



Detached Accessory Dwellings are a 2024 Focus for the City What Are They? What Are Other Jurisdictions Doing?



Examples of accessory dwelling units

Falls Church City Current Code

The current City Code permits accessory dwelling units that are “in the same structure as, under the same ownership as, and subordinate to a one-family dwelling.” A special use permit is required and additional conditions must be met. Separate, detached structures with all the provisions of a dwelling unit for living, sleeping, eating, cooking and sanitation, are not currently permitted in Falls Church. A few detached “accessory structures” with most, but not all of these provisions, have received special permission from the zoning administrator.

The Pros and Cons of Detached Accessory Dwelling Units

Detached accessory dwelling units can provide additional housing options for families (seniors wishing to age in place, young graduates, caregivers). Smaller units may be more affordable than apartments in multi-family buildings and can provide additional income to property owners if long-term rentals are permitted.

However, they can also have visual and privacy impacts on neighboring properties and can change the character and charm of stable neighborhoods, affecting green space, stormwater runoffs, traffic, parking, sewage infrastructure and schools. Local governments may also incur additional oversight and enforcement costs, and citizens may be affected by increased property valuations and taxes.

Recent Updates to Codes in Neighboring Jurisdictions Permitting Detached Units

Generally, jurisdictions gained experience with internal dwelling units first, then graduated to permitting detached units in existing accessory structures, and finally moved to allow new detached units. In Fairfax and Montgomery County, the initial focus was on large lots. Two acres minimum is still the rule in Fairfax; Montgomery initially permitted them only on lots of one acre or more, moving most recently to one-half acre and smaller lots. Arlington focused its considerations in part on setbacks as the key factor affecting neighboring homes, whereas the City of Alexandria, with already dense buildings, sought to enhance the ability of homeowners to earn income via rentals.

Detached Accessory Dwelling Regulations in Nearby Jurisdictions

	Alexandria	Arlington County	Fairfax County	Montgomery County
Lot Coverage	1/3 of main dwelling footprint, or 350 - 500 sf based on zone.	560 - 650 sf	Lots must be 2+ acres. 1200 sf maximum size.	Lesser of 50% of main dwelling footprint, 10% of lot, or 1,200 sf.
Height	Lesser of main dwelling or 20 ft.	1.5 stories or 25 ft	Depends on principal dwelling height, up to 35 ft	20 - 35 ft, depending on zone.
Side and Rear Setbacks	1 ft; 3 ft if side has windows/door; 5 ft if height over 16 ft.	5 ft ; 10 ft for rear for corner lot.	>8.5 ft tall : 5 ft side and rear; >12 ft tall: Same as principal dwelling (15-50 ft for side)	Same as for principal dwelling.

Additional Constraints on Detached Accessory Dwelling Units (ADU)

	Alexandria	Arlington County	Fairfax County	Montgomery County	Falls Church City (internal ADU)
Same owner as house					Yes
Owner residency required*	Yes	Yes	Yes		Yes
Maximum occupancy	3 people	3 people			
Type of permit	Administrative	Zoning Permit Board of Zoning Appeals	Administrative	Building permit (same as house)	Special Use (SUP)
Term of permit			2 years initial, 5 years renewable		3 years renewable
No. of ADUs/property	1	1			1
Short-term ADU rental	Yes, but not exclusively	Yes	No	No	
Parking requirement	None	1-2 spaces, unless street parking is available	BZA decides	1, unless 1 mile from train station or street parking is available.	
Conversion of accessory structure to ADU	Yes	Yes			No
Detached ADUs approved	47 units from 2021-2023	20 units from 2009-2016	4 units since 2021		

*Property owner is required to reside in either the main house or the ADU.

