

Madison Mayor Rhodes-Conway: Mayor and alders propose to ease permit approvals for accessory dwelling units

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On November 2, Mayor Rhodes-Conway, District 2 Alder Patrick Heck, District 13 Alder Tag Evers, and District 15 Alder Grant Foster will introduce legislation to make it easier to build an accessory dwelling unit (ADU) in Madison. ADUs, often referred to as granny flats or backyard cottages, are allowed on owner-occupied properties with single-family homes.

The proposed legislation would make ADUs a permitted use, rather than a conditional use, as is currently required in City zoning. A conditional use request often entails a lengthy process with an unpredictable outcome, which disincentivizes ADUs in Madison. The proposal also increases the maximum ADU size from 700 to 900 square feet, sets a 2-bedroom maximum for an ADU, and makes other simplifications and clarifications.

By creating a more predictable permit process for ADUs, the Mayor and sponsoring Alders hope to increase the number of ADUs in Madison. This proposal is one of several changes included in the Mayor's Housing Forward agenda that aims to increase both the amount of housing being built in Madison, and the diversity of housing types.

"Madison is growing rapidly, and our population growth has long outpaced our housing growth. We need to use all the tools in our toolbox if we want Madison to remain affordable and accessible for everybody," said Mayor Rhodes-Conway. "ADUs and backyard cottages are one way we can add housing and housing choice

to our city.”

ADUs are also a way to increase housing density in a neighborhood without large redevelopment projects. “Madison has a lot of neighborhoods that are largely comprised of single-family homes. These neighborhoods are often inaccessible to many people in our community,” said Alder Evers.

“ADUs by their very nature tend to be more affordable and therefore are a great way to open a neighborhood to new residents.”

The accessibility and affordability provided can work both ways. “Making it easier for city residents to construct ADUs on their property not only supports our citywide goal of increasing the availability of housing, but is also of great benefit to single-family property owners themselves,” said Alder

Foster. “The additional housing unit can help accommodate extended family living arrangements by providing a home for an aging parent or an adult child and in other cases, the additional rental income can help someone pay their bills and continue to stay in the neighborhood.”

Alder Heck agrees with the benefits of ADUs, and sees the barriers of the current process up close as a Plan Commissioner. “Hiring an architect to develop a site plan for a permit is a big investment for the average homeowner if they have no certainty about whether the permit will be approved. I think the proposed changes will make ADUs a more attractive option for many homeowners while still limiting impacts on neighbors.”

While the proposed changes make the process more predictable, it’s important to note that other zoning requirements will still apply.

A presentation on the proposed changes is planned for the Plan Commission meeting on November 8, with opportunity for public comment scheduled for the November 22 Plan Commission meeting. A final vote by the Common Council is expected on December 7.