



City of Seattle

Seattle Planning Commission

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September 4, 2009

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

Re: Legislation to allow Backyard Cottages citywide in Seattle

Dear Councilmember Clark,

Since July 2003 the Planning Commission has been on record urging the City to move forward with legislation permitting Backyard Cottages (aka Detached Accessory Dwelling Units) in single family zones throughout the entire city. Increasing the variety of housing types in all single family residential zones can lead to more affordable housing options. Backyard Cottages generally provide lower cost rental housing options, an opportunity for homeowners to offset the cost of their homeownership, and housing for extended family members.

The Commission has consistently advocated for policies that encourage affordable housing throughout the city and using all available tools to reduce or minimize the cost of housing. We strongly support Backyard Cottages as one of Seattle's housing choices. The proposal currently before City Council to allow Backyard Cottages citywide is one such tool and we encourage the Council to approve the proposal.

Seattle demographics have changed as have our housing needs. The City must meet the changing housing needs of an aging population, an increasing number of multi-generational families, extended families, and single-parent families, and childless couples. It is important for the City to look for innovative solutions to provide housing options for this new demographic profile.

In short, Backyard Cottages:

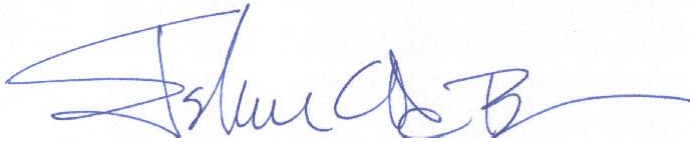
- provide an important addition to the housing choices for both homeowners and renters in Seattle
- provide an opportunity for extended families, where elderly parents or young adults can live in an independent, supportive housing arrangement
- provide homeowners with extra income to help meet rising homeownership costs
- allow older homeowners to age in place or potential new homeowners to afford the purchase price of a single-family home
- are a good way to increase the supply of affordable rental housing in single-family areas with dwellings that fit into the scale and character of the neighborhood
- give people more choices in the neighborhoods they want to live in
- guarantee on-site landlords who are more likely to make sure their renters are good neighbors

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 also fit within the current lot coverage allowance, which requires that all structures generally cover no more than 35% of the lot. In addition, all accessory structures may only cover 40% of the required rear yard. The Commission believes that these development standards are reasonable. We do not support lowering the 800 square foot maximum or the ability to build two stories. We want these housing options to be a feasible living space for a variety of household types.

In addition we do not support the 50 per year cap and would urge you to consider raising the cap in the first few years or eliminating it altogether. We believe that it is an unnecessary regulation and that the existing proposed development regulations along with the cost of building (\$80,000 on average) and the desire to build a Backyard Cottage will have a limiting effect on the widespread use of this housing type.

And finally, the Commission is dedicated to using our expertise and resources to provide guidance to homeowners that support good design, neighborhood sensitivity, and offer practical suggestions for developing a Backyard Cottage. Earlier this year the Planning Commission in collaboration with DPD released "A Guide to Building a Backyard Cottage in Southeast Seattle" to help homeowners in Southeast Seattle, where this housing type is currently allowed, to successfully design and build a backyard cottage. It would be our pleasure to provide a similar citywide user guide aimed at creating attractive backyard cottages that are designed to fit well in neighborhoods. Like the Southwest Seattle guide, subjects in the guide will include site planning, designing for privacy, green design ideas, as well as sample designs and construction and permitting information.

Respectfully submitted,



Josh Brower, Chair
Seattle Planning Commission

CC:
Mayor Greg Nickels
Seattle City Council Members
Diane Sugimura, Department of Planning and Development
Adrienne Quinn, Office of Housing
Ray Gastil, Department of Planning and Development
John Skelton, Department of Planning and Development
Mike Podowski, Department of Planning and Development
Andrea Petzel, Department of Planning and Development
Rebecca Herzfeld, Council Central Staff
Traci Ratzliff, Council Central Staff
Ketil Freeman, Council Central Staff

Record of Disclosure & Recusal

- Commissioner Josh Brower disclosed that his firm, Tupper Mack Brower, represents clients who might build backyard cottages sometime in the future.
- Commissioner Matt Roewe disclosed that he has a backyard cottage that was built prior to current zoning regulations.