



The City of
Worcester

Permitting ADUs – How to get Started

January 10, 2026

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Presentation Overview

1 - What are ADUs

2 – Why are ADUs Important?

3 - Quick History of ADUs in Worcester & MA

4 - Proposed Zoning Changes for Worcester

5 – Fire Access & Building Code Requirements for ADUs

6 - Other Permitting Considerations for ADUs

7 - Q&A

Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs)

Proposed Zoning Definition:

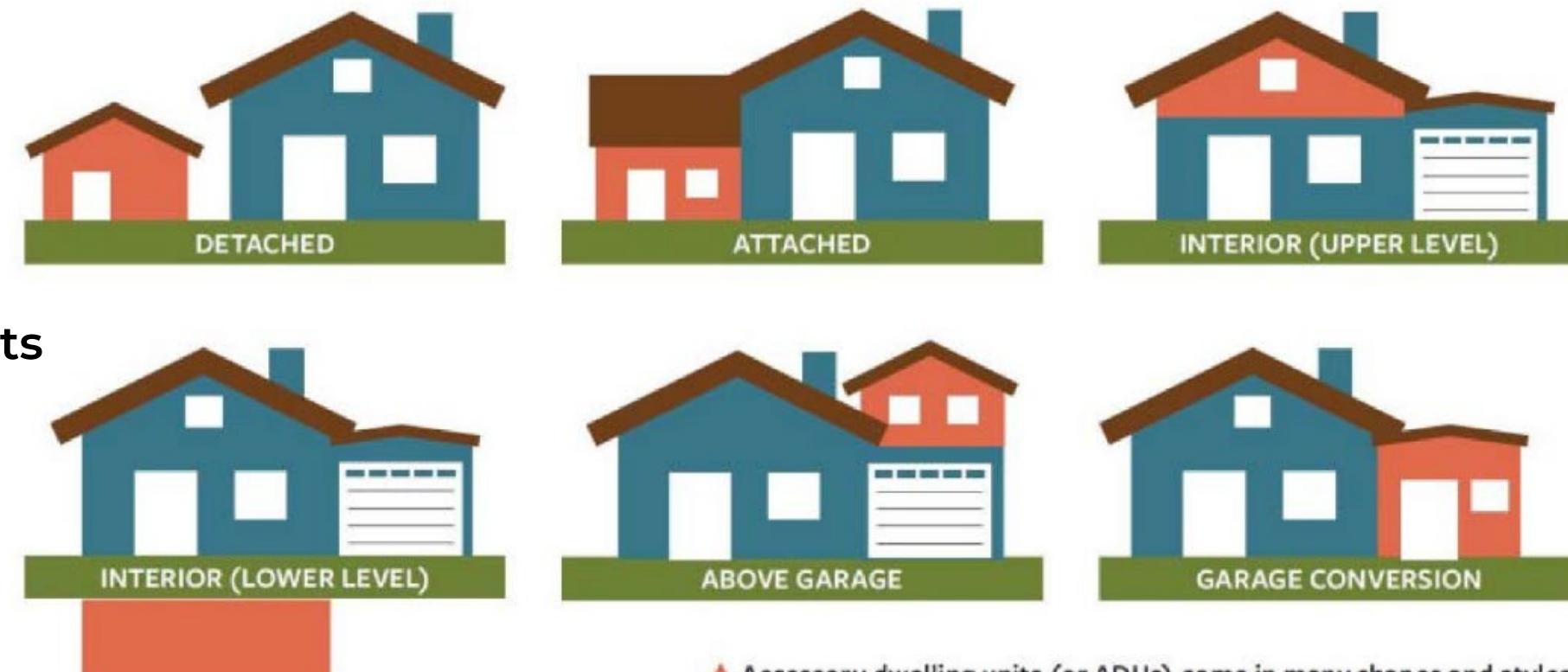
“A self-contained housing unit, inclusive of sleeping, cooking and sanitary facilities on the same lot as a Principal Dwelling, subject to otherwise applicable dimensional and parking requirements, that maintains a separate entrance, either directly from the outside or through an entry hall or corridor shared with the Principal Dwelling, sufficient to meet the requirements of the Building Code and Fire Code for safe egress.”

Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs)

A small residential dwelling unit located on the same lot as another dwelling unit.

Also known as...

- In-law apartments
- Accessory apartments
- Tiny houses
- Granny flats



▲ Accessory dwelling units (or ADUs) come in many shapes and styles.

What benefits do ADUs provide?

- Rental income can offset property maintenance and repairs
- Adds **smaller rental units** to the housing inventory to meet the needs of smaller households, adding diverse housing opportunities
- Lower-cost housing opportunity to help long-term residents stay in their neighborhoods
- More options for **older adults and persons with medical needs or disabilities** and their care givers enabling caregivers to live close by and folks can downsize to new accessible living while remaining in the community
- Compact growth efficiently uses of our existing land use, structures and infrastructure, which can be **more sustainable and economical** than building a single-family home on a new lot

History of ADUs in Worcester

January 9, 2024

Adopted ADU Zoning

Worcester City Council ordained a zoning amendment to enable ADUs by-right in all zoning districts with some dimensional limitations, requiring owner-occupancy of one of the units on the ADU lot.



August 6, 2024

Affordable Homes Act Enacted

[Chapter 150, Section 8 of the Acts of 2024](#) signed into law to allow ADUs up to 900 SF by-right in single-family zoning districts.

Expected to be adopted by City Council on January 13, 2026

Adopt new ADU Zoning Amendment

The City Administration has proposed a Zoning Amendment to reconcile Worcester's ADU regulations with the State's new laws and regulations.

Worcester's proposed amendment was favorably recommended by the Planning Board and Economic Development Committees with minor changes.



February 2, 2025

State Zoning Laws Changed

Local laws throughout Massachusetts that are inconsistent with the new state law and regulations (MGL Ch. 40A & [760 CMR 71](#)) became unenforceable. Communities must reconcile or develop new regulations consistent with the new state law.

