West Coast cottage reforms lead to explosive rise in permits

By Nisma Gabobe, Sightline Institute, December 2, 2020

“A first step for many cities and states combatting exclusionary zoning, particularly on the West Coast, has been to liberalize rules for accessory dwelling units (ADUs) to spur housing production. From states as large as California to small suburbs like Tigard, Oregon, removing barriers — such as parking requirements and anti-renter owner-occupancy rules — unlocked demand for backyard cottages and mother-in-law suites.

“Permitting data show the reforms are working. In California, ADU permits jumped by 10,000 in a single year.

“In the summer of 2019, Seattle passed the best local ADU policy of any large US city. The city adopted new rules to allow two ADUs per lot, as well as eliminate parking and owner-occupancy mandates.

“A joint report from UC Berkeley’s Terner Center for Housing Innovation and Center for Community Innovation confirmed that restrictive regulations are not the only barrier to ADU production. Financing can be a formidable hurdle for lower-income homeowners who want to add an ADU to their property.

“To spread the benefits of ADUs equitably across people of all incomes, subsidy programs may be necessary. This is the next step for jurisdictions that have taken the necessary but insufficient first step of removing code barriers."

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