



ACCESSORY DWELLING UNITS (ADU)

Frequently Asked Questions

09.25.23

On December 15, 2020 the Board of County Commissioners adopted Ordinance 15952 to allow Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs) in rural unincorporated areas of Thurston County when density requirements for the underlying zoning district, regulations, and standards pertaining to ADUs can be met.

Below are commonly asked questions for ADUs in rural Thurston County. Due to various zoning district designations, development regulations, design standards, and scenarios types, not every scenario is described. Refer to the ADU information sheet for guidance on conducting research prior to submitting a Residential Building Permit Application to the Building Development Center (BDC).

What is an ADU?

An ADU is a small, separate, home built on the same lot as a single-family home. ADUs can be an addition to a single-family home, a conversion of a basement, an attached or detached garage or outbuilding, or a new detached structure. An ADU includes a kitchen, bedroom(s), and bathroom. ADUs are smaller in size than the main home on the lot.

Where are ADUs allowed?

ADUs are allowed in rural, unincorporated areas of Thurston County and within the Urban Growth Areas of Olympia, Lacey, Tumwater, and Grand Mound when all regulations and standards pertaining to ADUs can be met.

What are the first steps if I am considering an ADU?

Refer to the county's permitting website for guidance on conducting research and applying.

How many ADUs are allowed on a parcel?

Only one ADU shall be allowed on a residential parcel in conjunction with a single-family home. ADUs are not allowed on parcels with an existing mobile or manufactured home permitted as a Family Member Unit or any other accessory residential structure.

What ADU types count as a dwelling unit for the purpose of calculating density?

- Attached ADU – Does not count as a dwelling unit for the purpose of calculating density
- ADU Conversion – Does not count as a dwelling unit for the purpose of calculating density.
- Detached ADU – Counts as a dwelling unit for the purpose of calculating density and will need to meet the minimum lot size requirements under the applicable zoning district

Is a new detached ADU allowed on a parcel less than 10 acres in size in the RRR 1/5 zoning district?

The RRR 1/5 zoning district requires a minimum lot size of 10 acres. Therefore, the minimum density requirements would not be met to allow for an ADU.

Are critical areas deducted from the total acreage calculations when calculating density?

Some zoning districts require critical areas (not buffers) to be deducted from the total acreage calculations. For example: A 10-acre parcel in the RRR 1/5 zoning district with wetlands would not meet density requirements for a new detached ADU.

Are there size limitations for an ADU?

- Attached ADU – Shall not exceed 50% of the gross floor area of the primary residential structure
- Detached ADU – Floor area shall not exceed the maximum of 1500 square feet or 40% of the primary residential structure, whichever is less. An attached garage is not included in the gross floor area calculation.
- Conversion – There is no limit size for a conversion so long as the conversion remains within the footprint of the structure (no expansion).

What is the definition of Conversion?

The conversion of an existing structure within the footprint of a primary dwelling unit, or conversion within the footprint of a detached accessory structure, that has been in existence and legally permitted for at least one (1) year.

What structures qualify for a Conversion?

A legally established accessory structure or structure that has been in existence for at least one year. Structures built prior to 1971 would also qualify for a conversion.

Can I convert an existing ‘exempt’ building into an ADU?

Structures exempt from building permit requirements will need to follow the structures built prior to permit policy located online at [Permitting Structures Built without a Permit](#) to determine if the construction is adequate under the current codes. After the structure is final inspected, and the structure has been permitted for one year, an application to convert the structure into an ADU may be submitted for review.

Can I convert a structure not “legally permitted” to an ADU?

Structures built without a permit will need to follow the structures built prior to permit policy located online at [Permitting Structures Built without a Permit](#) to determine if the construction is adequate under the current codes. After the structure is final inspected, and the structure has been permitted for one year, an application to convert the structure into an ADU may be submitted for review.

Can I expand an existing accessory structure and apply for an ADU?

After a building permit for the addition has been issued, final inspection completed, and one year has passed, a Residential Building Permit application to convert the structure into an ADU may be submitted for review.

Can I convert my guest house into an ADU?

Yes, if all applicable regulations and standards pertaining to ADUs can be met.

Can a Family Member Unit (FMU) be converted to an ADU?

A FMU cannot be “converted” into an ADU because it’s already considered a residential structure. However, you can request to reclassify the FMU to ADU if all applicable regulations and standards pertaining to ADUs can be met.

Is a building permit required for an ADU?

Yes. A Residential Building Permit is required for all ADU types.

Can an ADU be sold separately from the primary residence?

An ADU is constructed on the same parcel as a primary residence therefore it may not be sold separately from the primary home.

Can an ADU be rented?

The property owner may rent the ADU to whomever they wish.

Does an ADU have a parking requirement?

Rural ADUs do not have a parking requirement. However, parking requirements do apply within the UGAs.



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Can I use my existing well and septic system for the ADU?

ADUs must be served by an approved drinking water supply and an approved septic system. Visit the county's permitting website to find the most recent information regarding on-site septic system and water system requirements for an ADU. You can also email EH_Tech@co.thurston.wa.us for assistance.

Can I use my existing driveway or install another driveway for the ADU?

Contact the Public Works Department, Development Review Division at DevRev_Tech@co.thurston.wa.us for information.

Why are rural ADU regulations different from city or UGA regulations?

Rural areas are subject to more limits on density than in cities and UGA's. Rural ADU regulations are designed to ensure protection of rural character.

Are ADUs subject to impact fees?

Yes. ADUs are subject to parks and transportation impact fees. ADUs are exempt from school impact fees. Impact fees are collected prior to issuance of a building permit.

How do I apply for an ADU?

After you have conducted your research and are ready to move forward, the following will need to be submitted to the BDC. The applications outline information that must accompany your application.

- Master Application
- Residential Building Permit Application
- On-site Sewage System Application, if proposing a new septic system
- Application fees

What if I still have questions?

Professional friendly staff in the BDC can assist you with your questions. Please visit thurstoncountybdc.com to get the most recent applications, permitting information, and hours of operation. You can also email questions to permit@co.thurston.wa.us.