ADUs by the numbers

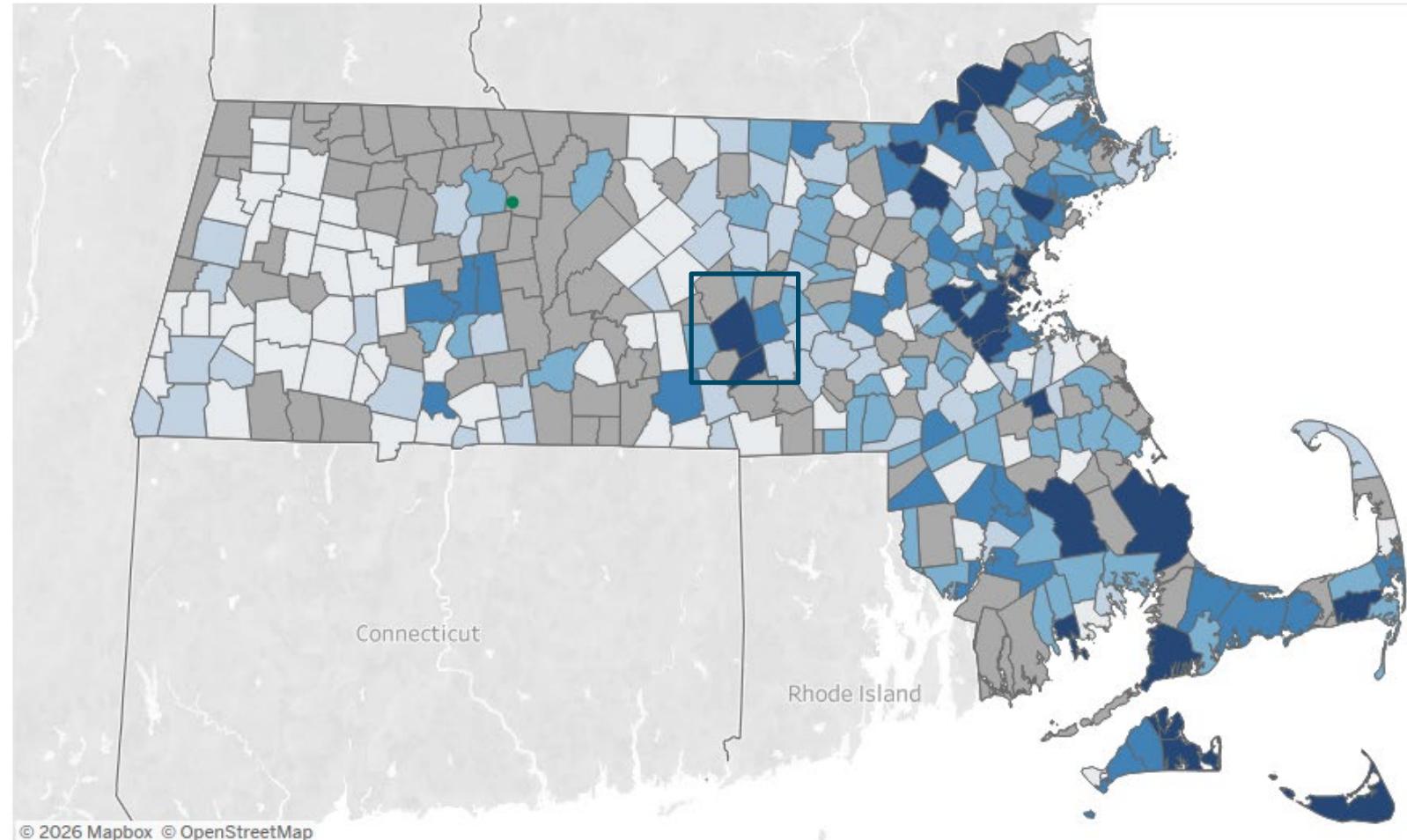
In Worcester (2 years)...

- 13 ADUs complete
- 43 pending/issued Building Permits
- 3 more ADUs with Special Permits
- 10 ADUs required Special Permits (90% approved)

Results of EOHL Accessory Dwelling Unit (ADU) Survey

Survey administered to municipal building inspectors July 9th-August 1st 2025.

Application and permitting numbers for the period January 1st-June 30th, 2025.



Display

Total ADU Applications

- No ADU applications
- 1 ADU application
- 2-4 ADU applications
- 5-9 ADU applications
- 10 or more ADU applications
- Did not respond to survey

Overall results:

549 approved Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs)

289 approved attached/interior ADUs

260 approved detached ADUs

843 applications for ADUs

457 applications for attached/interior ADUs

386 applications for detached ADUs



Examples of Existing & Proposed ADUs in Worcester



Proposed Zoning Requirements for ADUs

What kind of ADU can I have?

Attached? Yes! By-right use in all zones.
Detached? Yes! By-right use in all zones.
Interior? Yes! By-right use in all zones.

TABLE 4.1 - PERMITTED USES BY ZONING DISTRICTS –RESIDENTIAL USE

	RS	RS	RL	RG	BO	BO	BL	BG	BG	BG	BG	ML	ML	ML	MG	MG	MG	IP	IN	IN	A
19. Accessory Dwelling Unit (ADU)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y

Y – Yes; N – No;
SP – Special Permit

Use Provisions –
[Zoning Ordinance](#) Requirements – Table 4.1

By-right or “Y” (yes) in All Zoning Districts

Proposed Zoning Requirements for ADUs

How big can by ADU be?

≤ 900 SF by-right,
>900 SF requires a Special Permission (SP)

How many ADUs can I add?

1 ADU unit per lot; there must be 1 existing or proposed (in parallel with the ADU) “principal dwelling” unit; the ADU must stay on the same lot with the other dwelling.

How much Parking do I need?

None, but your ADU can't eliminate any existing *required* parking without a SP

Setbacks/height?

Not in the front-yard without a “reasonableness” determination from the building commissioner

Varies by existing use type and zoning district (can obtain a SP if they can't be met)

