



C H A T H A M C O U N T Y - S A V A N N A H

METROPOLITAN PLANNING COMMISSION

"Planning the Future - Respecting the Past"

M E M O R A N D U M

DATE: October 28, 2025

TO: THE MAYOR AND ALDERMEN OF THE CITY OF SAVANNAH

FROM: METROPOLITAN PLANNING COMMISSION

SUBJECT: Text Amendment

PETITION REFERENCED:

Petitioner: Bridget Lidy for the Mayor and Aldermen of the City of Savannah, GA

Petition File Number: 25-005494-ZA

MPC ACTION:

The Planning Commission recommends **approval** of the proposed amendments to Article 8, Section 8.7, Accessory Structures and Uses of the Zoning Ordinance with the following condition:

1. Establishment of variance criteria for Sec. 8.7.4.d.iii permitting ADUs to contain multiple bedrooms within 90 days of Council adoption.

MPC STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

MPC Staff recommends **approval** of the proposed amendments to Article 8, Section 8.7, Accessory Structures and Uses of the Zoning Ordinance with the following condition:

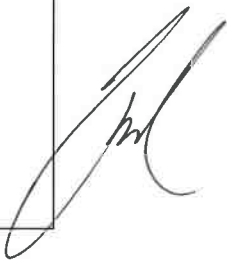
1. Establishment of variance criteria for Sec. 8.7.4.d.iii permitting ADUs to contain multiple bedrooms within 90 days of Council adoption.

MEMBERS PRESENT: 8

Traci Amick
Travis Coles – Chairman
Joseph Ervin
Karen Jarrett
Jeff Notrica
Dwayne Stephens
Amanda Wilson
Tom Woiwode – Vice Chair

PLANNING COMMISSION VOTE: Approve Staff Recommendation. (8-0)

APPROVAL Votes: 8	DENIAL Votes:	ABSENT	Abstain	Recused
Amick Coles Ervin Jarrett Notrica Stephens Wilson Woiwode		Boles Kaigler Melder Plunk Ross Welch		



Respectfully submitted,



Melanie Wilson
Executive Director and CEO

MW/sh

Enclosure

cc Mark Massey, Clerk of Council
 Lester B. Johnson, Assistant City Attorney
 Jennifer Herman, Assistant City Attorney
 Bridget Lidy, Department of Inspections



CHATHAM COUNTY-SAVANNAH METROPOLITAN PLANNING COMMISSION

"Planning the Future, Respecting the Past"

Council Report

TO: City Council

FROM: Planning Commission

DATE: October 28, 2025

SUBJECT: Text Amendment to the City of Savannah Zoning Ordinance

Re: Amendment to Section 8.7, Accessory Structures and Uses

Applicant: Bridget Lidy for The Mayor and Aldermen
of the City of Savannah, GA

MPC FILE NO: 25-004594-ZA

REQUEST:

A Petition to amend Article 8, Section 8.7, Accessory Structures and Uses, to provide greater flexibility for accessory dwelling units (ADUs) and reduce the number of variance requests submitted to the Zoning Board of Appeals.

The Petitioner specifically requests modifications of the following standards:

Under Section 8.7.3 Accessory Structures

- *Sec. 8.7.3.b Location*
- *Sec. 8.7.3.c Setbacks*
- *Sec. 8.7.3.e Building Coverage and Size*

Under Section 8.7.4 Accessory Dwelling Units (not including Caretaker's Dwelling Unit)

- *Sec. 8.7.4*
- *Sec. 8.7.4.a Location*
- *Sec. 8.7.4.b Lot Area*
- *Sec. 8.7.4.c Building Coverage*
- *Sec. 8.7.4.e Architectural Style*
- *Sec. 8.7.4.h Height*

The Ordinance text is proposed to be amended to read as follows, with the modifications identified in red:

8.7.3 Accessory Structures

Accessory structures, not to include accessory dwelling units, are allowed in all zoning districts and shall be subject to the following requirements, except as expressly provided elsewhere in this Section:

a. **Building Permit**

Accessory structures having a gross floor area of more than 120 square feet shall require a building permit.

b. **Location**

Accessory structures shall be located in the side (interior) yard or rear yard of the principal building, with the exception of the following:

- i. guard or gate house;
- ii. gazebo;
- iii. pump or well house;
- iv. carports with a setback of 8 feet from the front property boundary; and
- iv. other similar structures.

c. **Setbacks**

- i. An accessory building or structure shall not be located within five (5) feet of the rear property line. An accessory building or structure shall meet the same side-yard setback requirement as the principal structure. s, except where no setback is required by the zoning district.. Provided however, when the building or structure is located within the side yard, such building or structure shall not eneroach into the side yard setback except as provided for in Sec 4.3, Exceptions and Modifications.
- ii. Docks shall be exempt from any setback requirement.
- iii. Any building that is used to house vehicles or watercraft, and that is accessed from a lane, shall be located at least five (5) feet from such right-of-way. The City Manager or his or her designee may reduce the setback to three (3) feet.
- iv. Where Residential property is located adjacent to a river or marsh, accessory buildings and structures may be permitted in the front yard if all of the following requirements can be met:
 1. The accessory building or structure is set back a minimum of 50 feet from any vehicular right-of-way and is at least 10 feet from adjoining property lines;
 2. The floor-area footprint of the accessory building or structure does not exceed 1,200 square feet or 40% of the floor-area footprint of the principal building, whichever is less; and
 3. The accessory building or structure is constructed of the same or compatible material and color as the principal building, as approved by the City Manager or his or her designee.

