



# Backyard Cottages

July 2009

A New Choice for  
Seattle Families



City of Seattle  
Department of Planning and Development



# Introduction to Backyard Cottages

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## What is a backyard cottage?

As one homeowner describes it, a backyard cottage is a “mother-in-law unit with a little more breathing room.”

In other words, a backyard cottage is a small dwelling unit that is on the same lot as, but physically separate from, a single-family house.

The owner must live in either the primary home or the backyard cottage.



Since 1994, the city of Seattle has allowed accessory dwelling units that are inside, or attached to the main house. Backyard cottages (which are officially known as detached accessory dwelling units)

are detached from the main house and typically found in either the backyard or above a garage.

## Are backyard cottages allowed in Seattle?

In March 2009, Mayor Nickels announced new legislation to allow backyard cottages citywide. Homeowners throughout Seattle have requested this housing option. Backyard cottages have been allowed in southeast Seattle since 2006; with 20 households applying for permits so far.

## Where else can you find backyard cottages?

Many other cities and jurisdictions in Washington State and the Pacific Northwest allow backyard cottages, including Clyde Hill, Issaquah, Kirkland, Mercer Island, Shoreline, Newcastle, Redmond, parts of unincorporated King County, Woodinville, Yarrow Point, and Portland, OR.

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## What the Neighbors Think

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### What do residents in southeast Seattle think about backyard cottages?

In a survey of 118 neighbors living near a permitted backyard cottage in southeast Seattle, 96 respondents felt that the owners of single-family homes should be allowed to build a backyard cottage on their property. Because many backyard cottages are not visible from the street, more than half the residents living nearby weren't actually aware that one had been built. Most neighbors who knew about the backyard cottage felt it either had a positive impact or no impact on their neighborhood.

Among those aware of a backyard cottage in their neighborhood:

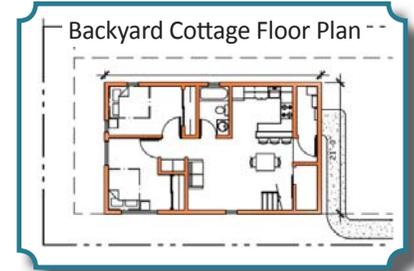
- 71% said that the backyard cottage in their neighborhood fit in with the surrounding homes.
- 84% noticed no impacts on parking or traffic directly related to the backyard cottage.

- 83% were supportive or strongly supportive of backyard cottage policy.

### Why the interest in backyard cottages?

Homeowners have many different reasons. For seniors, a backyard cottage offers a way to downsize while living next to their families and staying in the same neighborhood. Others want flexibility for their extended families or friends, a place for their children, or an opportunity to invest in their property while providing affordable housing for singles and couples.

What follows are four examples of backyard cottages in southeast Seattle.



## Seward Park: Bringing Together Three Generations

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*“We designed everything to be small, but it’s designed for the whole family to be together.”*

With aging parents, Paul Tan and his wife decided to take advantage of an opportunity to bring their family closer together. His wife’s parents, recently retired and living in Lake Stevens, were constantly traveling to Seattle to visit their grandchildren, grocery shop, and attend social events. Keeping family close is a priority in the Tan family, and although his property is big enough to subdivide, Paul opted to build a backyard cottage instead. Paul designed the modern structure to be built into a slight hillside, which affords his family beautiful views of nearby Lake Washington, with enough space to host gatherings of the entire family.



### Specifications

Lot:	11,475 sq. ft.
Backyard cottage:	800 sq. ft., 1 story with daylight basement 2 beds, 2.5 baths
Cost to construct:	\$142,336

## Rainier Valley: Options for Affordability

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*“It’s a nice thing to do on my property because now I have options; the space can be rented, or my mother can stay there when she comes to visit. And if I had to, I could move in and rent out the main house. It could be a financial lifeboat.”*

Backyard cottages caught Mark Savio’s attention even before they were allowed in southeast Seattle. As a homeowner, he knew that having a backyard cottage would allow him a variety of options. He could rent out the unit for additional income, or he could use it for family members. After waiting several years for the backyard cottage “policy to kick in”, he built an 800 square foot backyard cottage from the ground up. The second floor has 400 square feet of living space that feels much larger inside than it actually is, thanks to a vaulted ceiling and large windows. The ground floor has 400 square feet of work space that Mark uses to build kayaks. He easily found a renter who was looking for an affordable, quiet home.

