



# City of Seattle

## Seattle Planning Commission

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Barbara Wilson,  
Executive Director  
  
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Planning Analyst  
  
Diana Canzoneri,  
Demographer &  
Senior Policy Analyst

October 6, 2009

Honorable Councilmember Sally J. Clark  
Chair, Planning, Land Use and Neighborhoods Committee  
Seattle City Council  
PO Box 34025  
Seattle, WA 98124-4025

### **Re: Follow-up comments on Backyard Cottages legislation**

Dear Councilmember Clark,

On September 4<sup>th</sup> the Planning Commission provided you with its recommendation to approve the legislation to allow backyard cottages in single family zones throughout the entire city.

At the public hearing on September 15<sup>th</sup> the Commission testified in favor of preserving the unit size and maximum height as proposed. We do not support lowering the 800 square foot maximum, lowering the maximum height, or restricting the ability to build two stories.

### **Provide housing choices for a variety of household types**

The Commission strongly believes that the current restrictions and development standards are reasonable, sensible, and will ensure backyard cottages fit within the current single family neighborhood context while also ensuring that the housing units built are a realistic choice for a wide variety of household types. Providing reasonable living space requires adequate height and square footage to make these units useful for anyone other than a single person household.

### **Avoid piling on too many restrictions and limiting factors**

In the current proposal before Council, Backyard Cottages are limited to 800 square feet of interior area, **including any garage or storage area**. They must fit within the current lot coverage allowance, which requires that all structures generally cover no more than 35% of the lot. And, all accessory structures may only cover 40% of the required rear yard. The Commission believes that these restrictions are adequate to ensure that the placement and coverage of Backyard Cottages are sensitive to the abutting properties and that they are in reasonable proportion to the footprint of the primary structure, which in Single Family Zones, may reach within 5' of a side property line as-of-right.

Structure height and bulk are also important to regulate carefully. But they must be considered in relation to parking requirements and to the policy goal of providing increased access to a variety of housing options.

In the current proposal, maximum structure height and roof height are determined according to lot width, with the maximum allowable roof height being 23' on lots greater than 41' in width. **Already, this maximum roof height places significant constraints on the design, construction, and affordability of second floor dwelling units** – reducing opportunities for cost-effective prefabricated truss systems, restricting unit layouts, and limiting window placements.

We are aware that PLUNC is currently considering lowering the maximum roof height to 21' or 22', reserving the 23' height for lots greater than 50' in width and for lots abutting an alley. The full Commission, which among others, includes design professionals, architects, homebuilders and real estate developers strongly advises Council that **lowering the allowable roof height below 22' restricts the ability to provide a usable extra bedroom in second level units** and does not support increased housing opportunities in our single-family neighborhoods.

In most other cities you have studied, the garage space is exempt from floor area maximums. Portland also does not require additional parking. So, while Portland and other cities have lower height and square footage maximums they trade off parking requirements. We strongly support your recent decision to exempt backyard cottages in Urban Centers and Villages from the parking requirement. This is a step in the right direction and will allow these units much more design flexibility. Development standards are a balancing act. **If retaining the parking requirements in neighborhoods other than Urban Centers and Villages and limiting the amount of non-permeable surface is more important for Seattle, then taller units are necessary to make backyard cottages a truly feasible option for many who would use it.**

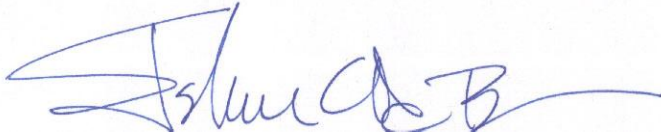
### **Privacy, design and being a good neighbor**

Design, privacy and good neighbor issues are important. **It is our professional experience that prescriptive and onerous regulations on design points such as window placement or public notice are not the ideal solution to these important considerations.** The Commission has put a tremendous amount of time and energy into thinking about these issues and suggested in our 2003 report that a user guide be created to help assist potential backyard-cottage builders address these issues sensitively and appropriately.

The Commission worked doggedly for such a guide and helped secure the funding to make it possible. As you are aware, earlier this year the Planning Commission, in collaboration with DPD, released "A Guide to Building a Backyard Cottage in Southeast Seattle". It would be our pleasure to work with you to provide a similar citywide user guide aimed at creating attractive backyard cottages that are designed to fit well into surrounding neighborhoods. Like the Southeast Seattle guide, subjects in the guide would include site planning, designing for privacy, where to place parking, and how to be a good neighbor—which includes talking with neighbors before you build a backyard cottage. The Commission is dedicated to using our expertise and resources to provide homeowners guidance that supports good design and neighborhood sensitivity. We believe this is a meaningful, and ultimately more successful, approach to helping people address the important issues of privacy, parking, design and being a good neighbor.

We are happy to continue providing you with the Commission's independent and objective advice as you continue your thoughtful consideration to this matter. Please feel free to contact the Commission for any clarification on any of these points through our Executive Director, Barbara Wilson at (206) 684-0431.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Josh Brower", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Josh Brower, Chair  
Seattle Planning Commission

CC:  
Mayor Greg Nickels  
Seattle City Council Members  
Diane Sugimura, Department of Planning and Development  
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