Definitive Site Plan Approval is NOT required

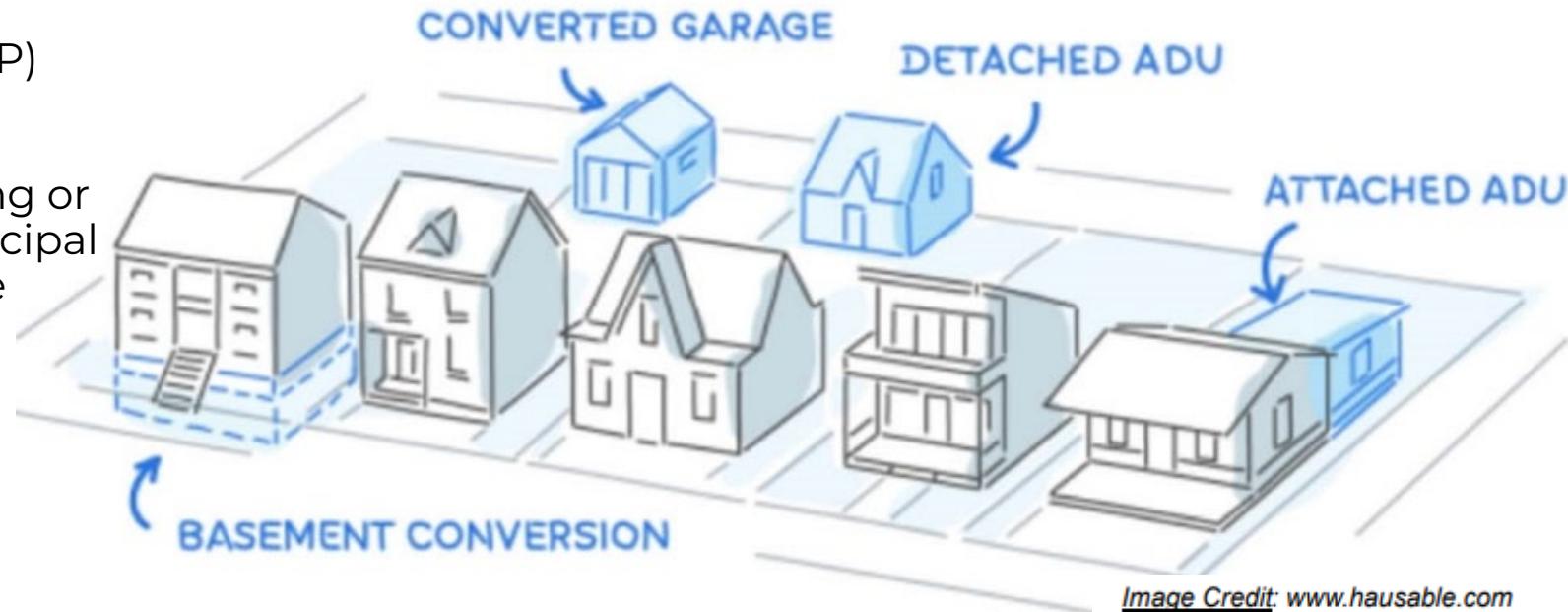


Image Credit: www.hausable.com

Attached & Detached ADUs – Must meet setbacks/height requirements for a primary structure OR a single-family structure OR and Accessory Structure (R zones) in the zoning district the ADU is in (whatever is less).

Interior ADUs – No physical expansion of the existing structure = generally no dimensional requirements

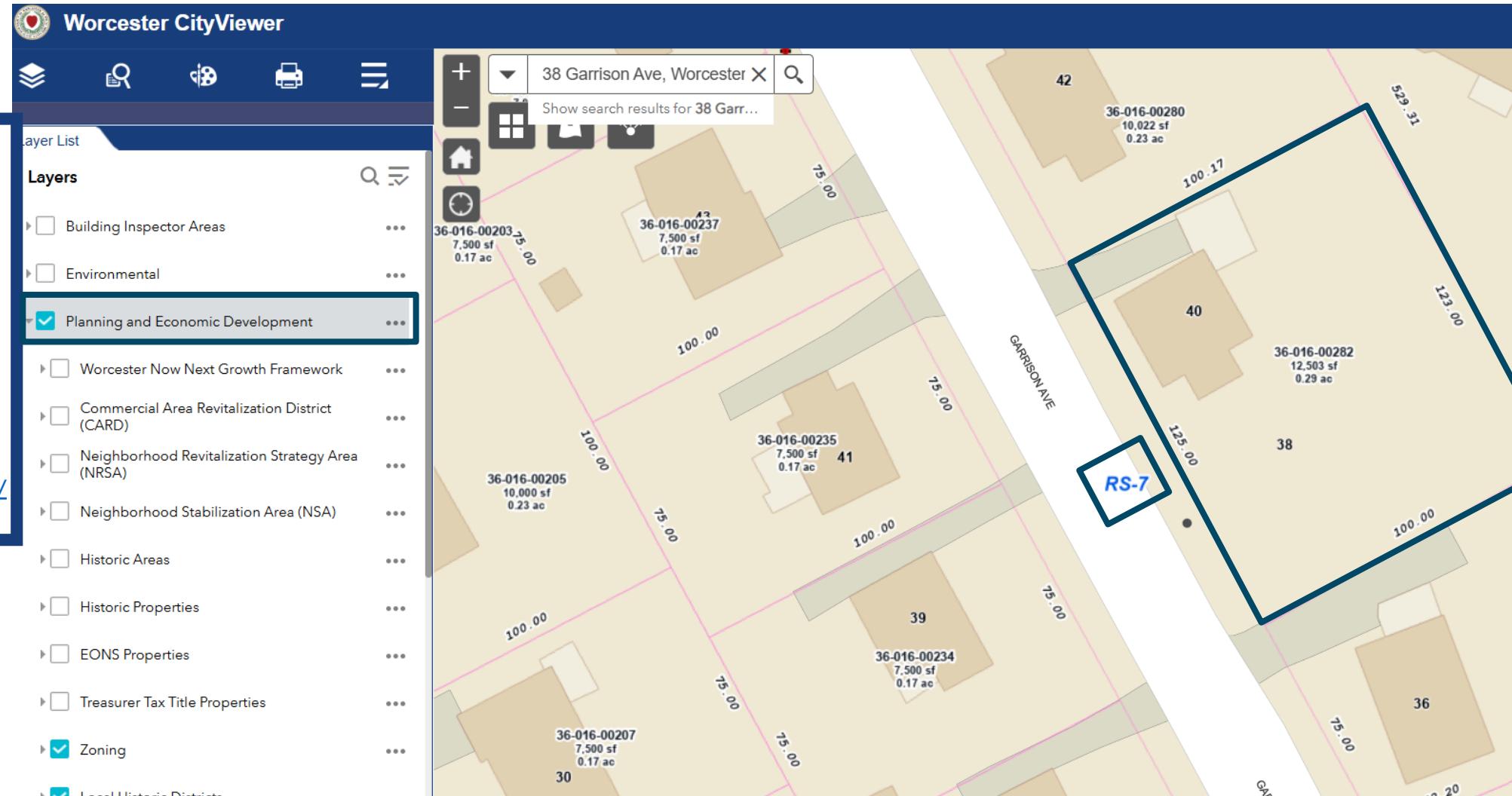
Proposed Zoning Requirements for ADUs

Do I identify my property's Zoning District?

City's Property Viewer: Worcester Atlas

Call:
508-799-1400 x 31440

E-mail:
Planning@WorcesterMa.gov



Proposed Zoning Requirements for ADUs

Setback & Height Requirements - [Zoning Ordinance](#) Table 4.2

Find the zoning district the ADU is in...

Whatever is most permissive of:

- Primary structure OR
- A single-family detached OR
- Accessory structures – applies only in residential (R) districts:
5' side-yard and 5' rear-yard setback

TABLE 4.2 -PERMITTED DIMENSIONS BY DISTRICT

DISTRICT	USE	LOT		YARD SETBACKS			HEIGHT	
		AREA (Minimum SF)	FRONTAGE (Minimum linear ft.)	FRONT	SIDE ¹	REAR		
				Minimum depth (linear ft.)			Maximum in stories ²	Maximum in ft.
RS-10	Single-family detached	10,000	80	25	10	20	2+	35
	Limited Residential Hospice House	40,000	80					
	Other permitted	10,000	80	25	20	50		
RS-7	Single-family detached	7,000	65	20	8	20	2+	35
	Limited Residential Hospice House	30,000	65	25	10	20		
	Other permitted	7,000	65	25	20	50		
RL-7	Single-family detached	7,000	65	20	8	20	2+	35
	Single-family semi-detached	4,000 per du	35 per du					
	Single-family, attached	3,000 per du	25 per du					
	Two-family dwelling	8,000	70					
	Three-family dwelling	9,000	75				3+	50

Proposed Zoning Requirements for ADUs

Setback & Height Requirements - [Zoning Ordinance](#) Table 4.2

Find the zoning district the ADU is in...

