



## What's the Big Deal About Tiny Houses?

You can hardly turn on the television without finding a show about tiny houses. *Tiny House, Big Living, Tiny House Hunters,* and *Tiny House World* are just three of them. Sometimes called Accessory Dwellings, tiny houses are starting to catch on in our area too.

According to the Alliance for Housing Solutions, accessory dwellings are “Additional, often small, housing units located within or adjacent to single-family homes. They are more frequently known by more descriptive names such as basement apartments, granny flats, backyard cottages, in-law suites, and carriage houses.” These tiny houses offer ways to offer additional housing opportunities in single-family neighborhoods without altering the character of the area, and can be offered at rents affordable to those with low-to-moderate income levels.

“A lot of people are looking at tiny houses as a way to get affordable housing for seniors, kids or for those who just want to live that way,” said Robin Hayes, owner/builder at Build Tiny. But although tiny houses are available, they may not be legal in all jurisdictions. “Local zoning administrations have a big impact on whether they are legal or not. I suggest that before you do anything, find someone who can help you with your terminology.”

Being legal can mean the difference between calling it a tiny house or an accessory dwelling, for example. Certain requirements must be met in each jurisdiction as well.

### Arlington County

As of November 27, 2017, accessory dwellings (ADs) serve as an important component of Arlington County’s Affordable Housing Master Plan. “Considered an accessory (or subordinate use), ADs promote a greater diversity of housing and household types in single-family neighborhoods, while maintaining neighborhood character and underlying zoning. Whether ADs are located within an existing one-family detached dwelling or a detached accessory building, ADs function as an independent dwelling unit, with their own entrance, kitchen, and bathroom facilities, and are intended for occupancy by no more than three (3) persons.”

Those desiring an accessory dwelling must undergo a submission and review process with the Arlington County Zoning Division to meet minimum eligibility requirements. For an application to be approved, it must also comply with the requirements for their creation, approval and



use. Consideration also needs to be given for zoning ordinances, historic preservation rules for historical districts, and environmental services.

### Fairfax County

Per Section 2-501 of the Zoning Ordinance of Fairfax County, “An Accessory Dwelling Unit can be applied for but shall only be permitted in association with a single family detached dwelling unit if a special permit is approved by the Board of Zoning Appeals. A dwelling unit being defined as, ‘A self-sufficient living space, which provides for living, sleeping, cooking, and restroom facilities.’ Conditions must be met, including but not limited to, one of the dwelling units must be occupied by a person who is elderly and/or disabled and there shall be no more than one accessory dwelling unit per single family detached dwelling unit.”

The Department of Planning and Zoning’s Older Adult Housing in Fairfax County Zoning Ordinance Provisions goes on to state that an accessory dwelling unit 1) must be subordinate to the single family detached dwelling unit; 2) either dwelling must be occupied by a person 55 years or older or by a person permanently or totally disabled; 3) is allowable only with the approval of a Special Permit; 4) on lots two acres or larger it may be located in a freestanding accessory structure; 5) are limited to a maximum of 35% of the gross floor area of the principal dwelling; 6) at least one of the dwellings must be owner occupied; and 7) accessory dwelling units are approved for a period not to exceed 5 years, with succeeding 5 year extensions requested.

### Fauquier County

Tiny houses in Fauquier County are allowable and considered principal dwelling structures as long as they are connected to water and sewer, and are tied down or on a permanent foundation. Electricity is optional, but documented building standards must be met in order to comply with regulations for things like emergency escape and rescue. Homes as tiny as 88 square feet are legal but must include a living and kitchen area of at least 70 square feet and a bathroom area of 18 square feet.

### Building a Custom Tiny House

“In my opinion, a tiny house is more of a state of mind than a physical description. It’s taking your life down to its most simplistic form to where you can enjoy it most by maximizing your peacefulness and financial obligations,” Hayes observed.

Every tiny house is custom designed and hand-built by Build Tiny to meet each client’s specific needs. “We start by asking them a series of questions, just as with building any custom home.”

- Do you want it on a conventional foundation or a trailer?
- How do you want to live?
- Is this for a special purpose like health reasons or handicap access?
- Do you want any special features?
- What kind of aesthetics do you want? Should it match the house or be a cabin style?
- Do you want to be on the grid or off with solar power, rainwater collection and a composting toilet?

“The difference between a tiny house and a trailer or camper is that regular RVs and campers are meant for you to stay in them a couple of weeks each year. They are made with lighter-weight, less expensive materials and not meant to be used for extended periods of time. But they travel better,” Hayes explained. A tiny house is built just like a house by a Class A contractor, with regular framing to codes and thick insulation to make

it warm and quiet. It is very stable and can include real hardwood floors and drywall, tall ceilings, and full-sized appliances. It can also include indulgent features like a rooftop hot tub, glass roof, accordion glass doors that can open the entire side of the house, radiant floor heat, wrap-around shower sprays, a workout facility, beautiful lighting, and anything else you can imagine.

“It takes us about three months to build a tiny house, with bare bones price starting at around \$35,000,” Hayes said. “What costs the most is the foundation (concrete or trailer) followed by the insulation and custom built-ins.” Build Tiny is a Green Advantage Certified Builder.

### You Can Build a Tiny House!

Twice a year in April and October, Build Tiny offers three-day, hands-on “Build Your Tiny House Workshops” ([www.build-tiny.com/workshops](http://www.build-tiny.com/workshops)) where you can learn more about what goes into building a tiny house from construction experts. “Thursday, we offer a beginner’s tool workshop, and Friday through Sunday, we do a hands-on build on an actual tiny house,” Hayes said. Meals are included and participants can camp on site or stay at the local B&B. ❖

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