

# QUICKNOTES

## Making Space for Tiny Houses

"Tiny houses" are attracting a lot of attention through social media, television shows, documentaries, and stories in the popular press. Advocates often tout the affordability and environmental friendliness of living in very small homes. Meanwhile, skeptics and detractors see a passing fad and caution against embracing tiny houses as a distinct type of dwelling. Currently, many cities and counties have provisions in their land-use and development regulations that make legal development and occupation of tiny houses difficult or impossible. However, a small number of communities have made changes to their codes to explicitly permit tiny-house living.

### Background

While there is no official definition, many planners, policy experts, and advocates consider any single-family dwelling with 400 square feet or less of floor area to be a *tiny house*. In some contexts, commentators only apply the label *tiny house* to very small site- or factory-built dwellings attached to permanent foundations. However, other commentators reserve the term for chassis-mounted mobile homes, which may or may not be built to U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development standards for manufactured housing (24 CFR §3280) or to the Recreational Vehicle Industry Association's standards for "park model" recreational vehicles (ANSI A119.5).

In many places, property owners and residents are interested in both foundation-attached and chassis-mounted tiny houses as principal or accessory dwelling units. In some cities and counties, there is also a growing interest in tiny-home communities, where multiple foundation-attached or chassis-mounted tiny houses are sited on fee-simple subdivided lots, a condominium lot, or lease lots.

Regardless of the type of tiny house, there are several potential individual and collective benefits associated with tiny-house living; however, there has been little research to date on the actual community impacts of tiny houses. Meanwhile, state and local building codes, as well as local subdivision and zoning ordinances, often pose barriers to siting and occupying tiny houses.

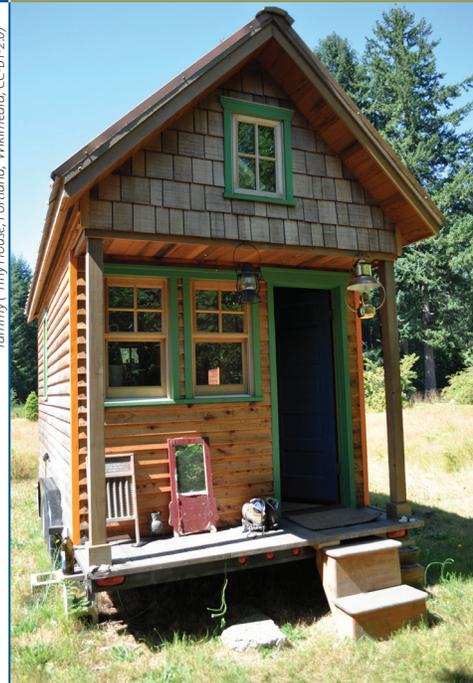
### The Case for Tiny-house Living

When considering homes constructed with similar materials and sited in similar locations, the smaller the home the cheaper and more efficient it is to heat, cool, and provide with electricity and water services. The same rule applies to the cost of the home itself. Chassis-mounted tiny houses are easier to move than site-built homes, and buyers can typically purchase them separate from land. This makes them attractive to people interested in traveling with their home and has the potential to create ownership opportunities for those who can't afford a conventional site-built home.

Many planners and housing policy experts see accessory tiny houses as a viable strategy for providing semi-independent housing for aging family members. In this scenario, tiny houses may be temporary or permanent and may include medical monitoring equipment. Beyond this, many housing and homelessness policy experts are interested in exploring the potential of tiny home communities as an alternative to temporary shelters or informal encampments for individuals experiencing homelessness. For example, Dignity Village in Portland, Oregon, has provided transitional housing in the form of a tiny house community since 2001 ([dignityvillage.org](http://dignityvillage.org)).

Notwithstanding the potential benefits above, tiny houses do not enjoy universal support. In some communities, tiny-house residents have earned a reputation as scofflaws by "flying under the radar" of local building and zoning code enforcement. In other communities, there is a general concern about welcoming tiny houses without carefully assessing their likely impacts on public health, safety, and welfare.

Tammy ("Tiny House, Portland," Wikimedia, CC-BY-2.0)



A chassis-mounted tiny house in  
Portland, Oregon.



