

County planners give green light to 'granny units'

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SANTA CRUZ — More than 11,000 granny units could be built in rural areas under sweeping changes approved by the county Planning Commission Wednesday.

The changes, which would cut through layers of red tape, must be approved by the Board of Supervisors and the Coastal Commission.

"They're long overdue," said Commissioner Renee Shepherd, who represents the San Lorenzo Valley area. The housing is desperately needed, Shepherd said, and will help people stay in their houses as they get older, as well as those whose children are moving back home. "This makes sense."

Housing planners point to the minuscule number of granny units applied for since the "affordable second units" were approved by the county 10 years ago: barely a dozen. During that time, county planners estimate that perhaps 3,000 units were built without permits.

Relaxing the rules, they hope, will encourage more people to build the units legally.

Granny units could go a long way to solving the county's shortage of affordable housing, planners say. They also hope the numbers will appease state housing officials who are upset over the county's refusal to take what they say is our fair share of growth.

The county's Housing Advisory Commission has pushed for two years to liberalize the regulations.

"(We) realize that these secondary units are viewed by county government as a very mixed blessing," said Stephen Mills, chairman of the housing commission, in a previous letter to the Board of Supervisors. "On one hand, they provide affordable shelter to thousands of residents who would otherwise be literally out in the street. ... On the other hand, because they have not been built with permits, these units are uninspected, may be substandard, and in some instances, can be dangerous to their occupants."

Planning commissioners narrowly approved the revised ordinance, with commissioners Dale Skillicorn and James Hamlin opposing it.

Hamlin argued that potential builders of the units would be put off by a provision that requires tenants to be screened by the county Housing Authority to ensure they're eligible.

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"It interferes with free enterprise," he said. As someone who's been a landlord, he said, "I don't want anybody helping me to select the tenant."

Under the revised ordinance, occupants of the granny units would have to fit one of three categories:

- Seniors;
- Low-income households of one or two people;
- Family members of the property owners.

Other approved changes:

- Scrapped complicated "rural density matrix" rules in determining which rural lots can add the units.

As long as the proposed unit meets health and safety codes and has adequate water and sewer systems, a unit could be built on any legal rural residential parcel.

- Recommended flexibility in how close buildings could be placed to property lines, approving five feet to the side, and eight to 10 feet from the rear. The commission rejected a suggestion by housing commissioner John Swift to allow buildings on the property line. If built properly, Swift said, they can offer more privacy than the proposed 5-foot setbacks.

- Suggested allowing rural units to be larger than the current 640-square-foot limit. The size limit would be maintained in areas in the county's urban areas.

- Required the owner of the property to live on the premises, either in the main house or the granny unit.

- Limited the number that can be built in Live Oak to five units per year.

Live Oak resident George Ackley had asked the commission to exempt Live Oak from the ordinance entirely. The area is too crowded already, she said, and has "horrendous" parking problems, failing sewers and failing streets.