

Backyard rentals coming soon to Crescent City

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Accessory dwelling units, or ADUs for short, received a nod of approval from the Crescent City Planning Commission and could go before the city council in late November or early December.

ADUs, which are often referred to as granny-flats, backyard cottages or attic apartments, are a fully independent, second residential unit that's either attached or detached from a main dwelling and can be up to 1,200 square feet.

Junior ADUs, on the other hand, are very small - 500 square feet or less - and are created out of space within an existing single family home by adding a small kitchen and exterior door, but may still share a bathroom with the primary dwelling.

The Planning Commission unanimously voted on Oct. 14 to forward to the California Department of Housing and Community Development its plan for adding both types of accessory dwelling for the benefit of people who need moderate to very low-income housing.

As stated in a previous special to the Triplicate article by Daniel J. Schmidt, cities are now required to streamline and lower the cost of the building permit process and to provide financial incentives in the form of water and sewer connection fee waivers or other concessions that may lower overall cost by \$10,000 or more.

Furthermore, ADUs and JADUs are consistent with the Crescent City Economic Development Strategic Action Plan, which was adopted in June of this year.

“Oftentimes, these units are the only rental housing available in older, predominantly single-family neighborhoods, making it possible for people from all walks of life to live in the area,” states the plan.

The plan further states that accessory dwelling units “significantly improve the value of the property, in essence constituting an asset-building strategy for homeowners.”

While homeowners looking to make money, and renters hoping to save some will likely benefit from the housing density modification, two of the planning commissioners worried about the long term effect on the city.

“I interviewed this city before moving here because I just loved the quaintness of it,” stated Commissioner Betsy Dewar. “I’m not a big fan of these because I like living in my little house. That being said, the topic is creating opportunities for more housing in Crescent City.”

Planning Commission Chairperson John Wendt expressed similar hesitation, especially if a parcel is managed by an absentee landowner.

“I had some of the same concerns about what can happen to a community, and I’m also thinking of it in light of the large number of houses in the city that are occupied by someone other than the homeowner,” said Wendt.

Notwithstanding both commissioner’s incertatute, however, a series of California bills passed in 2019 make it impossible for cities to block the construction of ADUs - and only allows municipalities to set limited parameters on how to regulate them.

Two recent workshops by the planning commission resulted in the following parameters:

Each parcel may only have one ADU and one JADU on its property. This means a lot which used to have one dwelling could now have three.

ADUs are limited to 1,200 square feet, and may not be taller than 16 feet.

Existing set-back limitations to the property are not waived with the addition of additional dwelling units.

The city can’t require additional parking if a garage or outdoor parking pad is converted to living space.

“This was one of the things debated in the workshop quite heavily,” stated Jon Olson, Crescent City’s director of public works. “When an ADU is created through the conversion of a garage, carport or covered

parking structure area, replacement parking spaces can't be required by the local agency."

Properties with ADUs, detached or of the junior version, do not mean that the land owner also needs to live on the lot.

"The owner/occupancy issue was debated vigorously, and the census came down to not require owner/occupancy because there was a limitation on when we can require owner/occupancy," said Olson.

"The state said you can't (regulate owner/occupancy) until 2025. By consensus, we decided to be even less constrictive than that, although you can revisit it at any time."

Rental terms and screening won't be regulated by the city.

And lastly, utility fees and charges will be waived to promote additional housing.

"My intent, what I was saying about utility fees, I don't know how we can make that decision," remarked Commissioner Brad Kime, who added that he wanted to instead include verbiage that would recommend or incentivize development through optional waiving of utility fees.

"I'll speak to it at the state level," responded Olson. "If somebody converts to a JADU, or an ADU inside a garage, we - as a utility - are not allowed to charge them for those utilities."

Olson added that partial utility fees may be charged for detached or newly attached units, however, and added "I'm sure this policy will be taken up again vigorously at the city council level."

"Wow, that surprises me that we (the city) don't have a say in utility hook-up fees," Dewar responded.

Prior to affirming her support for the plan, Dewar said that her vote was a "reluctant yes".

"My stomach is in knots," she said. "I love this cute little town."

In a follow-up interview with The Triplicate, Olson said that the accessory dwelling unit plan will be submitted to the California Department of Housing and Community Development this week, and pending their approval and assuming there are no delays, the matter could go before the city council in late November or early December.