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## Remove Unintentional Barriers

For cities and counties interested in supporting tiny-house living, it is important to take a close look at the effects of current building, subdivision, and zoning requirements on opportunities to site and occupy tiny houses. The most common regulatory barriers are state or local building code provisions that stipulate the minimum amount of habitable space per person for different types of residences, local zoning provisions that stipulate minimum unit sizes, and local zoning provisions establishing minimum lot area per unit and off-street parking requirements. Beyond this, many cities and counties classify chassis-mounted tiny houses as recreational vehicles and not dwelling units at all.

In some localities, minimum unit size or habitable space requirements and general prohibitions on camping outside of designated campgrounds or recreational vehicle parks effectively prohibit all tiny houses. In others, development standards can make tiny housing cost prohibitive.

Each of these potential barriers to tiny-house living may be wholly consistent with local policy objectives. If this not the case, consider opportunities to revise local building, subdivision, or zoning codes to remove unintentional barriers to siting and occupying tiny houses. This may be as simple as eliminating off-street parking requirements for accessory dwelling units or minimum unit size standards that exceed minimum habitable space requirements in the latest version of the International Building Code.

## Identify Appropriate Locations

Not all types of tiny houses are appropriate for all community contexts. Some cities and counties may be content to see tiny houses on permanent foundations comingled with conventional site-built housing. Others may prefer to limit tiny houses to tiny-home communities or recreational vehicle parks.

In contexts where it is important to differentiate between tiny houses and other types of dwelling units (or recreational vehicles), cities and counties should consider defining tiny-house living as one or more distinct types of land uses and adding these land uses to tables or lists of permitted uses by zoning district.

## Mitigate Potential Impacts

In some contexts, zoning district development standards may either be inappropriate for tiny house development or insufficient to ensure neighborhood compatibility. In these cases, cities and counties should consider adopting use-specific standards to minimize the potential for incompatible development.

For example, Fresno, California, permits chassis-mounted tiny houses as a type of accessory dwelling unit, subject to use-specific standards addressing design, minimum lot size, units per lot, unit size, lot coverage, setbacks, entrances, space between buildings, unit height, openings, access, parking, mechanical equipment, utility meters/addressing, home occupations, airport compatibility, and owner occupancy (§15-2754). Meanwhile, Bemidji, Minnesota, permits “tiny house subdivisions” as planned unit developments, subject to standards addressing location, density, ownership structure, structural independence, lot size, setbacks, open space, design review, and utilities (§1101.F).

## Conclusions

The aging of the U.S. population, the continued growth in the percentage of single-person households, and the demand for a wider range of housing choices in communities across the country is fueling interest in new forms of residential development, including tiny houses. While many cities and counties can accommodate very small, site-built homes under their existing building, subdivision, and zoning codes, many others have development regulations that make factory-built or chassis-mounted tiny houses impractical or impossible to site and occupy. Once a city or county has identified a desire to make space for tiny houses, it’s important to remove unintentional regulatory barriers, identify suitable locations, and consider adopting use-specific standards for tiny-house living.

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## FURTHER READING

### 1. Published by the American Planning Association

Elliott, Donald L., and Peter Sullivan. 2015. “Tiny Houses and the Not-So-Tiny Questions They Raise.” *Zoning Practice*, November. Available at [planning.org/zoningpractice](http://planning.org/zoningpractice).

Wyatt, Anne. 2016. “Tiny Houses: Niche or Noteworthy?” *Planning*, February. Available at [planning.org/planning/2016/feb/tinyhouses.htm](http://planning.org/planning/2016/feb/tinyhouses.htm).

### 2. Other Resources

Vail, Katherine. 2016. “Saving the American Dream: The Legalization of the Tiny House Movement.” *University of Louisville Law Review*, 54: 354–379. Available at [tinyurl.com/nyxfqbj](http://tinyurl.com/nyxfqbj).

Watson, Jayna. 2017. “Do Tiny Houses Fit in Your Community?” *Western Planner*, February. Available at [tinyurl.com/m8hd2yx](http://tinyurl.com/m8hd2yx).