Featured Tool: Accessory Dwelling Units*

An accessory dwelling unit (ADU) is a small, self-contained residential unit built on the same lot as an existing single family home. ADUs may be built within a primary residence (e.g., basement unit) or detached from the primary residence. They can be an effective way to add variety and affordable rental housing stock to existing single family neighborhoods.

**What issues do accessory dwelling units address?**

**Housing Diversity.** Accessory dwelling units add variety and housing choice in single family neighborhoods. Units are generally smaller than traditional single family homes. In addition to adding different sizes and forms of housing, ADUs can also add rental opportunities to largely owner-occupied neighborhoods. ADUs can be a great option for allowing residents to age in place or live with or near family and caregivers, providing a flexible way to address family needs for additional housing.

**Affordability.** In expensive single family dominated areas, accessory dwelling units can also provide affordable housing choices. Most communities require an ADU to be smaller than the primary home on the property, and the smaller size can reduce the rental price of the unit. Monthly rent of the unit would likely be lower than a mortgage payment for a house in the same neighborhood. Residents would likely not bear the maintenance and other costs associated with owning a home. Depending on how the ADU is constructed, residents may be able to share utility costs with the primary residence. For example, if the unit is attached to the primary residence, utility costs may be lowered by the simple efficiency of shared walls. For homeowners, an ADU can be an additional source of income for property owners, offsetting the cost of home ownership.

**Density.** Accessory dwelling units are a way to create infill housing and add density to single family neighborhoods without compromising the character or design of a community. ADUs can help jurisdictions achieve housing goals by providing density with an alternative approach to apartment complexes.

**Where are accessory dwelling units applicable?**

Accessory dwelling units work in every size jurisdiction. While Washington cities and towns with populations greater than 20,000 are required to plan for ADUs in single-family zones (RCW 43.63A.215), smaller cities frequently find on their own that ADUs provide an answer to some of their key housing goals at a variety of densities and neighborhood settings. Larger cities that already allow ADUs may be interested in revisiting their ordinance to expand their application. ADUs are particularly helpful in providing new housing options in cities or neighborhoods that are already built out, or where the character is to remain single family in design but with increases to density.

Accessory dwelling units are excellent tools for adding housing choices in centrally located residential zones. Encouraging units in neighborhoods near transit, shopping and other amenities can provide additional affordability and convenience from reduced transportation costs. ADUs are also effective in rural areas, providing people who work in agricultural or isolated areas with opportunities to locate nearer to their job, without having to purchase a home or large tract of land.

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**Tool Profile**

**Focus Areas**
- Expensive Housing Markets
- Innovative Single Family Techniques

**Housing Types**
- Single Family
- Rental
- Market Rate

**Affordability Level**
- Less than 80% AMI

**Goal**
- Affordability
- Diversity

* Tool considered very effective for producing units at less than 80% AMI.

**Case Studies**
- Everett Accessory Dwelling Units
- Kirkland Accessory Dwelling Units
What do I need to know about implementing accessory dwelling units?

Assessing need. If you are judging whether your community needs to implement an ADU ordinance or whether your current ordinance should be expanded, consider using these proxy measures to determine need.

- Are there many legal non-conforming or illegal ADUs in your community?
- Is there unfulfilled demand for rental housing?
- Have citizens sought information or permits on constructing mother-in-law units or additional housing for their extended family?
- Does your community meet population accommodation goals per the Growth Management Act?

Shaping your ordinance. Many model ADU ordinances exist, but an ADU ordinance is a flexible tool that can be tailored to address the specific needs and concerns of your community. The issues to be discussed while you develop an ADU ordinance include:

Zoning/Land Use
- How and where can ADUs best fit the character of your community?
- Parking requirements
- Do ADUs count towards the zoned density/density allowed on the property?
- How many ADUs are allowed on a property?
- Can ADUs be used for home occupations?
- Will ADUs be a permitted use or a conditional use? Will public notice be required?

Form/Design
- Which forms of ADUs (detached units above garages, backyard cottages, daylight/traditional basement units, upstairs units, attached units) would work best in the neighborhoods they will be permitted in?
- How large/small can the unit be?
- How should entrances orient?
- Cohesive design with primary unit
- Privacy and proximity concerns
- Are additions to ADUs or additions to create ADUs permitted?

Owner & Resident Considerations
- Must the owner or a family member occupy the primary or accessory unit on the property?
- How many occupants should be allowed to live in the ADU? On the property as a whole?
- Should residency in the ADU be contingent upon the relationship between the owner and resident of the ADU?
- Should utilities be separate from the primary unit, combined, or either (decided by property owner)?

Other
- How will units be tracked/enforced?
- How will pre-existing (grandfathered) ADUs be managed?
- How will illegally installed ADUs be managed?

Encouraging ADUs. Promoting the ordinance and encouraging home owners to convert or construct ADUs should also be considered. Some communities provide loan programs, fee waivers or tax incentives specifically for ADU construction, especially for units available to households with less than 80% of AMI. Providing amnesty for non-conforming and illegal ADUs and encouraging owners to bring converted living quarters up to code may send a message that your community is friendly to ADUs, and spur more development. A campaign to educate homeowners and ensuring that building and development staff are up-to-date on the details can also increase interest and level of comfort with ADUs. Creating user-friendly documents that lead homeowners through the ADU guidelines and development process can also promote the program.
Model Policies, Regulations, and Other Information

A Regional Coalition for Housing (ARCH): ADU Webpage, ADU Ordinance Issues [pdf]
Municipal Research and Services Center of Washington (MRSC): Accessory Dwelling Units Issues & Options
HUD: Accessory Dwelling Units: Case Study (2008)
City of Mercer Island: Frequently Asked Questions, Accessory Dwelling Units
City of Seattle: A Guide to Building a Backyard Cottage
AARP: Accessory Dwelling Units: Model State Act and Local Ordinance, 2000
Washington State Dept. of Commerce:
Accessory Model Accessory Dwelling Unit Ordinance Recommendation (1994)