

Big Growth, Small Solutions: Changing Zoning for Tiny Houses in Urban Infill Development

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Introduction

Since World War II, Americans have been moving away from urban centers and creating automobile dependent, low density neighborhoods in a phenomenon known as urban sprawl. However, for the first time in almost a century, new census data shows that Americans are making the move back to cities. Accommodating high density populations through growth management techniques, such as urban infill, decreases consumption of land resources and commuting distances which reduces car emissions. Urban infill increases density by developing on underused land and buildings to add density within an existing urban area. Compared to single family homes and conventional large-scale infill, tiny houses can provide a sustainable, affordable housing option that increases density with the least amount of disruption to the existing neighborhood. Unfortunately, current zoning laws in most cities across the US have "minimum size standards," making typical 400-1,000 square foot tiny houses illegal. In order to utilize tiny houses in small-scale infill development, these zoning barriers must be addressed. This project first identifies the niche for tiny houses in infill development by comparing conventional infill, such as apartments, and small-scale infill. This project then assesses the potential of accessory dwelling units (ADUs), pocket neighborhoods, and existing zoning for trailer parks to address zoning barriers for tiny houses.

Methods

- Literature from multiple authors on the history of sprawl and zoning in the US was examined.
- Case studies and literature on infill development were analyzed to determine what constituted infill development and where tiny houses could fit in among conventional infill and single family homes.
- Census data and study of housing market trends were analyzed to determine the demand and potential for tiny houses in urban areas.
- Data on the Tiny House movement was collected from a few books but most information was found on blogs, tiny house websites and other online forums.

Key References

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What is the Tiny House Movement?

With the recent recession, rising energy prices, high mortgages and increasing awareness of climate change and personal carbon footprints, the tiny house movement has emerged to combat the sprawling trend of increasing housing size. Tiny houses can be built anywhere from 100 to 1,000 square feet. They require less building materials and are more energy efficient than the average American home. Those who partake in the tiny house movement are committing to a specific way of life, one that involves consuming less and focusing on the quality and not the quantity of possessions and materials. Tiny houses are more affordable than the typical single-family home. They could add a valuable housing option for cities through infill development. However, most cities

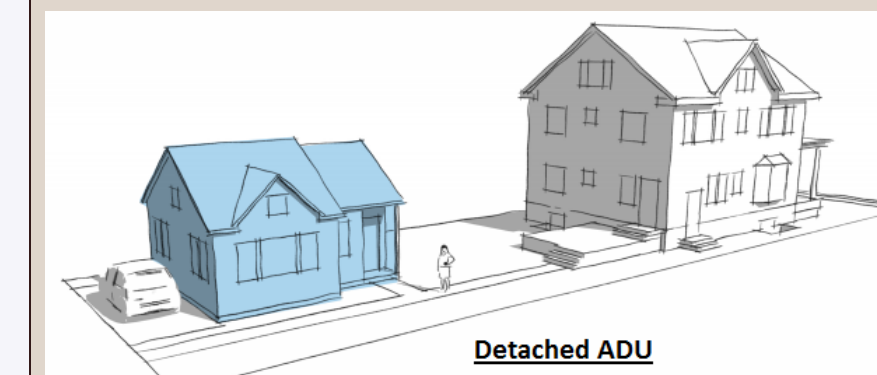


have minimum size standards and building codes that make tiny houses illegal.

Zoning Options for Tiny House Infill

Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs)

Names: secondary units, granny flats, backyard cottages



Definition: Separate additional living unit, attached or detached from primary residential unit on a single-family lot, includes kitchen, sleeping, and bathroom facilities. Requires a new zoning ordinance. Typically under 1,000 sq. ft.

Benefits

- Utilize open space and backyards resulting in minimal disruption to existing neighborhoods
- Has permit system in order to record and regulate buildings
- Can use amenities and utilities from main structure
- Potential source of income for homeowner

Disadvantages

- There must be some sort of relationship or financial understanding between primary resident and ADU occupant

Cottage Housing Development (CHD)

Name: Pocket Neighborhood



Definition: A cohesive cluster of homes gathered around some sort of common space in an existing neighborhood. Requires new zoning ordinance. Typically under 800 sq. ft.

Benefits

- Classified as medium-density infill but works on small sites
- Fosters community and emphasizes integration into existing neighborhood
- Addresses neighbor concerns, such as parking, in zoning ordinance
- Residents are able to share amenities and utilities

Disadvantages

- Need more than one lot and the lots must be together
- Difficult for current tiny house owners to use

Eco-Trailer Parks/Park Model



Definition: Many tiny houses are already built on trailers to avoid building code and zoning restrictions so this method takes advantage of existing trailer park zoning

Benefits:

- Residents are able to share amenities and utilities
- Existing tiny houses on trailers can take part

Disadvantages

- Negative connotations associated with trailer parks will likely lead to more resident opposition

Conventional Infill (large-scale, high-density multi-family housing projects) Ex: Apartment Buildings	VS	Small-Scale Infill (Backyard Cottages, Pocket Neighborhoods) Ex: Tiny Houses
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BOTH

- **Utilize existing infrastructure**
 - **Add density to locations where public transit is already in place**
 - **Integrate new homeownership opportunities into an existing community**
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More Density: one project houses multiple families, adding more density • Zoning Barriers: often uses old industrial sites not zoned for residential use • Land Barriers: Require much more land parcels, costly to build on in neighborhoods with high land value • Large initial injections of capital and long construction timeline • *Current Resident Opposition: fear that high-density developments will change the character of neighborhood and add stress to infrastructure and public services is the biggest barrier to infill | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less Density: Usually house only one family or small cluster of families • **Zoning Barriers: Minimum-size standards make them <i>illegal</i> • Land Barriers: utilize backyards and other small open lots, can be built in variety of neighborhoods • Low capital requirements and shorter development times • *Minimal Resident Opposition: tiny houses represent opportunity for hidden density and can be built specifically to fit the character of the neighborhood |
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Conclusions

The most appropriate method of tiny house development depends on local and community goals for growth management, and the needs and wants of existing neighborhood residents. **From this research, the zoning option with the least amount of initial neighborhood disruption would most likely be ADUs.** Not only do they provide the best form of hidden density, but being the most commonly used method, there is a lot of research on how to best implement them. The park model would probably be most difficult because of bad press the site would receive being associated with trailer parks. These options provide the opportunity for more people to live in a tiny house but may not accommodate those who are already a part of the tiny house movement. **Instead of fitting into the traditional tiny house movement, small-scale infill development with tiny houses may represent a whole new movement more closely associated with smart growth.** In the end, smart growth developers should continue to rethink zoning and conventional infill concepts to allow for this affordable, sustainable housing option in cities.