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ACCESSORY DWELLINGS



NVAHA

Northern Virginia Affordable
Housing Alliance

NVAHA-ARLINGTON

Introduction

Accessory dwellings are additional, often small, housing units located within or adjacent to single-family homes. They are frequently known by more descriptive names such as basement apartments, granny flats, backyard cottages, in-law suites, and carriage houses. A property owner with an accessory dwelling can live in either the main dwelling or the accessory dwelling while renting out the other unit.

Accessory dwellings are one way of adding to the supply of housing in single-family neighborhoods without altering the character of the area.

Because of their size and characteristics, these units are often rented at rates that can be affordable to low- or moderate-income individuals. They are also often one of the only options for smaller rental apartments in some areas of a community, providing a valuable housing option for those who need it.

Accessory dwellings can also help elderly homeowners age in place. Caregivers or family members can occupy either the accessory unit or the main home. For homeowners who choose to rent the accessory dwelling, this can provide a valuable supplemental source of income.

Arlington County adopted an ordinance in 2008 that allowed accessory dwellings generally no greater than 750 square feet within a single-family home. Detached accessory dwellings – such as backyard cottages or detached carriage houses – were not allowed in Arlington. In December 2017, the County Board approved updates to the ordinance that streamlined the rules and allows conversion of existing detached accessory buildings (such as garages) to be converted to accessory dwellings. In May 2019, the County Board approved allowing new construction of detached accessory dwellings. See the resources below for additional details on all these updates.

Timeline: AD's in Arlington

July 2008

Arlington begins allowing accessory dwellings that are no more than 750 square feet within a single-family home (example: basement or attic apartment).

Nov 2017

Regulations are updated to allow conversions of existing detached buildings into accessory dwellings (example: converted detached garage).

May 2019

Arlington allows construction of new detached accessory dwellings.

Examples Accessory Dwellings



Granny's Garden Cottage, Portland, OR

Architech: Michael Wolfe

Designer: Dave Rush

The dwelling was designed and built to be an accessible residence.



Backyard Cottage

Architech: Ross Chapin

This is a 449 sq. ft, one-bedroom cottage.



Cottage Cluster

Architech: Ross Chapin

2-bedroom + study unit clustered in a pocket neighborhood or court.

Learn More:

Arlington's accessory dwelling permit process is managed by the zoning office of the Department of Community Planning, Housing, and Development. Follow the links below to learn more.

- Zoning and building permit [applications and instructions](#) for accessory dwellings
- The [2008 zoning amendment](#) that allowed accessory dwellings
- The County's page on the 2017 [Accessory Dwellings Ordinance update](#)
- Overview of [changes allowing detached accessory dwellings](#) in May 2019
- July 2020 [Housing Virginia webinar](#) featuring AHS Executive Director Michelle Winters talking about Accessory Dwellings in Arlington
- [ABC's of ADU](#): A guide to Accessory Dwelling Units and how they expand housing options for people of all ages

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