, though, including duplexes, triplexes, and fourplexes. “What we’re proposing under the new 1-4 Unit amendments are that any homeowner with any single-family home lot, you could build up to two accessory dwelling units, and at least one of those two would have to be detached,” says Luis Pereira, planning director for the city of St. Paul.

In the end, despite all the buzz, ADUs probably won’t singlehandedly solve the housing crisis. But they may still play a role

“ADUs are by no means the silver bullet to solve the housing shortage, but they are one piece of the puzzle,” says Wittenberg with the city of Minneapolis.

Are You A Vanguard? Applications Now Open



BACKYARD

NEXT CITY ON HOUSING EQUITY

[Home](#) / [Urbanist News](#) / [Housing](#) / [ADUs Can Help Address the Lack of Housing. But...](#)

ADUs Can Help Address the Lack of Housing. But They're Bad Urban Design.

Op-ed: I've lived in a neighborhood that embraced "granny flats." There are better ways to add density without relegating our neighbors to the shadows.

TRAVIS BECK OP-ED OCTOBER 5, 2023



This is your **first of three** free stories this month. Become a free or sustaining member to read unlimited articles, webinars and ebooks.

BECOME A MEMBER

Cities across the U.S. and Canada have embraced [Accessory Dwelling Units \(ADUs\)](#), also known as “[granny flats](#),” as a means to quickly address severe housing shortages. Implemented at scale, however, ADUs are a bad urban design solution. They disrupt the neighborhoods they are intended to preserve and can limit, rather than create, social opportunity.

I know because I have lived in one such neighborhood.

Lack of housing availability and rising prices have created a [crisis](#) for low- and middle-income Americans. Of the many available statistics, consider just one: At the end of 2022, [Moody's Analytics reported](#), a median-income household renting an average-priced apartment qualified as rent-burdened.

In this context, ADUs offer many advantages. Defined by the American Planning Association as smaller, independent residential dwelling units located on the same lots as stand-alone single-family homes, ADUs can be relatively quick to construct. They reduce sprawl and lower development costs by adding housing where utilities, roads, schools and services already exist. They address housing affordability both by creating more rental units and by generating income for the homeowners who rent them out. They provide opportunities for multi-generational households by allowing adult children living at home to step up from their childhood bedrooms, aging parents to move in with their grown children (hence “granny flats”), or families of choice to assemble themselves.

The unspoken advantage for communities permitting ADUs as a housing strategy, however, is that they delay the day of reckoning with the land-use policies of the last century. Rather than give up the miles and miles of single-family housing that comprise so much of the nation's sprawling metropolitan areas, the hidden logic suggests, we can just tuck more people into them. In doing so, we preserve the twin American dreams of home ownership and neighborhood life.

But tucking more people into the backyards and former garages of a single-family neighborhood preserves the dream of homeownership for only a segment of the population, cuts off access to neighborhood life for the rest — and puts everyone in an uncomfortable arrangement.

Living in a neighborhood full of ADUs, as I have done in Santa Cruz, California, is an unsettling experience. This is due to the very nature of their design: ADUs are the secondary unit on a property and are usually located in the back of the lot, often accessed through a gate.

This arrangement creates two parallel neighborhoods. One is a front-facing neighborhood of homes with front yards and front porches where residents might spend time and say hello to passersby,

front doors you can knock on if you need the proverbial cup of sugar or are taking the kids trick-or-treating, and opportunities for all the casual neighborly interactions that build community. The other is a secondary neighborhood with no obvious street frontage, limited opportunities for neighborly relationship building, and design-enforced isolation.

Because it is harder to know the backyard tenants, they seem like perpetual strangers. Is that person we see from time to time going through the gate an unmet member of the front-facing family we know, a regular visitor, a vacation rental guest, or a neighborhood resident? Because tenants tend to turn over more frequently than property owners, the question repeats itself before the previous one is fully resolved.

The property owner, the one with the power and greater financial means, most frequently lives the front-facing life in the neighborhood. Their tenant lives the unseen life behind. Financial inequality is expressed spatially and then reinforced as differential access to the social networks of the neighborhood. It is an undemocratic arrangement.

There are better ways to add density while building opportunity and the community life of neighborhoods. One is to embrace the other options within the toolkit of what is sometimes called [“gentle” density](#): duplexes, fourplexes, small apartments and townhomes facing the street. Please, no sideways townhomes strung along a private drive in a once-spacious lot. With these options, two or more residences can fit on an existing lot, equaling or bettering what ADUs provide. Affordability can emerge from the variety of housing types and ages in a transitioning area. These building types put the residents of each unit on an equal footing. Importantly, by being front-facing, they also create equal access to the life of the neighborhood.

This is the approach taken by some pioneering jurisdictions. [Minneapolis](#), for example, ended single-family zoning effective January 2020, allowing the construction of duplexes and triplexes on all residential lots. [Oregon passed legislation in 2019](#) requiring cities with populations above 25,000 to allow construction of duplexes, triplexes, and fourplexes on all residential lots. And [California’s 2021 Senate Bill 9](#) allows the construction of duplexes on residential lots and the splitting of sufficiently large lots into two parcels, effectively allowing four housing units to be built in place of one.

So far, these reforms have led to [only modest numbers](#) of the newly permitted housing types being built. This slow uptake suggests that the inertia of the single-family neighborhood — due to whatever combination of market preference, the lifecycle of individual properties, or the parcel-by-parcel obstacles of small lots, mature trees, and other site constraints — may not be so easily overcome.

So while allowing gentle density is part of the solution, more direct measures may also be necessary to address America’s housing shortage.

A more direct approach is to build intensively in areas where it makes sense — downtowns, town centers, key transit nodes and along major thoroughfares. This type of density can boost housing stocks in bigger increments and create access to rentals and real estate equity at lower price points, especially where affordable housing requirements apply. It also promotes a lively community built around interactions in common spaces — the street, public gathering places and neighborhood businesses.

Cities need to take action to address housing shortages and declining affordability. Rather than pursue the seemingly easy option of permitting more ADUs, they should use the familiar built forms of denser neighborhoods to create housing and community for more of the population at the same time. That's good planning and good urban design.

This article is part of Backyard, a newsletter exploring scalable solutions to make housing fairer, more affordable and more environmentally sustainable. [Subscribe to our weekly Backyard newsletter.](#)

YOU MIGHT ALSO LIKE THE BACKYARD EMAIL NEWSLETTER

Get reports from Next City's housing correspondent, Roshan Abraham, emailed directly to you. Abraham will send original reporting that helps you keep up with the latest in community land trusts, public housing, zoning reform, historic preservation, fair housing policies, energy-efficient design, the intersection of healthcare and housing, and more.

Subscribe now and never miss a story.

| | |
|---|-------------------------|
| <input type="text" value="Enter your email"/> | SIGN UP |
|---|-------------------------|

 Like what you're reading? **Get a browser notification whenever we post a new story.**

Travis Beck is a landscape architect and public servant in Santa Cruz, California. He is the author of "[Principles of Ecological Landscape Design.](#)"

TAGS: [HOUSING SOLUTIONS](#), [HOUSING CRISIS](#), [ACCESSORY DWELLING UNITS](#)

RELATED READS