

GREEN TECH THE SERIES COLUMN FOR OCTOBER 26, 2016  
HEADLINE: ARE TINY HOMES THE “REAL” ANSWER?

It seems not a week goes by that I don't have a reader ask about some aspect of living in a smaller home. The “Tiny Home” evolution, both in the media and with the sustainable home buyer, has created a lot of interest. In my close to 40 years around homes, whether home building, doing inspections or watching the development of “green” products, nothing has evolved as quickly, to my mind.

Municipalities have taken notice. There is a real concern over how and where these homes will be located, never mind the evaluation of the assembly and operational aspect like plumbing and electrical, they operate outside the box at present. I spoke to one local building official who admitted it's a subject to which they have no answer and have no provincial direction. Municipalities have a real issue, referred to as the “trailer park stigma,” which evolved back in the 60-70's and quietly settled as most municipalities simply blocked any development of these “projects” as one council member said to me, off the record. Almost every other municipal official I spoke to simply shook their head and declined comment.

The provincial government is aware of the lack of affordable urban housing in Ontario. In 2012, they made extensive changes to the planning act that required municipalities to allow secondary units within the actual residence and also detached living accommodations to be built on the same lot. The City of Ottawa is making a stab at allowing a tiny home of kind in something they are calling a “Coach House.” They will be allowed on a city lot, provided they don't exceed 860 square feet or 40% of the lot's size, whichever comes first. I give Ottawa full marks; they are the first city in the province to enact this planning approval.

There are conditions within this Coach House program. The coach home can never be severed from the original lot. The new home must be designed and located so as to not affect the privacy, shadowing or overlook a neighboring residence. They must be hooked to municipal services; there is a height limitation and it must be a permanent structure, not built on a trailer frame. This last condition is going to receive some considerable negativity from the tiny home movement.

So where does this step ahead by Ottawa, which is likely to be followed by other cities and towns, leave the tiny house buyer? Right now in Ontario, it is illegal to live full time in an RV or mobile/trailer-framed tiny home. Unless this four season residence is located in a legal trailer park or RV camp that is registered for year round occupancy and there are very few of those in Ontario. It

all comes down to water and sewage services and some manner of evaluation for the municipal tax base. Right now, the majority of municipal codes require a residential space of no less than 800 square feet and some regions actually require more square footage. I only know of two regions right now where this sizing is lower, that is Highlands East at 500 square feet and Edwardsburg/Cardinal at 400 square feet. In both cases, when I researched these municipalities, the same standards for a foundation assembled home with correct services are required. I have heard or was advised during research for this column that there is some amount of discussion in most council chambers throughout Ontario on this very subject.

While all the effort on behalf of the tiny home community certainly has merit and I, for one, have long supported smaller homes, I stress the term smaller homes. Living in 200 square feet may suit a single person or possibly/maybe a well-adjusted couple, but living in such tight quarters, as the majority of these tiny homes profess, is questionable over the long term in my opinion. I also question this from a “personal sanity” view point. Let’s take the case of Carrie and Shane Caverly in Arizona. They had a featured TV show on their building and living in a tiny home. They tried it for 18 months and decided it was too small and now reside in an apartment. On the web, there are numerous builders of tiny homes. When I called a couple of these builders, not one lived in the product they sold.

The other argument from the tiny home community is how they are reducing their footprint, using compost toilets, solar panels for electricity and recycling or reduced water consumption. In the case of compost toilets and water storage, I can speak with some experience, as I have lived with both in the past and they are a considerable amount of work to maintain. I could see how the glamour would wear off here really quickly.

The other factor was one that I had not given much thought to, private space or the ability to close off those around you when you simply need some time alone. Simply put, cramped quarters take their toll on mental health. One British study shows a profound effect on children, underachievement at school, health issues and depression. Simple social interaction, such as allowing your child to have a friend on a “sleep-over,” is difficult at best. Over 25% of children in London suffer from overcrowding and its personal effects.

One article I read said it very clearly, “fad housing often crumbles into slum living for the poorest families.....when was the last time a trailer park was a coveted address?” That said, I support smaller homes in a controlled footprint environment where green space is considered, minimum sizes are governed and

proper services are provided. I will applaud the first municipality who approves a smaller home development where lots are reasonably sized and priced, municipal or communal services are installed and assembly standards are clearly stated to ensure any small home retains its value. We have the technology and we certainly have the tiny home interest, now it's up to a municipality who can lead the pack, not unlike Ottawa has done.

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