



Accessory Dwelling Units (ADU)

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, such as 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 choices

Accessory dwelling units add variety and housing choice in single-family neighborhoods. They can include detached units above garages, backyard cottages, daylight/traditional basement units, and upstairs units.

ADUs are generally smaller than traditional single-family homes. In addition to adding different sizes and forms of housing, they can add rental opportunities to largely owner-occupied neighborhoods. ADUs can be a great solution 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

ADUs can provide housing choices that may be more affordable in otherwise expensive single-family areas. Most communities require an ADU to be smaller than the primary home on the property. The smaller size can reduce the rental price of the unit. Monthly rent of the unit would likely be lower than rent or a mortgage payment for a house in the same neighborhood, and residents generally do not bear the maintenance and other costs associated with owning a home.

TOOL PROFILE

Objectives

[Housing Options in Expensive Markets](#)

[Missing Middle Density](#)

[Addressing Racial Inequities](#)

Type of Tool

Development types

Project Type

Single Family

Rental

Affordability Level

Market-rate incentives and tools

Most effective for units <80% AMI

Depending on how the ADU is constructed, residents may be able to share utility costs with the primary residence. For example, the simple efficiency of shared walls may lower utility costs. For homeowners, an ADU can be an additional source of income, offsetting the cost of home ownership.

Density

ADUs can help jurisdictions achieve housing goals by increasing density in existing neighborhoods. ADUs are a way to create infill housing and add density to single-family neighborhoods without compromising the existing look or design of a community.

WHERE ARE ACCESSORY DWELLING UNITS APPLICABLE?

Accessory dwelling units work in jurisdictions of all sizes. 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 that ADUs can provide an answer to key housing goals at a variety of densities and neighborhood settings. Larger cities that already allow ADUs may revisit their regulations 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.

ADUs are excellent tools for adding housing choices in centrally located residential zones. Units located in neighborhoods near transit, shopping, and other amenities can add convenience for residents, and can reduce transportation costs by limiting the need for a personal vehicle. ADUs are also effective in rural areas, providing people who work in agricultural or isolated areas with opportunities to live closer to their job without having to purchase a home or large tract of land.

[HB 1337](#), passed in 2023, requires a city or county planning under the Growth Management Act allow for the construction of ADUs within urban growth areas (UGAs) within six months after the jurisdiction's next periodic comprehensive plan update. It prohibits a city or county from imposing certain regulations or restrictions on the construction of ADUs, authorizes cities and counties to provide incentives for the construction or development of ADUs, and prohibits restrictive covenants or deed restrictions created after the effective date of the bill from prohibiting the construction, development or use of ADUs within UGAs.

The Washington State Department of Commerce (Commerce) updated the agency's 1994 guidance to assist local governments in implementing the requirements under HB 1337. The [updated guidance on accessory dwelling units](#) includes an overview of requirements, recommendations, and other considerations for local jurisdictions.

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT IMPLEMENTING ACCESSORY DWELLING UNITS?

Assessing need

ADUs are appropriate to consider in all jurisdictions. Consider these questions to determine whether your community should implement an ADU ordinance or expand your current ordinance:



- Does your community meet housing requirements of the Growth Management Act?
- Are there legal non-conforming or illegal ADUs in your community?
- Have residents sought information on or permits to construct mother-in-law units or additional housing for their extended family?
- Are the demographics trending towards older households looking to age-in-place?

Shaping your ordinance

An ADU ordinance is a flexible tool that can be tailored to address the specific needs and concerns of each community. There are several model ADU ordinances that can be used as examples. The following issues should be discussed when developing an ADU ordinance:

Zoning/Land Use

- How do ADUs best fit the character of your community?
- Do ADUs count towards the zoned density/density allowed on the property?
- How many ADUs will you allow on a property?
- Should additional parking be required?
- Can ADUs be used for home occupations?
- Will ADUs be a permitted or conditional use? Will public notice be required?

Form/Design

- Which forms of ADUs would work best for the neighborhoods they will be permitted in?
- How large or small can the unit be?
- How should entrances orient?
- Are there privacy and proximity concerns?
- Are there other design requirements or standards that need to be considered?

Owner & Resident Considerations

- Must the owner or a family member occupy the primary or accessory unit on the property?
- Should residency in the ADU be contingent upon a relationship between the owner and resident of the ADU?
- Should utilities be separate from the primary unit, combined, or decided on by the property owner?
- Does the ADU require a separate utilities connection charge?

Other

- How will units be tracked or enforced?
- How will pre-existing ADUs be managed?
- How will illegally installed ADUs be managed?



Encouraging ADUs

Consider how to promote the ordinance and encourage homeowners to convert or construct ADUs. Some communities provide loan programs, fee waivers or tax incentives specifically for ADU construction, especially for units available to households with incomes less than 80% of AMI. Other actions include:

- Granting amnesty for nonconforming and illegal ADUs and encouraging owners to bring converted living quarters up to code. This can send a message that your community is friendly to ADUs and may spur more development.
- Educating homeowners and ensuring that building and development staff are up to date on the details. This can increase interest and level of comfort with ADUs in the community.
- Creating user-friendly documents that lead homeowners through the ADU guidelines and development process. Many homeowners will have little experience with building, permitting, and zoning requirements for this type of project. Some jurisdictions have developed pre-approved plans to make it easier for homeowners to construct an ADU. Others have reduced costs to homeowners by decreasing the broad set of fees and requirements to build.

MODEL POLICIES, REGULATIONS, AND OTHER INFORMATION

A Regional Coalition for Housing (ARCH): [ADU Webpage](#) (2020), [City Zoning Provisions for ADUs](#) (2020)

Municipal Research and Services Center of Washington (MRSC): [Accessory Dwelling Units](#) (2020), [ADU Code Examples](#) (2018)

HUD: [Accessory Dwelling Units: Case Study](#) (2008)

City of Lacey, WA: [Build a Backyard Cottage](#) – Process for Using Pre-Approved ADU Designs (2020)

City of Seattle: [Accessory Dwelling Unit](#) (2020), [A Guide to Building a Backyard Cottage](#) (2010)

San Diego County: [County Standard ADU Building Plans](#) (2020)

City of San Jose, CA: [ADU Permit & Plan Review Process](#) (2020)

AARP: [Accessory Dwelling Units: Model State Act and Local Ordinance](#) (2000)

Portland, OR: [Accessory Dwelling Units](#) (2020), [ADU Financing Guide](#) (2014)

Vancouver, BC: [Build a new house or laneway house](#) (2020)

Washington State Dept. of Commerce: [ADU Guidance](#) (2023)

