



Second Unit Standards

21 Elements

Summary

Secondary units are small, independent homes located on the same lot as a primary, larger dwelling unit. Secondary dwelling units are also known as accessory, in-law, converted garages or garden units. Second units can be a source of affordable housing and can help increase density without significantly altering neighborhood character.

Many jurisdictions have specific policies pertaining to secondary units. 21 Elements emailed a survey on second unit standards to the jurisdictions in San Mateo County and compiled the results from the 13 respondents in the attached spreadsheet. The zoning standards from six additional jurisdictions were also included.

Jurisdictions limit secondary unit sizes to an average maximum of 670 square feet, and generally have no minimum size. Minimum lot requirements necessary to accommodate a secondary unit range widely from 5,000 square feet to an acre (43,560 square feet), with an average of 6,750 square feet. Often, local zoning requirements apply to secondary units in regards to height and setbacks; but parking requirements tend to be more lenient.

According to the survey, an average of 75% of lots in a jurisdiction can legally accommodate a secondary unit, although each jurisdiction is only producing a median of 2.5 secondary units annually.

Many jurisdictions are taking steps to encourage the development of more secondary units, including reducing minimum lot size and parking requirements, or conducting research and outreach. Several jurisdictions have also implemented amnesty programs for existing illegal secondary units, and more are considering such a program.

A brief summary of some of the key findings follows; please see complete spreadsheet for more details.

Secondary Dwelling Unit Standards —Summary		
Topic/Question		Summary
Unit Size range	<i>Maximum</i>	Median: 670 sq. ft. range: 640 sf - 1000 sf;
	<i>Minimum</i>	Mostly none
Max Building Height:		Median: 20.5 ft, mostly according to local zoning
Two-Bedroom Units		Generally are permitted
Owner-Occupancy: Is there an owner-occupancy requirement for one of the units?		Generally yes
Minimum Parcel Size		Median: 6,750 sq. ft range: 5,000 sq. ft. to one acre (43,560 sq. ft.)
Parking Requirements		1-2
Locational Limitations: Do you have proximity or density limits for second units		Generally no
Incentives: Are you taking other steps to encourage second units?		Seven jurisdictions are
Amnesty Program for Illegal Units		Four jurisdictions already have one, six are interested to learn more