

Accessory Dwelling Units: Toward Ending the Housing Crisis

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Everyone understands the basic housing problem in Sonoma County and in many other communities: there are too few available residential units, at prices out of reach for median and lower-income residents. The crisis has led stakeholders to revisit assumptions about sensible, sustainable growth. Despite moves to cap rent increases and introduce just-cause eviction laws, these stakeholders acknowledge that an effective strategy means, foremost, adding to the housing supply. Environmentalists, whose push for urban growth boundaries pays perpetual dividends in quality of life and urban character, appreciate that higher-density, green development in urban cores minimizes the impact on our world as the population grows. Developers and investors recognize that on-site, affordable housing units are a more effective method than in-lieu fees to bolster economic diversity, and the long-term stability in neighborhoods which in turn supports a resilient local economy. And local government, in the face of divergent public pressures, has begun to make the case that mixed-use, more intensive, more infrastructure-oriented development is the way to provide high quality services in a beautiful setting without worsening the burden on stretched taxpayers.

A strategy that all these stakeholders agree on is to focus, in adding to the housing stock, on “affordability by design.” Neighborhoods with seas of sprawling single-family homes, to many, appear wasteful, inefficient, and monotonous; to Americans brought up through the 2008 recession, they also seem like financial quicksand. On January 1, 2017, California’s “accessory dwelling unit” (“ADU”) law went into effect. This law makes building “granny units” cheaper and easier. New ADUs that do not add to square footage (most “internal conversions,” such as with a garage) are exempt from sewer and water connection fees – a large cost savings. Sensibly, the law does away with often-unnecessary and expensive parking space requirements for new ADUs within a half-mile of public transit and for internal conversions.

When it comes to land use, government policy has an outsized effect on what the market provides. The legislation represents an important shift from bias in favor of car-centered development favoring large floor plans, to promoting human-scale development with units across a spectrum of sizes. ADUs will diversify the housing stock and provide, even in wealthy communities, a modicum of affordability to people other than two-income married couples. Greater densities in underdeveloped neighborhoods will also broaden the tax base, and increase tax revenue without the new and wildly expensive infrastructure (roads and utilities) required for greenfield projects.

America’s postwar land use pattern, aided and abetted by government policies, has quite clearly proven itself unsustainable, unsound, and unaffordable. Fortunately, the land use policies that will stop the madness are also the policies that create livable, vibrant, diverse, and productive urban places.