

Make way for tiny houses State building codes should accommodate them

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Tiny houses won't end homelessness in Oregon. Nor can tiny houses alone make Oregon cities densely populated enough to achieve the goal of avoiding urban sprawl. Tiny houses can, however, be a small part of the solution to both problems — but the state's building code, written with standard-size houses in mind, stands in the way. The Legislature should amend the code to allow architectural designs that are necessary to make tiny houses practical.

Focus on Homelessness

A tiny house generally has 100 to 300 square feet of floor area. Architects who try to squeeze a kitchen, bathroom and living area into that small a space tend to arrive at a solution long favored by designers of recreational vehicles and houseboats: sleeping lofts. Current building codes require that sleeping areas be accessible by stairs, and also set standards for headroom. House Bill 2737-A would amend the code to allow sleeping lofts in tiny houses to be accessible by ladders and have more limited clearances.

The International Building Code Council voted last year to adopt the changes included in HB 2737-A. State codes, including Oregon's, are routinely updated to conform to IBC standards. But the linkage will not automatically occur for several years, and could be blocked by state building officials. In the meantime, tiny house developments in Oregon would face an unnecessary obstacle: It's difficult to incorporate a standard staircase in most micro-house designs.

Some tiny houses are being built even without the code change. Opportunity Village in Eugene is one example. Developed by Square One Villages, a nonprofit agency, it opened in 2013 on city-owned land and offers transitional housing to 30 people who would otherwise be homeless. The houses are truly tiny — 60 to 80 square feet — and are technically illegal by state standards, but are permitted as temporary structures. A kitchen, bathrooms and meeting area are in separate common buildings. These rudimentary shelters provide safe places to sleep and store belongings. More importantly, they provide the stability that allows residents to take their first steps toward more permanent housing.

A different kind of tiny house development, however, would receive significant assistance from HB 2737-A. Emerald Village Eugene, also a Square One project, will include 22 permanent low-income housing units, fully plumbed and wired, with kitchens and baths. The houses measure 160 to 300 square feet and are designed by 10 local architects. Many of the architects found a need to incorporate lofts in their designs, and these designs will need to be modified or abandoned unless HB 2737-A becomes law.

Building codes require stairs so that people can get out of a burning house quickly. The agency that enforces Oregon's building codes opposes HB 2737-A on grounds that ladders would increase the risk of fatalities in fires by 20 percent. That's a big increase, but egress-related fire fatalities are rare. Tom Bowerman of Eugene, a supporter of HB 2737-A and Square One, calculated that if all 20,000 of Oregon's unsheltered homeless people lived in tiny houses, using ladders instead of stairs would result in one additional fatality every 2,500 years.

Compare that to the number of homeless people who die each year from hypothermia. Sleeping in lofts that are reached by ladders may be less than ideal in terms of fire safety — but for the people in those lofts, it's a far sight better than the alternative.

Emerald Village could be the first of several complexes of its kind, and it can't be built or financed unless its houses fully comply with the building code. The same goes for other tiny houses likely to be built in Eugene and elsewhere if zoning rules relating to backyard accessory dwelling units are made more permissive. Tiny houses that meet building codes for permanent dwellings tend to be more expensive per square foot than apartment-style affordable housing complexes, but because of their small size they can be less expensive per unit. Houses in Emerald Village, for instance, will cost an average of \$75,000 apiece.

HB 2737-A passed the House on a bipartisan 46-13 vote and awaits action in the Senate Committee on Business and Transportation, chaired by Sen. Lee Beyer, D-Springfield. The legislation needs approval. Oregon should not impede one promising response to the twin problems of homelessness and housing affordability.