Whatever is most permissive of:

- Primary structure OR
- A single-family detached OR
- Accessory structures – applies only in residential (R) districts: 5' side-yard and 5' rear-yard setback

PERMITTED DIMENSIONS BY DISTRICT

TABLE 4.2 - Continued

DISTRICT	USE	LOT		YARD SETBACKS			HEIGHT	
		AREA (Minimum SF)	FRONTAGE (Minimum linear ft.)	FRONT	SIDE ¹	REAR		
RL-7 Cont.	Multi-family dwelling, low rise - first unit	7,000	65	20	10	20	NA	NA
	MFD, additional unit, low rise	2,000 per du	plus 5' per du to total of 140'	NA	NA	NA	3+	50
	Limited Residential Hospice House	20,000	65	25	10	20	3+	50
	Other residential permitted	7,000		20	10	20		45
	Other non-residential	7,000		20	20	20		
RG-5	Single-family detached	5,000	50	15	8	15	2+	35
	Single-family semi-detached	3,000 per du	30 per du					
	Single-family, attached	2,200 per du	20 per du					
	Two-family dwelling	6,000	55					
	Three-family dwelling	7,000	60	15	8	8	3+	50
	Multi-family dwelling, first unit	5,000	50	15	10	15	NA	NA
	MFD, additional unit, low rise	1,000 per du	plus 5' per du to total of 125'	NA	NA	NA	3+	50
	MFD additional unit, high rise	750 per du	plus 5' per du to total of 100'				8+	90

Proposed Zoning Requirements for ADUs

Who can live in an ADU?

- Can be rented to anyone (not just family members!)
- Can't be a lodging house or short-term rental
- The owner need not live on the property

Other Requirements or restrictions for ADUs?

- Must obtain an **Occupancy Certificate** from Inspectional Services (meet fire & building codes)
- Can't be rented for less than a month (ADUs **can not be short-term rentals**)
- Adding an ADU to a property will not change that property's zoning classification; however, the property will need to **meet the building and fire code requirements** to comply with the increased number of dwelling units (e.g., 3rd unit (or more) will trigger sprinklers and there may be Fire Code setback requirements that drive citing, etc.)
- Rental Registry requirement if the ADU is rented

When do I need Special Permission?

If a proposed ADU cannot meet the zoning dimensional requirements, it may be permitted via a [Special Permit](#) from the [Planning Board](#)

If an ADU needs Special Permission...

- No guarantee (discretionary approval)
- Application to the Planning Board
- Neighbors notified by mail
- Attend a public hearing
- Subject to appeal
- ±3 month process (before building permit)

If an ADU needs only a Building Permit...

- You first need to submit an address request via OpenGov (Street Number Change of Address - SNCA)
- You will need **professionally surveyed plot plan & architectural plans** to demonstrate building, fire, & zoning code compliance (e.g., setbacks, egress, location, size, etc.)

Example ADU Under the New Regulations

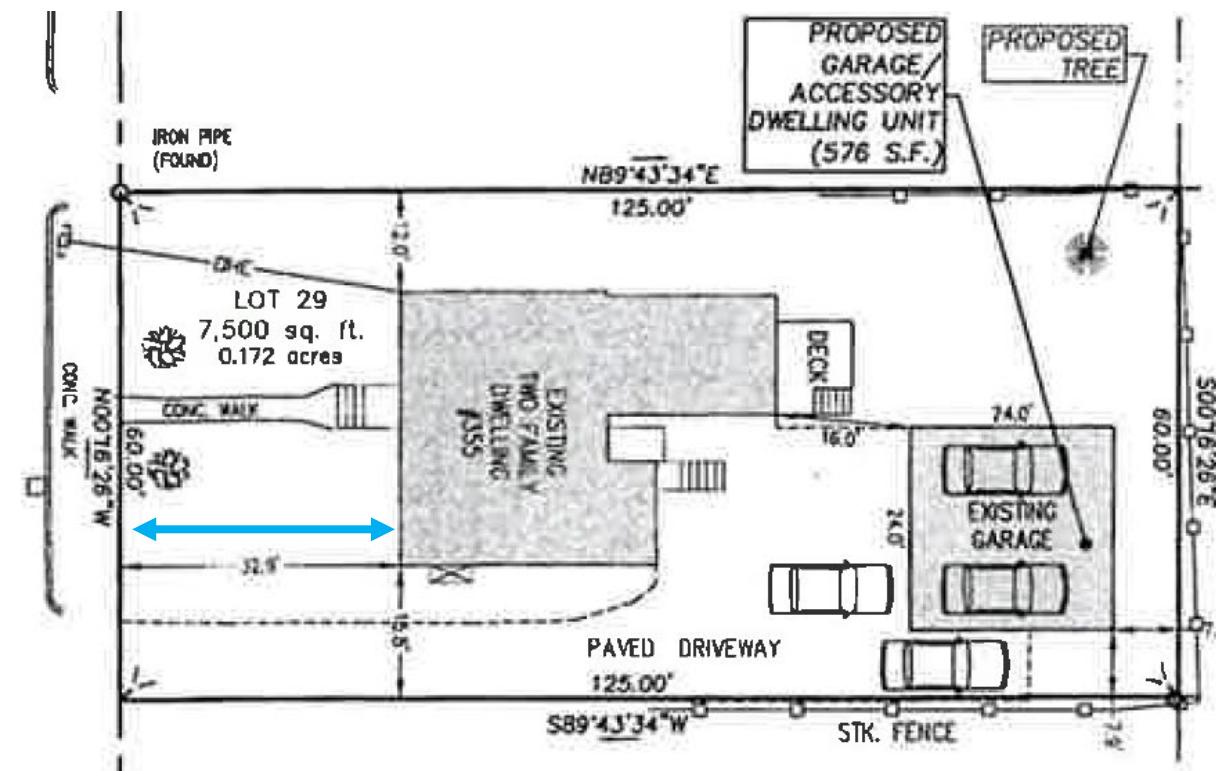
RL-7 Zone

Primary structure is a 2-Family (20' front; 35' height); OR
A single-family detached (same as single-family); OR
Accessory structure (5' side- and rear-yard) in the zoning
district the ADU is in...

Whatever is most permissive.

Not in the front-yard

BURNCOAT STREET



Example ADU Under the New Regulations

Setback & Height –
[Zoning Ordinance](#) Requirements –
 Table 4.2

Primary structure OR
 A single-family detached OR
 Accessory structure (5' side- and
 rear-yard) in the zoning district the
 ADU is in...

