



City and Borough of Sitka

100 Lincoln Street • Sitka, Alaska 99835

Coast Guard City, USA

Planning and Community Development Department

AGENDA ITEM

Case No: ZA 19-06
Proposal: Amend Titles 6, 19, and 22 to define Tiny Houses and Tiny Houses on Chassis and allow them in Mobile/Manufactured Home Parks
Applicant: Staff
Owner: various
Location: various
Legal: NA
Zone: Primarily, but not limited to, R-2MHP, C-2, and WD

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Amendments to three sections of the Sitka General Code are proposed. The policy intent of the combined changes is to promote the use of tiny houses as an affordable housing option.

KEY POINTS AND CONCERNS

- Defines tiny houses and relaxes certain building code requirements for tiny houses.
- Allows tiny houses on chassis¹ to be placed in mobile/manufactured home parks
- Allows tiny houses on permanent foundations to be constructed in mobile/manufactured home parks
- Changes height maximum in mobile/manufactured home parks from 14' to 16'
- The biggest impact of these proposed changes will be in the R-2MHP, C-2, and WD zoning districts. But tiny houses can be built in any zoning district allowing single family dwellings. Tiny houses on chassis may be placed in any zoning district allowing manufactured homes.

BACKGROUND

Tiny houses have generated interest locally and nationally as an affordable housing option. However, real and perceived zoning and building code barriers have limited widespread use.

The proposed ordinance changes bullet-pointed in the previous section work together to alleviate some of these barriers.

¹ A tiny house on chassis includes tiny houses on wheels, or on a supporting structure with wheels removed, and the chassis remains.

The Building Official administers both the Building Code, adopted in Title 19, and the requirements for mobile/manufactured home parks in Title 6 Chapter 6.12. Planning staff has worked closely with Pat Swedeen, Building Official, in preparing these recommended code changes.

ANALYSIS

Tiny houses are obviously not a good housing fit for everyone, no one housing option is. But there is a need for a housing option for young adults who are starting their careers, who may be new in Sitka with few household goods, who may have come here for a summer job or an internship, and would like to stay. Often they are hindered in finding a toehold in the community by the cost of year-round housing. It is this group, or demographic, that we expect is the primary market for tiny houses.

Title 19

The starting point is to define a “tiny house.” The 2018 International Building Code Appendix Q provides a definition: *a dwelling that is 400 square feet or less in floor area excluding lofts*. Appendix Q also recognizes lofts, but most importantly, relaxes code requirements for loft access, allowing steep stairs or ladders as a means of loft access. But importantly, those relaxed code requirements will no longer apply if the structure exceeds 400 square feet, such as if an addition is constructed.

Possible safety issues: the Building Codes are generally strict and unyielding when it comes to stairways. Stairway and ladder falls can be serious. By allowing steeper stairways and ladders, the code is anticipating that tiny house occupants who choose to use a loft have the physical capacity to use the stairs or ladders safely. This is consistent with staff’s opinion that the primary market for tiny homes will be younger adults. Although it is beyond the scope of this report, if this proposal is enacted we would suggest as a practical safety matter that staff actively discourage those with limited physical capacity from using a ladder as a means of access to a sleeping loft.

Title 6

The most significant changes to community housing policy are here. The proposed changes:

- Create for tiny houses on chassis, with or without wheels, a legal status provided they are built to the International Residential Code and inspected by the Building Official prior to use. This requirement has been drafted to hopefully encourage local construction of these units, by requiring building permits and inspections during construction. (The draft ordinance does provide a path for units constructed outside Sitka to be used here.)
- Allow tiny houses on chassis to be placed in mobile/manufactured home parks.

- Allow tiny houses to be built on permanent foundations in mobile/manufactured home parks. This opens the door, hypothetically, to the creation of tiny house park(s). Staff believes this proposed code section also provides a path for rehabilitation of dilapidated housing stock in mobile/manufactured home parks.

In the interest of promoting durable affordable housing, the amendments also specify certain prohibited building materials in the construction of tiny houses. These requirements are based on local experience that certain materials and methods normally allowed by code, such as oriented strand board and flat roofs, although cheaper in the short run, simply don't perform well over the long term in our region's climate.

During informal conversations with a few park owners, there was strong support for the proposed code amendments.

Title 22

The proposed changes to the Zoning Code Title 22 parallel and complement those in Title 6 Chapter 6.12. The proposed amendments add parallel definitions of tiny houses and tiny houses on chassis and amend zoning districts as needed to accommodate the changes described under Title 6.

RECOMMENDATION

The Planning Department recommends that the Planning Commission approve the proposed ordinance changes.

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ATTACHMENTS

- Attachment A: Assembly Action Plan²
- Attachment B: 2018 International Building Code Appendix Q
- Attachment C: Proposed ordinance changes to Sitka General Code 6.12
- Attachment D: Proposed ordinance changes to SGC Title 19
- Attachment E: Proposed ordinance changes to SGC Title 22

RECOMMENDED MOTION

I move to approve the proposed ordinance changes in principal, recognizing that final housekeeping edits and formatting changes may be made during formal ordinance preparation.

OR

I move to request staff to further develop the proposed ordinances, incorporating suggestions and addressing concerns raised during tonight's deliberations.

² The Action Plan was developed, but not formally approved, by the Assembly