



Legislation Text

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To: Members of the Planning Commission

From: Scott Tempel, City Planner

Discussion on Accessory Dwelling Units

Action Requested:

The Planning Commission holds a discussion exploring reform of the City regulations governing Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs).

Summary Report:

As part of the Planning Commission work plan and the City Council Strategic Plan, which also coincides with the HRA's goals, we will be looking at the regulations regarding ADUs in an effort to grow and maintain affordable housing. One of the initiatives in this effort is to remove barriers to affordable housing. ADUs have the potential to increase housing affordability (both for homeowners and tenants), create a wider range of housing options within the community, enable seniors to stay near family as they age, and facilitate better use of the existing housing fabric in established neighborhoods. While many communities are interested in expanding housing choices by allowing ADUs in single-family areas, some residents of these areas may be concerned about ADUs changing the character of their neighborhoods or overburdening existing infrastructure.

Research from the American Planning Association (APA) does not support fears about lower property values or parking shortages. Conversely, there are some indications that ADUs do increase the supply of affordable housing and do make significant economic contributions to their host communities, through construction activity and property taxes.

Northfield is currently experiencing a housing predicament. Northfield's popularity and high quality of life makes it an attractive place to live, thereby increasing demand for all housing types. The limited availability of vacant, developable land within city limits have placed upward pressure on both home prices and rental rates. One result of this has been an increased interest by home owners in building accessory units.

ADU's are currently a permitted accessory use in all residential zone districts. An Accessory Dwelling Unit is defined in the Land Development Code (LDC) as a separate, complete housekeeping unit with a separate entrance, kitchen, sleeping area, and full bathroom facilities that is located as part of a detached garage. ADUs have Use Specific Standards in Section 2.10.4 as follows:

(B) Accessory Dwelling Units

This section is intended to allow the creation of accessory dwelling units (see Figure 2-6) on existing lots in residential zoning districts that already contain legally created dwelling units.

- (1) Accessory Dwelling Unit Development Standards
 - (a) Only one accessory dwelling unit shall be permitted on a lot, and shall be included in the maximum number of allowable dwelling units on a property as shown in Table 2.7-1.
 - (b) There shall be a minimum lot area of 8,000 square feet.
 - (c) An accessory dwelling unit shall be located as part of a detached garage.
 - (d) An accessory dwelling unit shall contain separate kitchen and bathroom facilities.
 - (e) An accessory dwelling unit shall not exceed 864 square feet in size and 24 feet in height, and is subject to the building area ratio requirements in Table 3.2-1. One accessible off-street parking space shall be provided for each accessory dwelling unit in addition to the off-street parking spaces required for the principal dwelling in Section 3.6, Off-Street Parking, Loading, and Mobility.
 - (f) An accessory dwelling unit shall be constructed so as to be compatible with the existing principal dwelling, as well as the surrounding neighborhood in terms of design, form, height, materials, and landscaping.
 - (g) An accessory dwelling unit shall be separated from the principal dwelling by a minimum distance of ten feet.
- (2) An accessory dwelling unit may be rented if it complies with the Northfield Municipal Code, chapter 14, but the owner of the principal building on the property must reside on the property.

There are several common complaints about the current ordinance from applicants. The first is the LDC requirement that ADU's must be part of an attached garage. This severely limits design aesthetics, floor plans and the ability to give the building that "cottage charm." It also severely limits where on the lot an ADU can be placed (or if it can be placed at all) due to the fact that most properties have an existing garage.

The second issue is closely related to the first in that, when adding an ADU to a garage, the size of both the garage and the ADU are limited to 864 sq. ft. As a garage door must be maintained, this almost always results in the ADU being located above the garage. This is the carriage house model that was intended to increase neighborhood compatibility and follow the 'Old Northfield' aesthetic. However, it also creates problems. Some of the most common problems and resident complaints are as follows:

- The carriage house model with an upstairs unit is unfriendly and unsafe for seniors.
- Many 'Old Northfield' properties do not have a detached garage or have limited lot width to provide access for a detached garage (narrow side setback)
- Residents who do not live in old town have expressed concerns that a carriage house doesn't fit with my neighborhood. Most properties have attached garages.

A final limiting factor is the City's rental ordinance. ADU's are not allowed to be added to rental properties. Several requests have been denied for this reason. It seems unreasonable to not allow an increased density of one unit to properties already having a rental license and regularly inspected by the City. Please see attached references for additional information.