Whatever is most permissive.

TABLE 4.2 -PERMITTED DIMENSIONS BY DISTRICT

DISTRICT	USE	LOT		YARD SETBACKS			HEIGHT	
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Fire Access Requirements

Three Scenarios:

1. ADU \leq 900 SF ADU located on the same lot as any one- or two- family dwelling
2. ADU \leq 900 SF located on the same lot as any other building
(except for one- or two-family dwellings)
3. $>$ 900 SF ADUs on the same lot as any building

SF = Includes basements, lofts, intermediate tiered floors, etc.
Excludes garage parking areas, attics, enclosed porch, crawl spaces, etc.

Measured from interior face of exterior wall or the centerline of walls separating building/dwelling units

Fire Access Requirements

Scenario 1: ADU ≤900 SF located on the same lot as any one- or two-family dwelling

Requires a 10' wide illuminated, unobstructed pathway from the fire department “access road” to the ADU

OR

An automatic sprinkler system installed in accordance with NFPA 13D

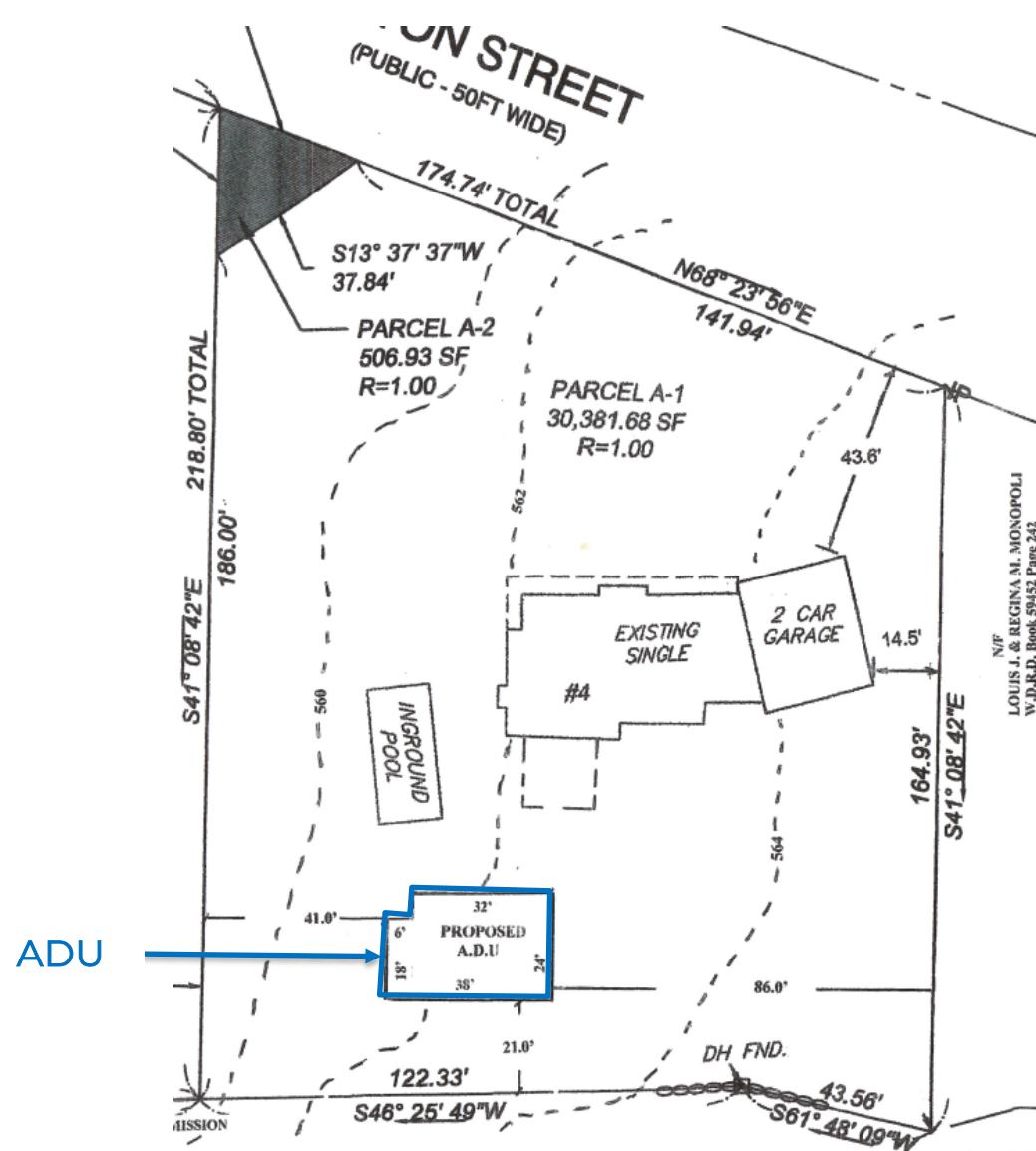
Fire Access Requirements:

Scenario 1: ADU ≤ 900 SF on the same lot as a one- or two- family

Example: Converted of an existing pool house to a protected ADU on the same lot as a single-family dwelling

No unobstructed 10' wide fire department access road to the ADU

NFPA 13D sprinkler protection required



Fire Access Requirements

Scenario 2: ADU ≤ 900 SF located on the same lot as any other building (*except 1 or 2 family dwellings*)

Requires a 20' wide fire department access road that extends to within 25' of at least one exterior door that can be opened from the outside and that provides access to the interior of the building

