



What is an Accessory Dwelling Unit?

An accessory dwelling unit is a self-contained living unit, located on the same lot as a primary residential dwelling. The accessory unit is generally smaller than the primary unit but still usually contains one or two bedrooms, a bathroom, living room and a kitchen. The two units may share an entrance, yard, parking spaces, and/or utilities.

Accessory dwelling units (ADUs) can be located within an existing house, attached to an existing house or be a stand-alone building. Spaces that have the potential for the creation of an ADU include attics, a walk-out basement area, attached garages, additions or backyards.

ADUs are typically established in single family zoning districts. An accessory dwelling unit is not a duplex, nor is it the same as two-family zoning. An ADU is considered incidental to the existing principal residential structure or use of the premises. ADU zoning differs from two family or multi-family zoning because in order to create and maintain an ADU, the principal structure must always remain owner-occupied.

Neighborhoods of single-family homes can accommodate ADUs and still maintain their low-density visual character.

Considerations

There is sometimes a concern over increasing density within a single-family residential neighborhood. As small units, appealing primarily to single households, accessory dwelling units are apt to have minimal impact on the overall density of a neighborhood.

Establishing an Accessory Dwelling Unit Bylaw or Ordinance

An accessory dwelling unit bylaw or ordinance is established by the local legislative body, town meeting or city council. A change to a zoning bylaw or ordinance requires a 2/3 affirmative vote of Town Meeting or City Council. Prior to a vote by the local legislative body, the planning board holds a public hearing and submits a report. An accessory dwelling unit bylaw or ordinance is best established as part of a master planning or strategic planning process that considers the overall housing needs of the community and the various methods of addressing those needs.

The bylaw or ordinance will regulate the locations where ADUs will be allowed and under what conditions. Some bylaws and ordinances allow an ADU by right so long as it meets certain criteria. Others require a special permit from the special permit granting authority.

BRPC PROGRAM

Community Planning Program
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Who benefits from Accessory Dwelling Units?

A diverse range of people can directly benefit from having an accessory dwelling unit. This includes the owner-occupants of the primary residence as well as the occupants of the ADU.

- Homeowners needing extra income to meet their housing costs.
- Homeowners living in a large home with unused space that would like to increase their income.
- Homeowners with elderly family that need affordable, private and independent housing in close proximity to family caretakers.
- Homeowners that would like to provide housing in exchange for childcare, grounds maintenance or security.
- Households that are downsizing but wish to remain in their community, close to friends and family.
- Single households that need a reasonably priced rental space close to their place of employment.

How can Accessory Dwelling Units benefit a community?

Accessory Dwelling Units benefit a community in many ways including the following:

- Accessory dwelling units provide a cost-effective way to increase housing, through the use of existing infrastructure in built-up areas.
- Accessory dwelling units increase the supply of reasonably priced housing without the use of governmental subsidies.
- Accessory dwelling units integrate small-scale housing more uniformly into the community, encouraging a more balanced and diverse population and income mix.
- Accessory dwelling units foster better housing maintenance and neighborhood stability.
- Accessory dwelling units protect property values and the single-family residential character of a neighborhood.
- Accessory dwelling units provide housing close to employment centers and public transportation.
- Accessory dwelling units help protect farmland and natural resources by creating more housing within developed areas.
- Accessory dwelling units add to the local property tax base.
- Accessory dwelling units reduce capital costs for the provision of municipal services and ultimately reduce sprawl.
- Accessory dwelling units help address the diverse housing needs of a community by providing creative, flexible, and cost-effective housing options to an array of individuals and small families.

Planning for Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs)

To determine if accessory dwelling units could benefit your community, a first step is to gather a group of interested people to investigate the status of local housing. Be sure to include representatives from the private, public, and non-profit sectors.

The group will be responsible for gathering information, analyzing and interpreting data, documenting need, and sharing the results with a broad cross-section of the community. Basic information about the status and nature of the existing housing stock is essential. This study may include the following:

- The need for smaller housing units based upon the existing overall housing composition and household demographics, considering age, income levels and employment sectors.
- An analysis of where existing housing stock and lots could accommodate ADUs.
- An evaluation of community and neighborhood support for ADUs.
- Relevant bylaws and ordinances from communities with accessory dwelling units.
- Best practices learned from other communities for a successful program.