

Grandma, what big square feet you have!

IF YOUR COMMUNITY'S zoning keeps people from carving little apartments out of existing homes, it doesn't just add to some abstract housing shortage. It also oppresses Grandma — and lots of other would-be renters.

The terms “granny flat” and “in-law apartment” sound like quaint stereotypes in 2016. But they underscore how real people benefit when housing is easy to create, and get hurt when it isn't.

As of Sunday, new rules in Cambridge will make it far easier for owners of one- and two-family homes to convert basements into the add-on apartments that planning nerds call “accessory dwelling units.” These units will still re-

quire special permits, but not zoning variances, which are much harder to obtain.

The change, approved in January by the City Council, began with a citizen petition. “With a stroke of a pen,” says Patrick Barrett, the Cambridge lawyer and property investor who led the effort, “we created 5 million square feet [of usable space] and potentially 1,200 units. And it didn't require a crane.”

Best of all, the looser rules attracted almost no controversy — not even in Cambridge, where debates over zoning lead to profound soul-searching, and where an earnest progressivism provides cover for NIMBYs.

Meanwhile, other communities are

catching on. In Lexington, whose Town Meeting recently lifted a number of restrictions on accessory apartments, supporters have said that debt-ridden recent college grads would otherwise be priced out of town. In Newton, where Mayor Setti Warren wants to make in-law apartments allowable by right on far more residential lots, the argument focuses on keeping elderly citizens in the city. Seniors could move into accessory units in the houses of younger relatives, or stay in their own homes but defray expenses by taking on renters for small portions of them.

The population is aging. Average household size is shrinking. Yet the

RAMOS, Page K5

Continued from Page K1

housing stock is increasingly out of synch with these changing demographics. Even Boston, where multifamily housing is common, treats accessory units as illegal, according to a spokeswoman at the city's Inspectional Services Department.

Land-use rules in Massachusetts are shot through with control-freakery — an assumption that if something questionable is allowed, it'll drag down a community. When Amy Dain, now at UMass Boston, examined the zoning rules of 187 Eastern Massachusetts municipalities a decade ago, she found that 57 percent technically made some provision for accessory apartments. But many had regulations so onerous that few homeowners bothered.

Some major North American cities are more willing to accept in-law apartments, in the spirit of can-do individualism. In Portland, Ore., supporters of the tiny-house movement have also taken on the cause of reconfiguring single-family homes.

Eli Spevak, a cofounder of the website AccessoryDwellings.org, says there's been enough “Internet porn on tiny housing” to expose a broader interest in compact living arrangements. Portland's Pedalpalooza festival has even featured organized bike tours of accessory apartments. It turns out that, while 100-square-foot homes may be a little, er, dogmatic for most people, small accessory units are often more palatable. “The reality is that people say, ‘Maybe 800 square feet is good for me,’” Spevak says.

For advocates of in-law apartments, Vancouver's rules are the ideal: light regulation of size

and placement, no requirement that the property owner live on site, no off-street parking requirements. (In the future, Grandma will just take an Uber.) The Canadian city's rules reflect a pragmatism that often eludes us in Massachusetts. Preserving open space means being creative about reusing buildings and land that have already been developed.

A bill before the Legislature would give towns an easier method of allowing in-law apartments in designated districts. Alas, a more sweeping proposal last year to allow such apartments in single-family areas statewide failed on Beacon Hill. Critics fretted that the measure would undercut the powers of local government — as if that were always a terrible thing.

Because accessory units are useful to lots of families, they already exist in lots of places where they're forbidden. Newton officials estimate the city may have up to 1,000 illegal accessory apartments. Lots of buildings in Cambridge have illegal units too. Why not bring them out in the open — and up to code? “I'm not going to fight human nature,” Barrett says. “I think its better to make [an apartment] safe and make it legal.”

Accessory apartments aren't some fad that arose last week at a new-urbanism conference. They're part of a long tradition of modest apartments and multigenerational homes that predate the post-World War II boom in single-family suburban homes. And if “granny flats” — or “aunt haunts” or “nephew nooks” or even “total stranger studios” — provide suitable, cost-efficient quarters for more people, we need a lot more of them.

Dante Ramos can be reached at dante.ramos@globe.com. Follow him on Facebook: [facebook.com/danteramos](https://www.facebook.com/danteramos) or on Twitter: [@danteramos](https://twitter.com/danteramos).