

Auxiliary Dwelling Units

A look at current efforts to increase affordable housing stock through ADU's and Tiny Houses

LAI Baltimore Chapter – June, 2018 meeting

Michael Cordes – Chapter Scribe

On June 20th, Baltimore City Councilman Ryan Dorsey and affordable housing advocate Greg Cantori joined LAI's monthly luncheon to share their ideas on Auxiliary Dwelling Units (ADU's) and Tiny Houses. Councilman Dorsey spoke first about his efforts to introduce legislation that would expand the availability and use of ADU's within Baltimore City.

Councilman Dorsey recently introduced Bill 18-0188 with the goal of allowing ADU's within the City. What exactly is an ADU? They can go by many different names including:

- Carriage Houses
- Backyard Cottages
- Dawdy Houses
- In-law Suites
- Tiny Houses

But what all these various monikers have in common is that they are small (and hence affordable) dwellings that are ancillary to a larger dwelling on the same lot or property. Given the rise in homelessness and spiraling costs of housing, Councilman Dorsey is championing ADU's in an effort to "try to put safe roofs over peoples' heads". Moreover, Councilman Dorsey views ADU's as a healthy diversification of housing options. Given Baltimore's current circumstances with housing too expensive for many residents and homelessness an ever-present problem, "why are we prohibiting a class of housing that could help alleviate these problems?" Councilman Dorsey views the City's zoning code "as rooted in the past", wherein racial segregation was baked into the zoning laws. He sees his ADU Bill as being a "backdoor", or one alternative method, of challenging this status quo. His overarching question regarding current zoning laws is "Why are we restricting housing opportunities without any substantive rationale when the need is so compelling?" It's a damned good question.

Councilman Dorsey advised that the Canadian City of Vancouver "is a model" for ADU zoning. As a result of the extremely tight housing market there, the City passed legislation defining ADU's in a simple, straightforward manner, as follows:

- Detached
- Single Family Dwelling
- Located on same lot as a principal structure
- Subordinate in Lot Coverage and Area to that principal residence
- Gross floor area not to exceed 750 square feet

The Councilman's Baltimore City Bill 18-0188 includes the same definitions for an ADU. Even with this simple, rather elegant ADU definition, Vancouver's experience is that less than ½ of 1% of all eligible

residences have built an auxiliary structure. Therefore Councilman Dorsey opines that his Bill would not have a dramatic impact on the City's built environment, but would allow some additional affordable housing alternatives for its citizens to, for instance, allow a senior to age in place, or to enable a resident to garner a bit of additional income from a small rental unit.

Unfortunately, Councilman Dorsey's bill is currently stalled, in spite of having 11 co-sponsors upon its initial introduction. It would appear that the forces of "NIMBYism" are currently strong enough to block this common sense initiative. Perhaps this situation will spawn yet another acronym describing anti-development sentiment – NIYBYism – as in Not In Your Backyard? Could this new acronym be a subset of the overarching BANANA acronym ("BuildAbsolutelyNothingAnywhereNearAnybody")? At any rate, the fact that such a common sense attempt to engender decent, affordable housing alternatives is stalled, certainly speaks to the difficulty in finding viable solutions to our housing and homelessness problems. Below are a few of the examples of ADU's Councilman Dorsey provided:



Greg Cantori spoke next with a deeper dive into one form of ADU - Tiny Houses. Greg's experience with tiny houses began when he bought a 220 SF house in Kansas some years ago and, because it was built on a trailer, was able to drive it back to Pasadena, MD where he lives. Greg used his tiny house as an office parked in the rear of his residence as seen below:



Housing Inspectors from the County visited Greg's property more than once to check out this unusual structure. Apparently the fact that it was on wheels allowed the Inspectors to opine that it was "like an RV" and therefore not a zoning violation. In addition to using it as his office, Greg allowed his tiny house to be a part of the Warm Showers cycling program (www.warmshowers.org), providing occasional shelter to weary, long distance riders.

Greg eventually moved his house to Shepherdstown, WV where the City's regulations allow for tiny houses to be off-grid. With solar panels, composting toilets, and rain collection systems, tiny houses

can be situated beyond the reach of municipal utility grids, providing viable affordable housing in rural locales.

Greg advised that there are municipalities that are actively experimenting with tiny houses as potential solutions to housing affordability issues. He traveled to Detroit to see a community of tiny houses on slab that are being offered in a “rent to own” experiment. The City’s program allows an individual to rent a tiny house for only \$1/SF/month (which certainly sounds affordable!), with the renter owning the house after seven years. A subsidy by Detroit’s taxpayers must be a part of such a program, but if decent, safe housing can be offered by a program such as this for a cost equivalent to say, Baltimore City’s High Performance Tax Abatement Program, then it’s an exciting template worthy of consideration by any City hoping to make a dent in its homeless population.

The members of Baltimore’s LAI Chapter thank Councilman Dorsey and Mr. Cantori for their efforts to raise awareness of potential affordable housing alternatives, and for their time in presenting their ideas and experiences to our group.