

Madalyn Letellier

From: Nicholas Asermelly [REDACTED]
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To: Public Comments
Subject: Public Comment on "Proposed Zoning Text amendment, SZC 15.7.2"

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Hello,

I wanted to comment on the above Zoning discussion from our perspective. At the time of this email, I work for LaCourt Realty LLC, located here in Somerville Ward 2. It is owned by a minority immigrant gentleman who came here in his youth. To date, we have built 4 and designed 6 backyard cottages, with two more currently in the works for this year. All of these backyard cottages are rental units right here in Somerville. They have been a highly desired rental option that our tenants have LOVED! They speak about the feeling of "single-family living" in the city, they love the Ambient light from the four walls of windows. Because of the requirement for a gurney pathway, they love the private access and safe entry points. But the Number One thing we have heard is, "We love living in the city, but we love having a house that feels like we have privacy".

Regarding the points raised on the April 16th meeting about amending the backyard cottage:

1. Not allowing the division of the lots and making of the BYC into condo's, while this doesn't affect our company or our tenants at all, I can imagine that a mix of these BYC's being rentals, being "in-laws", and some being condo's would be good for the city as each brings in a different kind of person and diversity. At its current largest allowable development (1.5 story, 576 sq ft floor plate), a BYC can support 3 beds and 2 baths. This is personally the most desirable option for me, a 45-year-old with a family of 5. Units like this give families with multiple kids a place that doesn't share walls where we can be self-conscious and not worry our kids are bothering the neighbors with normal play. That being said, we also constructed one we call the "Ant-farm" because it is 10 feet deep and 24 feet wide. During the entire process, over a dozen people stopped, looked, and asked where to find more information about renting it as it offers a very eclectic tiny home feel with full-size amenities. It has 2 beds and 1 bathroom, a private patio, a lawn, and lots of light. Most inquiries were from people who wanted a second room for an office and their dog, or from couples who wanted one room as a bedroom and one room for activities.

2. "Reducing the current requirements based on floor plate and stories to a total Square footage metric." I understand this, but using the arbitrary 900 sq ft mark taken from the ADU laws (which are currently not the same as a BYC) is slightly short-sided. The city may decide that a technical 1.5 story structure with a finished basement and a first floor plate of 576 sq ft (24'x24' or 30'x19.2' or 32'x18') is too large for a BYC. However, the offered reduction to 900 square feet for all 3 floors leaves the actual living areas consistently small. Since all BYCs must have a 60-foot setback, they are required to be fire-sprinkled, which necessitates large mechanical rooms for that equipment. Large modern code staircases and limited head height with the dormer requirements (BYC's are not allowed to have Mansard Roofs, which would be amazing if we could) also reduce the usable floor area for normal furniture and living. I have designed, built, and rented 4 BYCs to date. IF A CHANGE IS A MUST, a more reasonable option that I

hope the city would consider is simply reducing the maximum allowable dimensions from the current 32 feet deep and 24 wide with a Maximum 1st floor plate of 576 square feet to more reasonable maximum dimensions of 28 feet deep and 28 feet wide with the first-floor plate being 450 Square feet. In practice, that means we could build a 28' wide/deep by 16' foot wide/deep structure. This offers flexibility and diversity allowing each lot to take on a life of its own. This still leaves enough room for mechanicals, staircases, and semi-comfortable living. This would bring the total finished square footage down to 1350 feet. While any reduction of the current allowance makes it harder to build because of the set costs no matter the size, anything less than the floor plate of 450' takes these buildings into tiny homes and follies. Which on their own is cool, but again limits the diversity of people and activities people can enjoy in their own living space they pay for.

3. The complaint that Back Yard Cottages are consuming green space is only half the story. First, any lot purchased for development—whether for rental, home ownership, or condominium—can only be developed up to 60% of lot coverage per the zoning ordinance. This is true if you expand the principle building or construct a BYC. In 5 of the 6 mentioned BYC's we have built, we have reduced the lot coverages, removed 100% of the blacktop top, made parking peastone spaces, made all walkways permeable, installed on-site water control (per the engineering department reviews) and increased actual grass and tree plantings on the lots. However, the concern that large, open yards will lose space to BYCs is very real. Perhaps a stipulation should be required that the total setback of the principal building and the building separation from the BYC be equal or greater than 20 feet, which is the current standard for a rear yard setback. It would look like this: the front facade setback (including the front porch) plus the minimum 10 foot separation between the BYC and principle building has to add up to 20 feet. If the front building is closer than 10 feet to the sidewalk, the separation between the two buildings must increase until the total distance is 20 feet. Since the NR Zone requires an unencroachable 20-foot rear setback, this would redistribute that same amount of open space across the lot. This would keep more open green space, but not thwart housing unit construction.

Last thought: Regarding the cost to build (effectively the cost to live in Somerville), the cost of housing, and affordable units, since the city has seen fewer than 150 BYCs, I'm not sure the metric drives up the cost as much as the requirements to build do.

Thank you for hearing me out. I hope all change benefits everyone. If anyone wishes to see any of the backyard cottages we have completed, I would be happy to give a tour so things can be better understood.

Best
Nick Asermelly