



# Accessory Dwelling Units: Building Height

**Question:** Should height limit for detached accessory structures be increased for accessory dwelling units?

**Current Olympia Approach:** The height limit for detached accessory structures in most residential zones is 16 feet, measured at mid-gable. This applies to accessory dwelling units, garages, sheds and all detached accessory structures. The height limit for the primary residence in most low-density residential zones is 35 feet; in mid- and higher-density residential zones, it is generally 40 to 45 feet.

## What is current approach intended to accomplish?

This approach may be intended to ensure that accessory structures remain as subsidiary to the primary residence by limiting their height to less than that of the primary structure. In some zoning districts, accessory structures are allowed with smaller setbacks from the rear property line, particularly when abutting an alley. This height limitation may also be intended to reduce potential visual impacts to neighboring properties of a structure closer to the rear property line.

## Alternative Approaches:

Alternatives include:

1. Retaining the current height limit.
2. Increase the height limit enough to ensure the possibility of a loft or second story in an ADU (e.g., up to approximately 22 feet).
3. Increase the height limit as described in #2, subject to a minimum setback from abutting properties (e.g. 5 or 10 feet).
4. Allow accessory structures to be constructed up to the height of the existing primary house on the property, or 22 feet, whichever is less.

## Analysis:

The factors for consideration discussed by the Missing Middle Work Group are:

- **Affordability**  
Increasing the height limit to ensure a loft or second story will likely increase the number of ADUs constructed, particularly above existing garages or storage spaces. Construction costs for individual ADUs will vary depending on design and condition of an existing structure, and



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rental rates may not be less than for ADUs less than 16 feet. If an increased number of ADUs are constructed, it is likely there will be an overall greater number of housing options that would be at more affordable rents than single-family homes.

- **Variety of housing types**  
Increasing the number of ADUs will increase the variety of housing types in neighborhoods that currently do not have many ADUs. Increasing the height limit will likely increase the number of properties that have the option of constructing an ADU.
- **Ability to accommodate growth**  
ADUs will accommodate more households without increasing the overall area of the city. They primarily will provide housing for households of 1-2 persons, which was 70.4% of Olympia's households in 2010 Census (*The Profile*, Thurston Regional Planning Council). Increasing the height limit will likely increase the number of properties that have the option of constructing an ADU.

The current 16-foot height limit significantly limits the option of constructing a detached ADU with a second floor, either as new construction or above an existing garage or storage space. ADUs that are attached to the existing primary home are currently allowed up to the allowed height in that zoning district.