



Accessory Dwelling Units:

A Smart Growth Tool for Providing Affordable Housing

BY JAIMIE ROSS



This cottage is an example of a detached accessory dwelling unit built in the side/backyard with matching rooflines, colors, and architectural design.

An accessory dwelling unit (ADU) is a residential unit that is secondary to the primary residence of the homeowner. It can be an apartment within the primary residence or it can be an attached or freestanding home on the same lot as the primary residence. The concept of an accessory dwelling unit is to have an additional complete residence, meaning a place for sleeping, bathing, and eating independent of the primary home. An ADU is a tool for providing affordable rental housing and promoting smart growth. These smaller housing units are typically infill units built where there is existing infrastructure, making greater use of the already developed land.

THE VALUE OF AN ACCESSORY DWELLING UNIT

An accessory dwelling unit creates affordable housing in two ways: the secondary (accessory) dwelling is a small rental unit that will ordinarily rent at a price within the means of lower income persons; at the same time, the rental income from the accessory dwelling unit can render the primary residence more affordable by virtue of the income it generates for the resident owner of the primary residence.

Ordinarily, the accessory dwelling unit is smaller than the primary residence of the homeowner. But, if permitted by the local government, the owner may choose to live in the smaller unit and rent out what was the primary residence. At first blush this arrangement may seem odd, but in the case of a family that now has a single elderly member living on a fixed income, this arrangement can provide the perfect affordable living solution; a more appropriately sized living space and a higher rental income.



AARP engaged the APA (see sidebar on resources) to develop a model state act and local ordinance as a resource for meeting the affordable needs of elder Americans. ADUs are particularly well suited for lower income elderly because in addition to increasing affordability, the elderly homeowner may also obtain companionship and needed services from the tenant in the ADU. The use of ADUs can assist the elderly to “age in place”. An example of this cited in the Public Policy Institute publication is from Daly City, California:

“One homeowner with Alzheimer’s was able to trade ADU quarters for medical services from an ADU tenant, a nurse, who was also delighted by the arrangements.”

Permitting accessory dwelling units is a way for government to create an environment in which the private sector can produce affordable housing, without having to invest public dollars. Removing the land use barriers which prevent accessory dwelling units from being built may be all that local government needs to do for affordable accessory dwelling units to be built. This is an example of how regulatory reform can increase the supply of affordable housing.

However, if the purpose in permitting accessory dwelling units is to increase the supply of affordable housing, local governments need to be thoughtful about the manner in which ADUs are permitted. Without conditions placed upon the use of ADUs, the garage apartment in an expensive or desirable area could end up an “illegal use” such as a Bed and Breakfast. If local governments want to encourage the



This is an example of an attached accessory apartment in the back of this single family home. The accessory apartment is not visible from the front of the house.



production of ADUs for affordable housing a loan program to assist the homeowner in developing the unit is an effective way of providing an incentive for development together with an assurance of affordability through a recorded land use restriction agreement made in conjunction with the loan.

OBSTACLES TO ACCESSORY DWELLING UNITS

Traditional “Euclidian” zoning separates land uses in a way that prohibits more than one single residence on a platted lot, regardless of the acreage. If two or more residences are situated on a single lot, they would need to be in a more intensive residential zone, such as one that permits duplexes or multi-family housing.

Some single family zoning may permit an accessory dwelling unit, but require that special circumstances be shown to warrant the use, such as a unit limited to use as a “granny flat” or “mother-in law” suite to accommodate immediate family members. The local zoning code may also limit the accessory dwelling use by proscribing separate metering of the accessory dwelling unit. In short, there may be a number of land use regulations to overcome.

Another obstacle to ADUs may be neighborhood or community resistance. The owners of single family homes may object to having renters in their neighborhood; they may fear increased traffic and parking, or perceive a threat to their property value.

PROMOTION OF ADUS AS AN AFFORDABLE HOUSING STRATEGY

When the SHIP Legislation was adopted in 1992*, included in the list of regulatory reform items for consideration by all SHIP jurisdictions (all counties and entitlement cities in Florida), was permitting accessory dwelling units in all residential areas. Most jurisdictions did not opt to include this

incentive, but a number of jurisdictions in Florida do make some provision for accessory dwelling units.

In 2004, Chapter 163 Florida Statutes, was amended to include Section 163.31771 entitled “Accessory dwelling units.” The law encourages local governments in Florida, especially those in urban areas, to permit accessory dwelling units in all areas zoned for single-family residential use. The purpose of this legislation is to increase the production of affordable rental housing. To that end, the statute provides that “an application to construct an accessory dwelling unit must include an affidavit from the applicant which attests that the unit will be rented at an affordable rate to extremely low income, very low income, low income or moderate income person or persons.” The statute also states that each affordable accessory dwelling unit shall apply toward satisfying the affordable housing component of the housing element in the local government’s comprehensive plan. Local governments in Florida are, of course, empowered to permit accessory dwelling units without this statute, but the statute brings this underutilized tool to the fore and makes explicit the connection to local government comprehensive planning obligations.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR ADU ORDINANCES


Accessory dwelling units could be permitted without adoption of a separate ordinance by simply having accessory dwelling units enumerated as a permitted use within the single family residential use category. It is unlikely, however, that this will be the chosen vehicle, as it fails to provide the parameters for the development and use of accessory dwelling units, which are key to successfully balancing the production of affordable rental housing with the concerns of the existing single family homeowners.