OR

An automatic sprinkler system installed in accordance with NFPA 13D

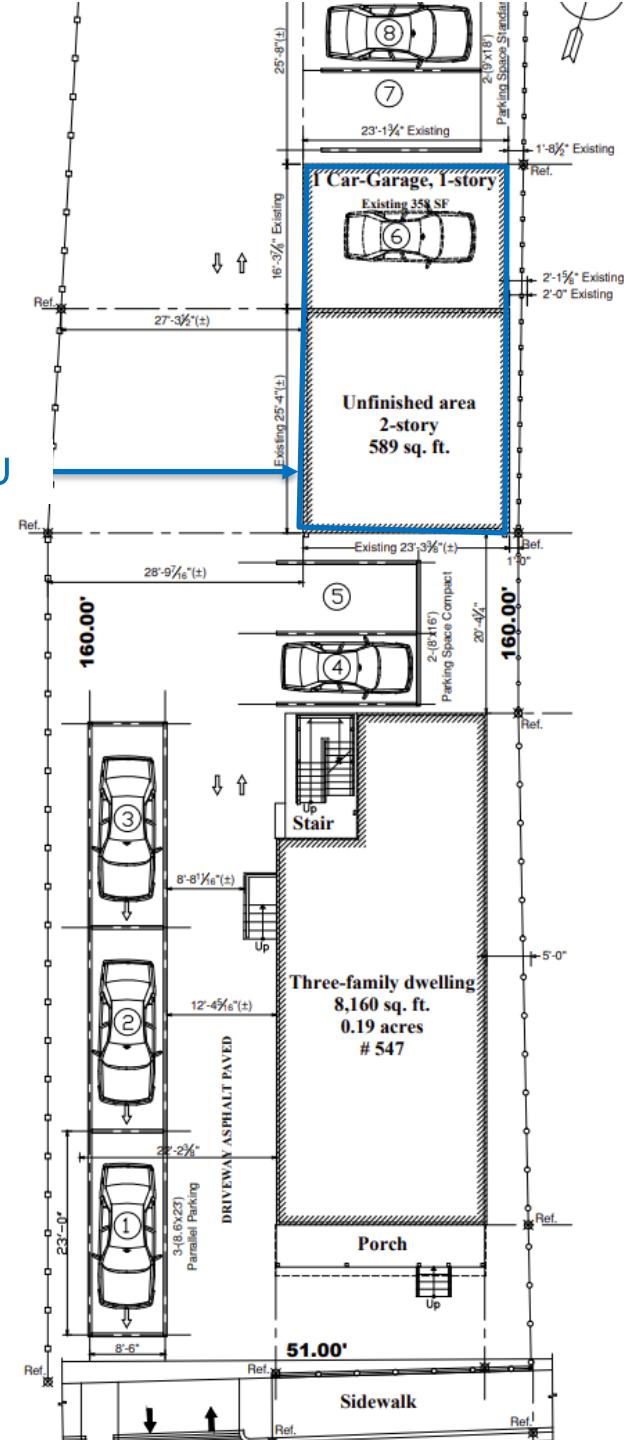
Fire Access Requirements

Scenario 2: ADU ≤ 900 SF located on the same lot as any as any other building (except 1 or 2 family dwellings)

Example: Added a protected ADU to an detached garage for an existing three family

No 20' wide fire access road within 25' of an exterior door

Required NFPA 13D sprinkler protection



Fire Access Requirements

Scenario 3: ADU >900 SF located on the same lot as any building

Requires a 20' wide fire department access road that extends to within 25' of at least one exterior door that can be opened from the outside and that provides access to the interior of the building

OR

An automatic sprinkler system installed in accordance with NFPA 13D

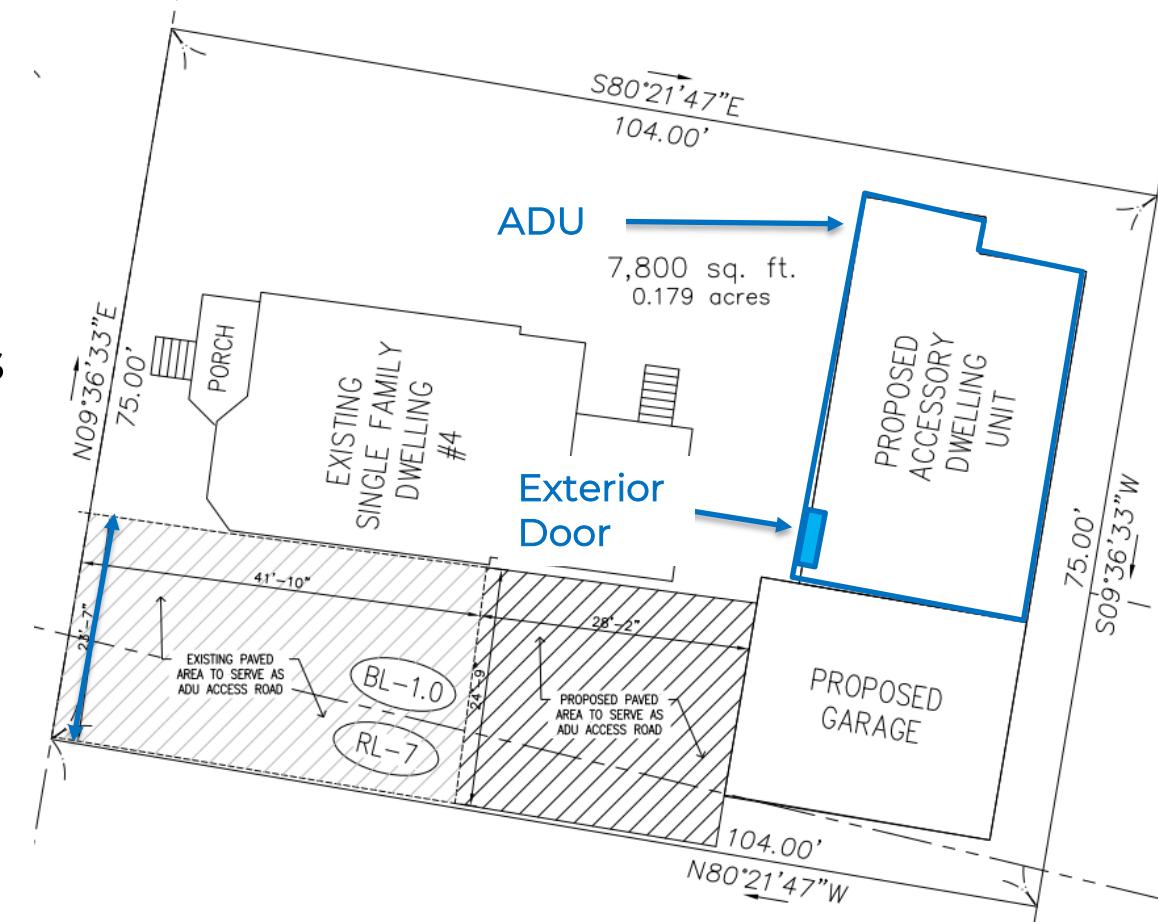
Fire Access Requirements

Scenario 3: ADU >900 SF located on the same lot as any building

Example: Constructed an unprotected ADU (over 900 sq-ft) on the same property as a single-family dwelling

Proposed ±23' wide, unobstructed fire access road that extends to within 25' of the door

No sprinkler system required



Building Code

Building Code - Worcester is a **Specialized Stretch Code** community, with higher energy efficiency requirements than the state minimum (10th edition, with Mass Amendments).

Zoning vs. Building Code -

An ADU is not considered when determining use classification for zoning purposes... However, under the building/fire codes ADUs ARE considered as an additional unit if attached, or if detached, as a single-family home.

Use Class Comparison:

Zoning Use	Building Code
Single family + detached ADU	2 single family homes, on one lot
Single family + ADU	2 family use
Two-family + ADU	3 family use
Three-family + ADU	Multi-family

Illegal Units

ADUs may be a pathway to legalize an “illegal” or “unpermitted” dwelling unit

How do I recognize an Illegal unit?

