



## Legislation Text

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**File #:** 17-101, **Version:** 1

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**TITLE:**

Discussion of Tiny Homes

**PURPOSE:** The purpose of this worksession is for the Board to discuss Tiny Homes and to consider whether and how this type of dwelling may offer new housing options for Carrboro.

**DEPARTMENT:** Planning

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**INFORMATION:** Interest in smaller homes began a resurgence in the late 1990s after the publication of Sarah Susanka's book *The Not So Big House*, which emphasized the importance of quality spaces rather than simply size. Soon after Jay Shafer developed Tumbleweed Homes, with designs for a variety of even smaller dwellings, constructed with historic features and often placed on axles for travel. The examples range from standalone single-family homes as primary or accessory dwellings or in clusters or courts, similar to the bungalow courts in the early twentieth century, and have included buildings on permanent foundations, or units constructed to meet recreational vehicle (RV) requirements. Excitement has been growing for years; ramped up even more with the launch of the Tiny House Expedition's YouTube posting of Living Tiny Legally, Parts I and II (available at <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCmpHOZ6GqCvcWyPX3svgz-g>) and the recent approval of a Tiny House appendix for inclusion in the 2018 International Residential Code (IRC). An infographic prepared by thetinylife.com summarizes information about housing patterns and the interests in tiny houses. See *Attachment A* or <http://thetinylife.com/tag/infographic/>.

Residential building requirements and zoning ordinances are not fully in sync with tiny homes. The (IRC) forms the basis for the State of North Carolina's Residential Building Code and that code is updated every six years. Simply stated, building codes are designed to support permanent, fixed occupancy, and impermanent residences are typically classified as vehicles, rather than dwelling units. Permanent structures are subject to standards relating to construction methods and dimensions that have been developed over decades to provide minimum standards for safety and reliability of systems and materials. Small size is not a significant obstacle as the minimum room size requirements can allow permanent buildings of around 400 square feet. While stick built, mobile, and manufactured homes have different standards, the emphasis on safety of occupants as permanent residents of these dwellings remains. Safety standards have been developed for RVs and apply to their use as motor vehicles first and foremost, as well as the electrical voltage, fuel systems, fire/smoke alarms and egress, and plumbing aspects of their use as temporary residences. Relevant resources attached that seek to shed some additional light on these points include the November 2015 issue of Zoning Practice, *Practice Tiny Homes*, and two October 21, 2015 memos from the North Carolina Department of Insurance Re: Guidelines for Tiny Homes in North Carolina and Re: Recreational Park Trailers (Park Models)/Permanent Dwellings (*Attachments B and C*). The IRC Tiny House Appendix and reasons for including in the 2018 update and the Recreational Vehicle Industry Associations Standards are also attached (*Attachments D and E*).

Carrboro's land use regulations do not present significant obstacles to tiny homes that meet site-built building code, modular, or manufactured home standards. An interest in diversity of housing options is long-standing and the recognition that smaller homes might offer more affordable options is the basis for the size-limited housing requirements found in Section 15-188, though the maximum area for the smallest home required under this provision is 1,100 square feet.

The Town's provision for single-room occupancy units also authorizes smaller dwelling units - these can measure only 450 square feet. The allocation of a full dwelling unit, from the perspective of residential density, to a stand-alone residence of such a small size, when it is intended as the primary use of a lot, has been questioned by some. Dwelling units of up to 750 square feet are allowed on many residential lots where the lot size is 50 percent larger than the zoning district's required minimum. Alternative approaches could involve a density bonus for really small homes, or a sliding scale for smaller homes and lots that exceed the minimum, but don't reach the current required threshold of 50 percent larger in order to qualify for additional dwelling units. The long-term effects of increasing the amount/number of residential units permitted - measured tangibly and intangibly in relation to build-out and achieving community interests - will be important considerations to making changes. An MPA student intern will be joining the staff this summer to assist with Planning and Fire Department projects. The Planning project we've identified is to analyze density options/buildout of principal and primarily accessory "small to tiny (sliding scale of density based on lot size)" homes, and also evaluate/explore the use of overlay zones to incentivize redevelopment/mixed use and affordable housing.

Changes to allow tiny houses on wheels will involve slightly different approaches and considerations. Since these units are not considered permanent residential structures, ordinance amendments would look to allow temporary occupancy - such as RV Parks, cottage neighborhoods and related. Examples of some approaches are attached including: Coconino County Arizona's Draft Permitting Regulations for Tiny Houses, Proclamation and Ordinance for Tiny Houses in Spur, Texas, Backyard Cottage provisions from Fresno, California, and Rockledge, Florida's Pocket Neighborhood Provisions (*Attachments F-I*). An example a bit closer to home is found in Orange County's recent approval of its Home Park conditional zoning district. See the attached agenda materials from February 13, 2017 for more information (*Attachment J*).

For several years community members have been wondering, "Can tiny homes, including tiny homes on wheels, provide more affordable options?" While the total cost of constructing a tiny home may be less than a larger home, the cost per square foot ranges based on the selected finishes and with a smaller total size over which to spread the more expensive building components (e.g. kitchens, baths), is almost always much higher than larger homes. Due to their small size, however, the total cost of such units is said to normally fall below \$100,000 (and reportedly often well below this threshold). The interest in using tiny homes on wheels for this purpose is especially high. An article on San Jose, California's efforts to address the needs of its homeless population with tiny homes is attached (*Attachment K*).

This work session provides an opportunity for Board members to become familiar with tiny homes, the current state of regulations, and the framework for some changes local governments around the United States are considering. The worksession seeks to provide a time and place for the Board to explore how and whether this approach would be beneficial to advancing the town's interest of providing for a diversity of housing options, and particularly towards the provision of affordable housing.

Resource materials are attached as noted above.

**FISCAL & STAFF IMPACT:** There are no fiscal impacts relating to the discussion, there may be fiscal and/or staff impacts depending on the Board's direction.

**RECOMMENDATION:** Staff recommends that the Board discuss the topic and direct staff if followup actions are of interest.