

OP/ED

Guest editorial: Will ‘density’ become a dirty word in Vermont?

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By John Moyers

Note: John Moyers is a long-time resident of Bristol, where he serves on the Planning Commission and Development Review Board.

When does a former town moderator, after decades of public service, jump out of retirement to join his town’s Planning Commission?

When a next-door neighbor builds a large industrial-style outbuilding that looms over the moderator’s home in the heart of Bristol’s snug, old-village setting... That’s when.

The new building on Garfield Street is hard to miss at two stories and 2,400 square feet, bigger than the main house and surrounding homes, its shallow-pitched roof designed to maximize useable space upstairs, if nothing else. It’s set deep on the lot, far from the main house, about as close to the property lines and a neighboring house as is allowed. There was little chance for neighbors to participate or ask questions before it got built.

It’s an “ADU,” an Accessory Dwelling Unit. Think: “garage apartment” or “carriage house” or “mother-in-law suite” — a new or converted outbuilding or addition to a single-family home for use as a rental. It’s an old idea revived by the current housing crisis, and something Vermont lawmakers want to encourage. They’re now debating changes to Vermont law to do just that.

It’s the right goal. Vermont needs more small apartments, especially in village centers. Here in Bristol, people are clamoring to live in our compact, walkable village with its busy downtown. More ADUs would help meet that need, and there are plenty of appropriate places in the village for them.

ADUs increase housing density, one of the holy grails of housing — ‘in-fill development’ on existing lots, more people in less space, living closer together. It’s an essential piece for

solving the housing puzzle.

But just when we need people to accept more density in our villages, the changes proposed in Montpelier threaten to make 'density' a dirty word.

If Senate Bill 100 passes as proposed, towns like Bristol would be prohibited from reviewing applications for new ADUs any more closely than a proposed single-family home without an ADU — that is, hardly at all. Meet the setbacks, keep to the height limit, get a state septic permit. That's it.

That's what we do already In Bristol, and it didn't work on Garfield Street. No one is happy with it — not the Town, definitely not the neighbors, and probably not the owner-builder, who has upset his neighbors.

I'm a big fan of density. I make my living creating density (renovating six buildings in downtown Bristol since 2000). And I live downtown, in the densest part of Bristol. I understand the impact that lax zoning, or an uncaring or simply inattentive neighbor, can have on others nearby.

I serve on Bristol's Planning Commission. We are now considering new bylaws for ADUs. Under current law, we may adopt a process for reviewing ADUs that protects neighbors' and the town's interests. But if the language in S.100 passes, we cannot — unless we pass bylaws holding all single-family homes to the same standards, which isn't happening anytime soon here.

But an ADU isn't just a single-family home alone on a lot. It's a new dwelling added to an existing single-family home — more density in a residential zone. Its size, height and location matter. So do the location of its parking; whether it shines light in neighbors' windows; and where it dumps its heating or ventilation noise. Attention to issues like these can minimize the impact of in-fill development. Inattention promises to maximize the impact.

The builders that S.100 envisions — resident homeowners — are not professionals. They may not think of the things a professional would (or should) think of — lighting, noise, screening, etc. A simple review process can be educational and helpful for the resident homeowner ADU builder, and it gives neighbors a chance to be heard. We could pass such rules under current law. But S.100 says we can't do it.

Ask a planning expert or 'smart growth' professional: Bristol village is a model for what we want. Let's have more density that fits in and protects what we love about our village. Simple review of ADU applications can ensure the density we invite is the density we can all live with.

It's worth noting that S.100 would allow towns to adopt bylaws requiring review of parking plans for ADU proposals. So why not a little more permission — let us review plans for light, noise, screening etc., and have a chance for neighbors to be heard, too? Or leave the law alone and let Bristol devise zoning rules to guide new ADUs.

This is what will make density work.

John Moyers

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