If the unit does not have an occupancy certificate it is not a “legal” ADU and would need to apply for a building permit, undergo review for code compliance, and have inspections to obtain an occupancy certificate. *The assessor classifying a unit for tax purpose is just an observation of actual use but is NOT an official determination as to the legality of a unit for zoning or building code compliance.*

How do I resolve an Illegal unit?

Illegal units (up to one unit) can be legalized by applying for a building permit and/or obtaining an occupancy certificate. This process will trigger review for compliance with current code requirements and may identify building/code or zoning violations.

ADUs must comply with state (building, fire, and sanitary) codes and applicable zoning requirements.

Worcester needs more safe, sanitary housing units.

Other Considerations for Planning Your ADU

Before Building Permit

Electric & Gas – Contact National Grid (& Eversource) early!

Local Historic Districts – Any exterior construction is subject to design review, before work can occur, by the Historical Commission (likely that a Certificate of Appropriateness is needed) (1-2 months). Proposed work should follow approved design-guidelines;

Historic Buildings – Removal of any exterior material is subject to prior approval (Building Demolition Delay Waiver) by the Historical Commission and 1 year delay if denied (1-2 months).

Work in a floodplain, in/within 100' of a wetlands/streams/ponds, or disturbing >5,000 SF near catch basins

Earth disturbance or construction activity is subject to prior approval (Request for Determination of Applicability or Notice of Intent) from the Conservation Commission (1-2 months).

Water/Wastewater - DPW Permits are needed if upgrades to service or new utilities are proposed. New units may require a \$1,650/bedroom sewer connection fee. If you have a septic system – contact Inspectional Services to see if your system has excess capacity or if it may need to be replaced or expanded for a new unit.

Remember winter moratoriums (November 15 – April 1) where no work is allowed in public streets.

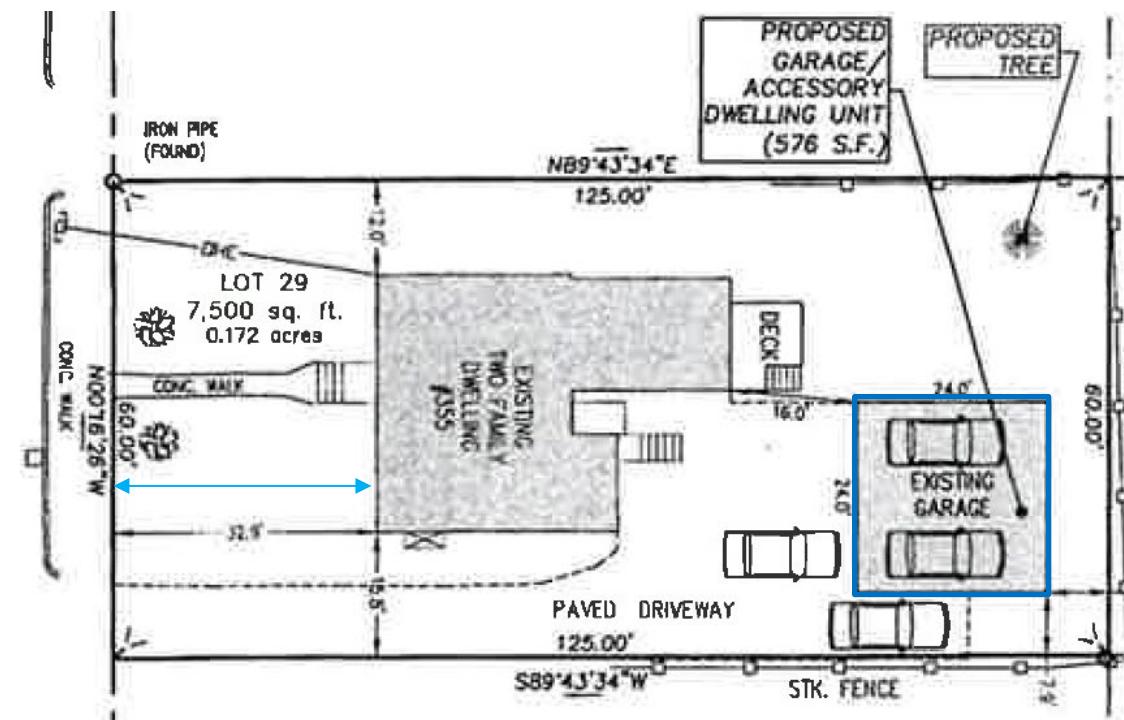
Other Considerations for Planning Your ADU

Professional Services – who will draw your plans that meet the relevant zoning, building, and fire codes, oversee and construct the project? Check the credentials of your professionals at [Mass.gov - Professional Licenses & Permits](https://Mass.gov/ProfessionalLicenses&Permits) under "Building & Trades". Ask your contractors for a valid "Certificate of Insurance". (multiple months)

Assessment/Taxes - Will likely increase. Assessor's use classification will change (increase) by 1 unit (e.g., single-family to two-family, two-family to three-family, etc.). If a three-family, multi-family, or other mixed-use property adds an ADU they will need to return the Income & Expense Form 38D annually to the City.

Financing – Contact local banks about available financing. Some local banks have products specific to ADUs which allow you to consider income from the ADU.

BURNCOAT STREET



Note: The City is exploring opportunities to provide future financial and/or technical assistance but does not currently have resources available. However, the State of MA Will be partnering with MHP to provide technical and financial resources for ADUs to property owners. The program is still in development – contact EOHLIC for more information www.mass.gov/forms/adu-incentives-program

Permit Checklist

There's no perfect timeline or process for *every* project but think about this order of operations.

- Engage a design professional(s) to prepare land survey & architectural plans and identify a contractor
- Talk to City Staff and utility providers about your project to confirm what permits will be needed based on a preliminary concept. Then refine your plans with your design professionals in response.
- Obtain any land use permits, if applicable (planning@worcesterma.gov) :
 - Planning Board
 - Conservation Commission
 - Historic Commission
- Secure Financing
- Obtain a Street Number
- Utility & Building Permits (inspections@worcesterma.gov & dpwpermits@worcesterma.gov)
- Obtain a Certificate of Occupancy
- Rental Registry Registration

Can I subdivide my ADU onto its own lot?

No. By definition ADUs are accessory and therefore must remain on the same lot with the other residential unit(s) on the property.

FAQs

What do I need to know about Utilities?

ADUs in existing dwellings with utilities may rely on their existing water/sewer connections if there is adequate capacity to serve the unit. If you need to modify utilities outside of your house you will need a permit from DPW&P Engineering.

ADUs in detached structures require a permit from DPW&P Engineering to make changes to the sewer outside. A plumbing permit is required to connect the water from the primary dwelling to the ADU.

Utility changes to allow ADUs - especially for detached structures may require interconnection with your existing utilities and may dictate the location of your new utilities, so it's important to plan for this early in your design process.

**Have questions later?
Ask us online via the QR
code below:**

Questions?



