

Accessory Dwelling Unit (ADU) Ordinance Update

Focus Group Discussion

February 20, 2015

An ADU is a small, self-contained residential unit located on the same lot as an existing single-family home. ADUs help the City provide a range of housing choices for residents. The City's 1995 ADU ordinance requires review of the existing regulations upon issuance of the 200th ADU permit or before any specific neighborhood exceeds 20 ADUs. The South Hill Neighborhood is nearing this number. The update intends to analyze the current regulations for attached and detached ADUs, and recommend possible changes that will ensure implementation of the comprehensive plan, efficient use of land, and clear and consistent review processes.

In single family zones, Bellingham only allows ADUs that are within or attached to the main residence (BMC 20.10.035). Attached and detached ADUs are allowed in other zones that allow residential uses (BMC 20.28.020, .090, and .100). Whether attached or detached from the main residence, Bellingham requires that the main residence and the ADU are owned by the same person, and the owner must live on site.

A focus group made up of representatives from neighborhood groups and various housing professionals was convened on February 20, 2015 to identify opportunities and concerns with allowing ADUs. The following is a summary of that meeting.

Opportunities/benefits

1. Housing choice -- provides a diversity of housing types and income levels.
2. Financial benefit to owner -- can supplement income and offset mortgage payment, can allow folks the opportunity to stay in their home/age in place (See also #5). Adds value to the property and tax base for the City.
3. Affordable housing -- especially in some SF neighborhoods that a segment of the market could not otherwise afford to live in, and for extended family such as kids that complete college but unable to find a job.
4. Infill housing -- Addresses the demand for housing options close to downtown, jobs, services and recreation. Environment and financial benefits of infill vs. sprawl. Provides an option for carless choices.
5. Caretaker function -- either for an aging homeowner with medical issues or for an owner on vacation.
6. Jobs -- provides an opportunity for work for small builders.
7. Cultural -- may foster cultural awareness if allowed to be leased as airbnb to foreigners.
8. Parking -- provides housing that often is not in need of parking
9. ?

Concerns/issues

1. Illegal units -- unsafe units, owner occupancy requirement (owner renting both units, or owner living in ADU and renting house to a large number of people).
2. Impacts on neighborhood character.
3. Parking problems -- can lead to a parking deficiency on site and on abutting streets due to visitors. Also the converse that too much parking is being required for ADUs when they are often occupied by people that have no cars.
4. "Overfill" in some neighborhoods -- additional people, cars, noise, mass, bulk, etc.
5. Design issues -- size and scale, shadow effects on solar and gardening.
6. Recreation -- loss of space for kids to play outside.
7. Impervious surfaces -- loss of green space/open space.
8. Cost to build ADU -- permit and other fees. Confusing regulations.
9. Short-term or vacation rentals -- Occupants have no vested interest in the neighborhood and frequent turnover can result in neighbors not knowing if persons on the ADU premises (and in the neighborhood) are legitimate residents or strangers with ill intent.
10. Utilities -- equity issues.
11. Public services -- effects on parks, schools, etc.
12. Allowing ADUs will be the beginning of a negative slide that deteriorates neighborhoods.
13. Change is difficult.
14. ?

Other comments:

1. Should rebrand as "backyard cottages" to get away from the negative connotations associated with ADUs.
2. Must look at the unique characteristics of each neighborhood when determining applicability.
3. ?