### Specifications

Lot:	5,156 sq. ft.
Backyard cottage:	800 sq. ft., 2 stories, 1 bed, 1 bath
Cost to construct:	\$55,332



## Columbia City: Choosing a Sustainable Lifestyle

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*“Lynn and I love our little cottage. It’s like a tree house...It gives us a warm, bright and separate space to live, while still staying close and being a part of the upbringing of our 15 month old godson. Having my godson, his family, and a family friend living in the big house, we find ourselves sharing at least one dinner a week.”*

Building a backyard cottage allowed Yolinda Ward and her partner Lynn the golden opportunity to downsize their lives and bring their extended family closer together. After building their 620 square foot backyard cottage, complete with energy efficient appliances, reclaimed flooring from Garfield High School, low-flow toilets that use roof water for flushing, and numerous other green building features, Yolinda and Lynn rented their main house to Yolinda’s godson, his wife and new baby. Lynn, an expert gardener, designed their yard as a place to play, and incorporated a bioswale to handle storm-water runoff. Within walking distance to both the light rail station and Columbia City’s Historic District, Yolinda and Lynn, and their family have truly embraced a lifestyle centered on sustainability and livability (see cover for exterior view).

### Specifications

Lot:	7,150 sq. ft.
Backyard cottage:	788 sq. ft., 2 stories, 1 bed, 1 bath
Cost to construct:	\$128,000

## Rainier Beach: Opportunity for Rebuilding

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*“Backyard cottages are one of the only ways to preserve this kind of quality of life...”*

After a tree fell on his detached garage, John Stoeck decided to tear down the irreparably damaged structure and build a backyard cottage. With alley access and enough space to provide onsite parking for his family and the future occupant of the backyard cottage, John, an architect, designed a 2-story building to fit on the existing foundation. The modern structure has an angled, shed roof that is barely visible from the front of the house. Due to the shared alley access in the rear, John worked with his neighbors to carefully place windows, ensuring privacy for everyone. When completed, the living space will be just over 437 square feet and the cottage will be painted to complement his existing house.

### Specifications

Lot:	5,000 sq. ft.
Backyard cottage:	437 sq. ft., 2 stories, 1 bed, 1 bath
Cost to construct:	\$48,907



## Citywide Interest in Backyard Cottages

*“Actually the property is my father’s. It is a small three bedroom house and has little spare space. It would be a big help, financially, for all of us if I had a little space (very little is fine) of my own on the property instead of renting and wasting money that could be used to help the family get by. A fully equipped ‘house’ isn’t needed just a sleeping/private space.”*

- Kari Berglund, North Seattle Resident

*“We would love to have housing for our aging parents: then, for our son as he becomes a young adult and eventually, as a place for us to downsize to. By having a place for our extended family we could save time and energy caring for one another and have that time and energy to put into our community.”*

- Mead Wehle, North Greenwood Resident

*“It would be used as a rental to help with our mortgage payment. It would be deliberately designed to be adaptable, able to house relatives while our kids are young and eventually living quarters for a teenager. Ours would also have a portion of the space dedicated for an office, as I am a screenwriter and my wife is a photographer.”*

- Kelly Requa, South Park Resident

*“I would like to have a place for my mother to stay as she gets older. I think if it is done right, the neighborhood would benefit. Advantages are that family is closer and dollar savings. All while maintaining the peace in the family.”*

- Corey Artherholt, Magnolia Resident