**City of Worcester
Planning & Regulatory Services Division (DPRS)**

City Hall, 455 Main Street, Room 404
Worcester, MA 01608



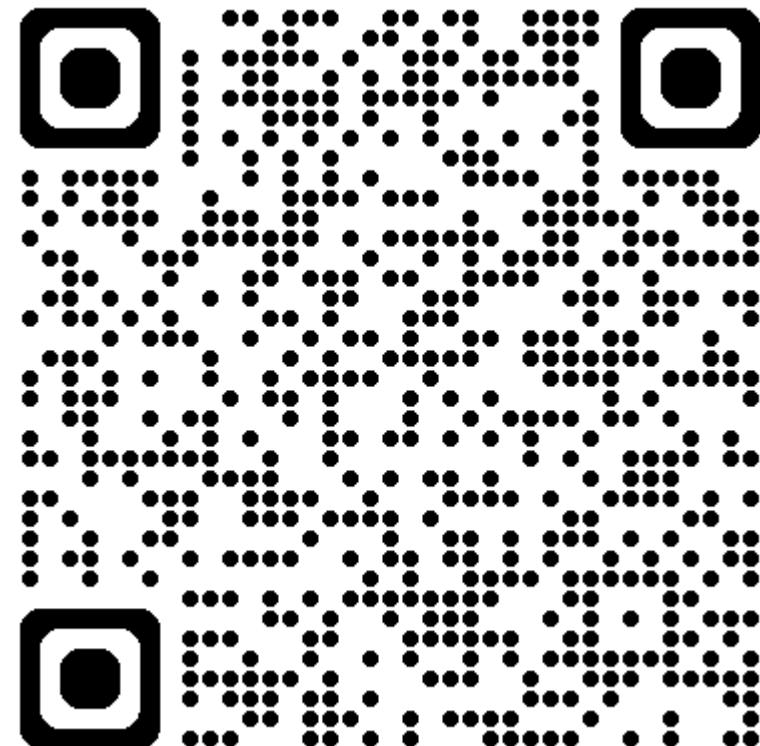
Phone

508-799-1400 ext. 31440



Email

planning@worcesterma.gov

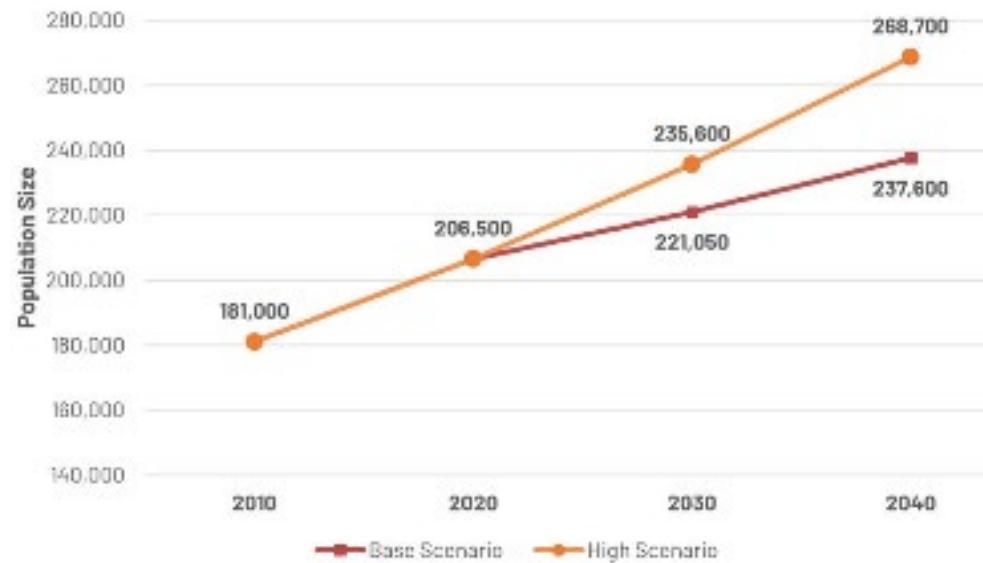


Useful Links

- [Property Viewer \(GIS Maps\) - Worcester Atlas Viewer](#)
- [Zoning Ordinance](#)
- [Accessory Dwelling Units \(ADUs\) - Quick Guide | City of Worcester](#) (Note: Updates are in progress to reflect proposed zoning changes, facts relate to the zoning in place before changes to the state law)
- [Request an Address \(Street Numbering Change of Address Form\) - OpenGov](#) (all ADUs)
- [Apply for a Building Permit to Construct – OpenGov](#) (all ADUs)
- [Mass.gov Professional Licenses Look-up](#) (see under “Building & Trades”)
- Application for a [Special Permit](#) from the [Planning Board](#) (some ADUs - if dimensionally non-conforming)
- [Accessory Dwelling Unit \(ADU\) - FAQs | Mass.gov](#)
- [Septic System Guidance for ADUs Title V ADU FAQ](#)

THANK YOU

Why do we need ADUs?



Growth Type	2030	2040
People	+29,100	+62,200
Multi-family Units	+7,100 - 9,400	+15,100 - 20,100

Some Worcester Context:

From 2010 to 2020 Worcester grew by 14% (**>25,000 people**), surpassing historic peak populations.

Worcester Now | Next projects that by 2040, Worcester could need 20,000 new multi-family units if the City continues to grow at its current rate.

- Where will our new residents go?
- How do we keep Worcester affordable?

Housing prices continue to rise.
Vacancy rates are low.
Homelessness is high.

ADUs in MA

Affordable Homes Act Enacted

[Chapter 150, Section 8 of the Acts of 2024](#)

signed into law to allow ADUs up to 900 SF by-right in single-family zoning districts.

SECTION 8. Section 3 of said chapter 40A, as so appearing, is hereby amended by adding the following paragraph:-
No zoning ordinance or by-law shall prohibit, unreasonably restrict or require a special permit or other discretionary zoning approval for the use of land or structures for a single accessory dwelling unit, or the rental thereof, in a single-family residential zoning district; provided, that the use of land or structures for such accessory dwelling unit under this paragraph may be subject to reasonable regulations, including, but not limited to, 310 CMR 15.000 et seq., if applicable, site plan review, regulations concerning dimensional setbacks and the bulk and height of structures and may be subject to restrictions and prohibitions on short-term rental, as defined in section 1 of chapter 64G. The use of land or structures for an accessory dwelling unit under this paragraph shall not require owner occupancy of either the accessory dwelling unit or the principal dwelling; provided, that not more than 1 additional parking space shall be required for an accessory dwelling unit; and provided further, that no additional parking space shall be required for an accessory dwelling located not more than 0.5 miles from a commuter rail station, subway station, ferry terminal or bus station. For more than 1 accessory dwelling unit, or rental thereof, in a single-family residential zoning district there shall be a special permit for the use of land or structures for an accessory dwelling unit. The executive office of housing and livable communities may issue guidelines or promulgate regulations to administer this paragraph