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EXPANDING HOUSING OPTIONS IN THE ROCKY MOUNTAIN WEST BY REDUCING LAND USE REGULATIONS

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Well-designed micro-apartments, like this one developed by Panoramic Interests, provide new housing options in popular neighborhoods. Photo courtesy panoramic.com.

Even a cursory review of today's real estate market reveals that there's a lack of choice for certain households in the American West. If you're on the market for an apartment without parking, or would like to build a "granny flat" for an aging parent, or desire to live in a tiny apartment in a hip neighborhood, you're probably out of luck. Unfortunately, today's building codes and land use regulations frequently prevent these types of moderately-priced housing options from being developed. In the "new normal" American economy, with limited resources at every level of government, the affordability crisis will only deepen if we don't change regulations that prohibit sensible development.

In terms of advocating for simple, politically-feasible housing strategies, I want to particularly recognize the leadership of several Western organizations: the Pacific Northwest's [Sightline Institute](http://sightline.org), the San Francisco Bay Area's [SPUR](http://spur.org), and British Columbia's [Victoria Transport Policy Institute](http://victoriapolicyinstitute.org). Each has shown how major West Coast cities might better increase moderately-priced housing supply. And many of approaches are easily adaptable to smaller communities in the Rocky Mountain West. Some of the most promising strategies include allowing "granny flats," eliminating minimum parking

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requirements, and reducing minimum unit sizes.

First, the simplest way to increase neighborhood housing options is to allow accessory dwelling units (ADUs or “granny flats”) in single-family neighborhoods. Unfortunately, many cities either prohibit granny flats altogether or make them onerously difficult to develop. [Sedona, Arizona](#), [Glenwood Springs, Colorado](#) and [Boulder, Colorado](#) are examples of Western cities that have proactively adopted ADU programs. Sedona, for example, passed an ordinance focused on not only bringing new ADUs to market, but also bringing illegal ADUs into compliance. ADUs allow families to live in place over time, creating private units for college students or aging parents. The AARP and APA have created a [model ordinance](#) to help cities develop local ADU policies. Good ADU policy creates new housing options in neighborhoods, in a way that is largely invisible to neighbors. This type of regulatory change is sorely needed – particularly as the Baby Boomers age. These changes will present market opportunities for savvy developers and income-generating opportunities for homeowners. Since the permitting and development process may seem daunting to many homeowners, I’m intrigued by the business model of [New Avenue Homes](#), and others who guide homeowners through the process. Are there any similar companies in the Rocky Mountain West?

Second, as [Donald Shoup](#), [Michael Manville](#) and others have noted, high parking requirements present an often insurmountable barrier to low-cost housing. Parking requirements limit achievable density, add development costs, force developers to inefficiently use land, and limit housing options for people who do not have a car. Several U.S. cities, including Portland and San Francisco, have eliminated parking requirements and instituted parking maximums in walkable areas that are well-served by transit. Many cities across the Rocky Mountain West have decades-old standards, not well-suited to the needs of our future population.

(article continues below photo)



Before and after photos of a new apartment development in San Francisco that exemplifies infill housing without parking. Photo courtesy panoramic.com.

Lastly, the introduction of minimum unit sizes reduced over-crowding and the spread of disease in America's cities a century ago. However, these requirements now prevent people from renting or buying a high-quality, yet small unit in desirable neighborhoods. In high-cost cities, small units allow a household the option to "shrink 'til they qualify" instead of having to "drive 'til they qualify." Demand has been high for "micro-apartments" in [San Francisco](#), [Seattle](#), and [Portland](#). The Denver Architectural League recently hosted a [microhousing design competition](#) and received entries from around the world. This is a promising option, not only in major cities, but in college towns too.

In future blog posts, I'll expand on these examples and highlight others from the Rocky Mountain West. What else has worked to improve affordability in your community? What are you getting ready to try? Oftentimes local efforts to increase housing supply and

affordability without subsidy are often not nationally publicized. We want to hear about the strategies you're implementing.

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