



TWO HOMES FROM ONE

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When we started to look at affordable housing for our community, it was obvious that we can't build NEW affordable housing without subsidies. And they are a challenge to get. That means we need to work with the existing housing we have, and use it better. One good way to do that is Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs), or granny flats. ADUs are merely jargon for allowing a portion of an existing dwelling to be used as a separate apartment, without having to go through so many bureaucratic hoops.

ADUs can increase the supply of affordable housing quickly, without government subsidies. They rent for less because they don't require new land or new construction. Homeowners are less likely to charge market rents because of their interest in getting and keeping good tenants. Many homes built during the 40's, 50's, and 60's were designed for large households. Using surplus space in such homes, ADUs promote more efficient use of the community's existing housing stock and supporting infrastructure.

ADUs improve affordability for both tenants, for whom rents are usually cheaper, and for homeowners, who can use rental income to ease the burden of mortgage, utility, and maintenance expenses. For a young family in their first home, a single parent after a divorce, or older people on fixed incomes, the additional income from an ADU may make it possible to stay in their home.

For a single individual or a young family buying their first home, creating an ADU for its potential rental income may help them to qualify for a mortgage. Young families can rent out an ADU until a time when their incomes and family sizes have expanded and they need more room. In this way ADUs allow families the flexibility to adjust the way we use our homes to suit changing life-cycle needs. Lower rents for ADUs may also make it easier for some tenants to save for a down payment on a home of their own.

ADUs can give families broader options for live-in care in their parents' own home, or for having their parents move in with them. With an ADU, people can care for an aging parent while retaining a semi-independent living arrangement for both of them.

Homeowners may also offer lower rents to tenants in exchange for assistance in performing various household services. For some homeowners, being able to exchange rent reductions for needed maintenance, driving, shopping, or caregiving services can enable them to stay in their homes.

Exchanging reduced rents for services also benefits other groups of homeowners, including young families, single parents, and handicapped persons. A single mother with young children may rent an ADU to an older couple, with reduced rent in exchange for regular babysitting. ADUs can help handicapped individuals to live independently in their own home but close enough to others to provide needed assistance.

Security and companionship provided by having a nearby neighbor can also be a benefit. Concerns about injuries while being home alone, or fears about rising neighborhood crime rates may be greatly reduced by having someone else living under the same roof. The presence of a tenant may also enhance security while homeowners are out of town. And having more permanent residents in neighborhoods improves neighborhood safety and security, and someone to check on storm damage.

When we first looked at ADUs, we assumed they were something exotic and untried. Not true, of course. Neahkahnie has 10 of them already, as does Cannon Beach. Portland, Seattle, and most Washington communities have 10 or more years experience with them.

In looking at ADUs for our communities, two qualifications have been suggested. The first is allowing only long-term rentals, with a rental cap of \$500/month, to keep ADUs from becoming motel rooms. The second is to require efficiency upgrades on toilets, lighting, and insulation, so utility loads are reduced rather than increased. This both funds efficiency upgrades and gives justification for exemption from expensive system development charges.

Seems like a win-win to me.

* Excerpted, in part, from Washington State MRSC Report #33, Oct '95. For more information on ADUs, visit <www.neahcasa.org>