

GREEN TECH THE SERIES COLUMN FOR FEBRUARY 17, 2016  
HEADLINE: ARE SMALL HOMES THE FUTURE?

Two weeks ago, a part of my column was on tiny homes and this drew an unusually large number of comments. With that in mind, I felt that some background and maybe a bit of information on the mixed standards with respect to acceptable home sizing throughout this province was worth knowing.

To start, while the tiny home evolution is grabbing the media of late, in fact the idea has been around for some time. Toronto put their “foot in the water” back in 2006, but quickly backed away, due to infrastructure issues mostly. “Laneway homes” in Vancouver, have been approved, however, subject to the usual municipal regulations, since 2009. Vancouver has a complete package on how to build, the permit process and ideas from completed laneway homes.

What is a laneway home? According to the City of Vancouver, it is “a smaller detached home located where the garage would normally go on a single family lot.” The city goes on to say, “Laneway Homes contribute to the overall sustainability of the city. They give people more opportunities to live close to where they work, shop and play, and they make the city’s urban lanes more green liveable and safe.....they also contribute to the amount of affordable rental housing in the city,” These homes must be no less than 500 sq. ft. in the footprint of the home, on a lot that is 32 feet or wider and in a single family zone.

Here at home, make that Ottawa to be precise, they are in the final stages of releasing a proposal to permit what they are calling “Coach Homes.” Under 2011 Ontario regulation, all municipalities have to come up with a way to integrate this type of housing into their urban planning, however, there is no deadline for them to do so. Their plan is somewhat different and they have spelled out specific regulations.

In Toronto, there was a huge uproar over privacy with another home on a lot, hence Ottawa proposed regulations state that the Coach House must be designed and located so the neighbouring homes are not affected. They are going to allow them on a lot, size permitting, that presently has a single family home, a semi or a linked home. They are stopping at urban homes and no rural applications will be accepted due to private water and septic standards. Access for emergency vehicles will also be a consideration when permits are approved. With lots sizes in the newer subdivisions, this will all but eliminate this idea, however, on older sections of the city where lots are larger, this will be possible. This was also one of

the hopes when Vancouver approved Laneway Homes. Most of the development was closer to the city core, hence they hope for greater use of public transit. The Coach House can never be severed from the original lot, cannot increase the overall lot coverage by more than 40% and they are limited to a maximum of 1022 sq. ft. The expected base size is 500 sq. ft., which is roughly the size of a two car garage. This is still at the proposal stage and public consultation will continue with hopes of being in front of city council by sometime in May. Kingston created an area by area map of potential homes inside the city where a secondary suite within a home are permitted, provided they meet municipal standards. This move by Ottawa, I suspect, will be closely watched by all major municipalities as they move ahead with similar plans.

This brings me to the sizing issue of smaller homes. As of right now, the Ontario regulations are: studio homes, 269 sq. ft.; one bedroom, 344 sq. ft.; two bedroom at 441 sq. ft. These are only guidelines and each municipality can set their own sizes. The Ottawa plan is for 500 sq. ft. However, in Edwinstown-Cardinal Township it is 400 sq. ft. as a minimum size of a home. Yet another township, Algonquin Highlands, has a minimum of 796 sq. ft. and I am aware of others at over 1000 sq. ft. for minimum footprint for a new home.

This brings us back to the tiny home evolution. They are usually built on a trailer frame and some are well under the footprint sizes discussed here. All of these proposed coach homes must be tied to municipal services. In Toronto, the cost is totally borne by the existing homeowner and, in one case, it was going to be well into the five figures. Most utilize a ladder to access the upper sleeping area and it's doubtful that the building code would permit this for a permanent home; stairs would be required, as one example of some code issues that surely will crop up.

The smaller home, call it what you will, is here to stay. We are going to have to blend ideas and locations into a workable process that can be clear and simple for the average homeowner to understand. Helping those who wish to add a coach home or utilize a tiny home on their existing property is a step forward. Utilizing the larger lots usually found in the older sections of most cities makes good sense. We have enough high rises in my opinion, let's find a workable option for greater density without adding huge costs to the already aged infrastructure that most cities are now facing.

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