

ADUS

A fundamental tool to alleviate the housing crisis



This image provided by Bigger Than Tiny, Smaller Than Average, is an example of an Accessory Dwelling Unit, a small home separate from a main house. Proponents say ADUs are a low-impact, energy-efficient way to create more living space. ERIC STAUDENMAIER PHOTOGRAPHY FOR BIGGER THAN TINY, SMALLER THAN AVERAGE VIA AP

By Carl Howell

Communities facing a housing crisis must consider all available solutions. One solution gaining traction is accessory dwelling unit (ADU) ordinances, which allow homeowners to build small rental units on their property. Critics claim that ADUs will increase traffic, burden housing inspections, impact neighborhood character, be costly for owners to develop and drive up housing costs, but these claims are unfounded.

Opponents argue that ADUs will increase traffic, but research shows that they generate fewer car trips per household than single-family homes. In fact, a study by AARP found that residents of ADUs tend to drive less and rely more on public transit and walking or biking. ADUs can reduce traffic congestion and improve transportation options by encouraging these other forms of transit. Furthermore, ADUs are often occupied by family members or long-term renters, who are less likely to own multiple cars, reducing the number of cars on the road.

Opponents also argue that ADUs burden housing inspections, but many communities have streamlined their inspection process for ADUs, making it easier and more affordable for homeowners to build them. By providing an alternative to traditional apartment buildings, ADUs reduce the burden on existing housing inspection systems. Most ADUs are built to the same code as single-family homes and can be inspected at the same time. ADUs are often easier to inspect than single-family homes because they are smaller and have fewer systems to maintain. The argument that inspection services are a reason to oppose ADUs has alternative motives.

Interestingly, critics do not raise this same point when it comes to constructing high-density-unit buildings in multifamily zoned areas.

Opponents claim that ADUs can change neighborhood character, but ADU ordinances ensure that designs blend in with the existing architecture and landscape. ADUs can also provide a source of income for homeowners, allowing them to stay in their homes and continue to contribute to the community. ADUs can help preserve the character of a neighborhood by allowing homeowners to maintain their existing homes while still increasing density. Lastly, using coded language such as “neighborhood character” is a form of contributing to a systemic practice of white supremacy, which historically and presently prioritizes white “neighborhoods” and white “character” over the interests and well-being of other racial groups and community members. Opponents argue that ADUs are investor properties, but a number of ADU ordinances implement safeguards that mandate owner occupancy but empower owners who are looking to create additional housing options for family members or renters. Many communities have implemented ADU ordinances that specifically prohibit short-term rentals, ensuring that ADUs are used for long-term housing options. Research also demonstrates that over 80% of ADUs nationally are owner-occupied.

Opponents claim that ADUs will drive up the cost of housing. Interestingly, owner investments like kitchen upgrades and other enhancements to a property are completed to improve the equity of a home, yet this is seldom mentioned as a community concern. However, unlike kitchens and property upgrades, research has shown that ADUs can actually help alleviate the housing crisis. In Portland, for example, the development of ADUs has led to the creation of thousands of new affordable housing units. By increasing density and offering affordable rental options, ADUs can help address the housing crisis while also benefiting homeowners.

Opponents contend that the cost of creating an ADU is prohibitive, but ADUs can actually be a cost-effective way for homeowners to increase their income and build wealth. By renting out an ADU, homeowners can supplement their income and potentially pay off their mortgage faster. Additionally, as the demand for housing continues to rise, the value of properties with ADUs is likely to increase.

Lastly, opponents claim that their community has taken on more than its share of housing troubles. Yet, the data shows that almost every town and community has been impacted by the rising costs of housing. More and more middle-class households and seniors are being pushed to housing insecurity or homelessness. Creating more housing options is necessary to ensure that community members can remain in their community but also guarantee that all residents have a place to call home.

In conclusion, while concerns about ADUs are understandable, these arguments are flawed. ADUs bring a host of benefits to communities that far outweigh the potential negatives. ADUs are just one tool that every community needs to implement to help address the housing crisis and create a more affordable and sustainable future.

Carl Howell wrote this op-ed on behalf of the Lowell Housing Choice Coalition, a group comprised of about 120 Lowell citizens.