



Michigan Association of Planning
A Chapter of the American Planning Association

Excerpted from the MSPO Community Planning Handbook

Accessory Housing

Description

Accessory housing units are complete, self-contained living units that may be either attached to a single-family home or detached, but share the same lot as a single-family home. These units are most often occupied by single or married elderly persons related to the occupants of the adjacent or attached single-family home. Usually, the occupants are ill or disabled or, for some reason, not able to afford housing elsewhere. Accessory housing units represent a viable housing alternative for all of today's smaller households which are in great need of independent but affordable housing that includes people of all ages.

Accessory housing units usually fit into two categories:

- **Attached accessory apartments**- either converted from additional space or added on to a single-family home.
- **Detached or ECHO housing** [elderly cottage housing opportunity, also called "granny flats" (a term which is pejorative to some and a status symbol to others)]- reusable, manufactured homes which are placed in the rear or side yard of the primary single family residence. Mobile homes have been used as accessory units for married children or elderly parents in rural areas for some time. More recently, public agencies and private nonprofit corporations are sponsoring the construction and rental of manufactured housing units for use by an elderly family member.

Fears persist that proliferation of accessory units might result in undesirable neighborhood change. Amendments to the zoning ordinance allowing accessory units while guarding against neighborhood change will alleviate these through licensing, special land use permit, or by right (see associated techniques in the Land Use Regulations section). The special permit process is usually preferred, as it allows

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each case to be reviewed individually. For attached accessory units, conditions for permit approval may include:

- The type of home being converted (single-family residences are usually preferred).
- The number of homes already converted in the block or neighborhood.
- Owner occupancy.
- The age of the home (older homes are often preferred).
- Apartment size.
- Number of occupants.
- Adequate off-street parking.
- Other special conditions designed to preserve the visual integrity of the principle residence and the neighborhood.

Conditions for approval of a detached accessory unit may include:

- The size of the unit and lot.
- Removability requirements.
- Occupancy.
- Parking access requirements.
- Compatibility with its surroundings.

Accessory housing provisions may be included in a local zoning ordinance. Review and approval of accessory housing is by either the local zoning board, planning commission, or legislative body. In accordance with the municipality's special permit review process, a public hearing may be required.

Planning Considerations

Accessory units protect the general welfare of the community by:

- Stimulating new, moderate-cost rental housing for younger and older households.
- Providing housing for a mix of income levels in an affluent community.
- Preserving very large, older homes, usually in or near historic districts.

Preserving neighborhood character is a primary consideration when reviewing a special permit request for the construction of an accessory unit. Granting officials must be careful to only approve requests that will not adversely change the visual character of the principal residence and its surrounding neighborhood. Public concerns over property values, traffic noise, and community character are very common when reviewing accessory uses in residential neighborhoods. Public officials must review these requests, bearing in mind the community's overall planning and housing goals as well as neighborhood impacts. If the density of housing units is already great or public services are low, it is important to ensure the approval of new accessory units will not overtax existing public facilities.

Advantages

- Allows adaptive reuse of large older homes that otherwise may be too costly to maintain by a single family.
- Provides a cost-effective and attractive housing alternative for younger household or the elderly who choose to remain in their own homes.
- "Granny flats" provide a temporary and affordable solution for elderly parents without sacrificing independence.
- "Granny flats" provide a cost-effective solution for public service agencies wishing to provide affordable housing alternatives to an elderly population.
- The existence of a well-drafted and thoughtful accessory housing ordinance may decrease the number of unauthorized and unregulated accessory units.

Disadvantages

- Poorly-drafted ordinances may result in negative neighborhood changes and property devaluation.

Limitations

- Public opposition to the ordinance as well as proposed conversions may be controversial, sparking public debate and pressure.
- Mobile housing units can become unsightly over time if not properly maintained.
- It may be difficult to get the accessory unit removed after the occupant is gone unless a performance guarantee is posted to cover the cost of removal (see also: Performance Guarantee technique).
- Monitoring efforts related to proper occupancy may be difficult.