

CALAVERAS COUNTY RESTRICTIONS ON SO-CALLED MOTHER-IN-LAW QUARTERS MAY BE LOOSENING

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SAN ANDREAS - Calaveras County officials are considering code changes that would make it easier to build a cozy cottage for grandma behind the main house.

Right now, county rules in some cases ban construction of additions or accessory dwellings that could provide a relatively low-cost way to house an aging relative, a college student who needs a studio, or a young couple.

"In the areas where we have sewer and water and you can walk to the store and walk to the school, we don't allow it," said Rebecca Willis, the county's planning director.

Calaveras County code bans accessory dwellings on lots of one acre or less. Willis said second units are built only in rural areas, typically those with 5-, 10-, 20- and 40-acre lots, or exactly where officials have sought to prevent housing sprawl.

A state law enacted in 2003 requires local jurisdictions to make it easier for property owners to build so-called "mother-in-law" units. Calaveras County officials in 2005 adopted a housing element "implementation program" that made it the county's goal to lift the ban on accessory dwellings on lots of less than an acre. That same plan also called on the county to revise its code on accessory dwellings to make that code consistent with state law.

Seven years later, neither goal has been met. Willis said county planners are at work on the task. One first step happened Feb. 23 when the Planning Commission held a public hearing on the county's accessory dwelling rules.

Calaveras County's code conflicts with state law in several ways. For example, Calaveras code provides for a public hearing and notification of adjoining property owners before permits are issued for an accessory dwelling. But state law bans any such requirements if they are more restrictive than the local rules for getting the permit to build the first home on a lot.

The goal of the state law is to make getting permits for a second unit just as easy as getting them for the first home.

Willis said county officials issue about 10 permits a year for accessory dwellings. She expects that to grow once the rules are revised.

"A lot of times it is people who want to build a unit above the garage," Willis said. "There is demand. We do get a lot of people who want a caretaker to live on the property."

Willis said the Planning Commission will resume its hearing on the issue April 12. After the Planning Commission makes a recommendation, the county Board of Supervisors would hold a public hearing on the matter before approving any code changes.

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