Virtually all ADU ordinances require the owner reside in either the primary or the secondary unit.





Above is an accessory dwelling unit built on top of a three car garage on the back side of the property. To the left is the primary residence, and a view of the garage apartment at the rear.


But there are a number of issues that can be decided differently depending upon community needs. All programs for the development of ADUs should consider the following:


 **Conditional use or “by right”**- If the ADU is a conditional use, a public hearing would be required – this makes the process more difficult for the applicant, but provides a forum for input from the neighborhood. If the ADU is “by right” it is a permitted use and provided the application meets the requirements in the ordinance, it will be approved administratively, without public hearing.


 **Permitting process** – To encourage the development of ADUs, local government can create a user friendly process for construction which includes expedited processing (a requirement under the SHIP program), a manual to help the homeowner, and a staff person charged with overseeing the program.


 **Size regulations** – ADU ordinances commonly have a minimum lot size for the total parcel and a maximum ADU size. The goal is to maintain the aesthetic integrity of the single family neighborhood. Performance standards rather than arbitrary size limitations may better address neighborhood concerns.


 **Design requirements** – To ensure compatibility and maintain the aesthetic character of the neighborhood, an ADU ordinance may set forth minimum design standards and have architectural review requirements.

 **Parking requirements** – To avoid parking problems in an urban area, the ordinance may require that there be sufficient on-street parking or off-street parking, or may require that parking be at the back of the residence.

 **Type of unit**- Different considerations may apply if the ADUs are within the primary residence, such as a basement apartment, attached to the primary residence, such as a garage apartment, or detached from the primary residence, such as a cottage.

 **Occupancy restrictions**- Some ordinances may prescribe the maximum number of people who can live in the ADU or the type of renters, such as limiting the rental to relatives or the elderly.

 **Incentives to produce ADUs** – Loans for the production of the ADU may make it easier to monitor for affordability and assist the local government in directing applicants on its rental waiting lists to affordable ADUs.

 **Monitoring**- Some ADU programs have an annual affidavit requirement or other means for monitoring whether the ADU continues to be used in accordance with the local ADU requirements.

One of the keys to a successful program is the information and technical assistance provided to the community and the prospective developer/owner of an ADU.

To ensure the success of its program, Montgomery County, Maryland has a guidebook to assist applicants through the permitting process for accessory apartments. The County also assists the applicant by having a staff person assigned to help applicants through the process.

In 2004, the National Environmental Protection Agency gave the city of Santa Cruz California the National Award for Smart Growth Achievement for its Accessory Dwelling Unit Policies and Regulations, which includes a manual for developing ADUs, including architectural designs. You can



ADUs do not have to be an afterthought. New construction of single family homes could also include construction of an ADU. “Carriage houses” accessible from alleys are commonly found in the “New Urbanism” or Traditional Neighborhood Design. But without an ADU ordinance requirement that these units be affordable, the carriage houses in this “new urbanism” community exceed affordable rents, as the desirability of the traditional neighborhood design development drives housing prices out of the affordable range.



access the Santa Cruz manual and ADU prototypes on line at http://www.ci.santa-cruz.ca.us/pl/hcd/adu/adu_manual.pdf

If your local government would like technical assistance to help develop an accessory dwelling unit ordinance or navigate the issues to be addressed with accessory dwelling unit ordinances, contact the Florida Housing Coalition at 1-800-677/4548, or Jaimie Ross at jaimieross@aol.com.

*Florida Statute 420.9076 (4) “At a minimum, each advisory committee shall make recommendations on affordable housing incentives in the following areas: (e) the allowance of affordable accessory residential unit in residential zoning districts.



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RESOURCES FOR ADU MODELS:

Accessory Dwelling Units Model State Act and Local Ordinance, Public Policy Institute, Rodney L. Cobb and Scott Dvorak, American Planning Association
www.assets.aarp.org/rgcenter/consume/d17158-dwell.pdf

Examples:
Massachusetts Smart Growth Toolkit Bylaw
www.horsleywitten.com/smart-growth/bylaws/ADU-Bylaw.pdf

Santa Cruz California ADU Manual
www.ci.santa-cruz.ca.us/pl/hcd/adu/adu_manual.pdf

State of Georgia (Department of Community Affairs)
www.dca.state.ga.us/intra_nonpub/toolkit/modelordinances/modordinanceinfl.pdf

Municipal Research & Service Center of Washington Accessory Dwelling Units Issues and Options
www.mrsc.org

Vermont “Accessory Dwelling Units” A Guide for Homeowners
www.dhca.state.vt.us