d. **Height**

The height of an accessory building shall not exceed the height of the principal building in a Residential district or where otherwise prohibited by this Ordinance.

e. **Building Coverage and Size**

- i. Building Coverage. Within all zoning districts, accessory structures shall be included in the calculations for maximum building coverage.
- ii. Size. Residential Districts. Within residential zoning districts, the floor-area footprint of an accessory structure shall not exceed 40% of the floor-area footprint of the principal building. When accessory structures are attached, the footprint measurement shall include all attached accessory structures.
- iii. Size. Nonresidential. Subject to maximum building coverage standards.

8.7.4 Accessory Dwelling Units (not including Caretaker's Dwelling Unit)

One (1) accessory dwelling unit shall be permitted per lot as an accessory use to a principal dwelling in a single-family detached, single-family attached, two-family, three-family, or four-family building or in a townhouse building on its own lot. Accessory dwelling units shall only be permitted in the A-1, RSF-, RTF-, RMF-1, RMF-2, TR-, TN-, TC-, D- and PD district. Such use is not required to be included in the gross residential density calculations. Manufactured homes, shipping containers, recreational vehicles and travel trailers shall not be used as accessory dwelling units, except that manufactured homes may be used as an accessory dwelling unit in the A-1 and Manufactured Home Overlay districts. For such use, the following shall apply:

Commentary: Principal dwellings include single-, two-, three-, and four family and townhouse dwellings. Measurements for principal dwelling size when principal dwelling is a multi-family will be calculated from single unit.

a. Location

- i. The unit may be attached to or detached from the principal dwelling.
- ii. When the unit is attached, it shall share a common wall with and have a separate entrance from the principal dwelling or be connected by a covered walkway. When the unit shares a common wall with the principal dwelling, the entrance to the unit shall be located along the side or rear façade of the dwelling. An attached accessory dwelling unit shall meet the setback standards for the principal dwelling unit.
- iii. Detached accessory dwelling units shall meet the same side-yard setback requirement as the principal structure. Such units shall be separated from the principal structure by at least 10 feet. Detached accessory dwelling units shall have a rear-yard setback requirement of at least five (5) feet, provided that if the accessory dwelling is located on a lot that abuts a lane the rear-yard setback requirement shall be at least three (3) feet. Within zoning districts that have no rear-yard setback requirement for the principal structure there shall be no rear-yard setback requirement for an accessory dwelling unit.
- iv. A variance shall not be required to convert an existing accessory structure to an accessory dwelling unit when the existing accessory structure is nonconforming only with the accessory dwelling unit setback requirements. Such conversion shall only be allowed when the extent of the nonconformity is not increased, and the height of the structure is not increased. When the subject lot does not meet the minimum lot area to allow an accessory dwelling unit, a variance shall be required for enlargement of the nonconforming accessory structure, including when such enlargement does not increase the extent of the nonconformity with setbacks.

8.7.4 Accessory Dwelling Units (not including Caretaker's Dwelling Unit)

b. Lot Area

For A-1, RSF-, RTF, RMF-1, RMF-2, and TR- districts, the minimum lot size for such use shall be at least ~~125%~~ 100% of the minimum lot area required by the zoning district. This standard shall be variable. ~~If a variance is pursued, the Historic Preservation Commission shall provide a recommendation to the Zoning Board of Appeals, when the parcel is located in a conservation overlay district, as provided in Section 7.15 or is located in a designated National Register Historic District without a Local Historic Overlay, as defined by Sec. 13.3~~

c. Building Size

- i. The building footprint of the accessory dwelling unit shall be a maximum of 40% of the building footprint of the principal dwelling not to exceed 700 square feet. In the A-1, RSF-

E, RSF-30 and RSF-20 districts, the maximum building footprint shall be 40% of the building footprint of the principal dwelling or 1,000 square feet, whichever is less. In buildings with multiple dwelling units, the footprint percentage calculation shall be based on the footprint of a single dwelling unit.

- ii. The accessory dwelling unit shall contain the minimum square feet as required by the ordinances and codes of the City of Savannah regulating building construction.
- iii. The accessory dwelling unit shall contain no more than one (1) bedroom. This standard shall be variable.

e. Architectural Style

For property not in a local historic overlay district, Such use shall be designed in a similar architectural style as the principal dwelling. If the site is located within a local historic overlay district, the standards of the overlay district shall apply.

h. Height

- i. When a parcel is located in a conservation overlay district, as provided in Section 7.15, or is designated a National Register Historic District without a Local Historic Overlay, as defined in Section 13.3, accessory dwelling units shall not exceed 25 feet in height or the height of principal building, whichever is less. ~~If a variance is pursued, the Historic Preservation Commission shall provide a recommendation to the Zoning Board of Appeals.~~
- ii. Within all other permitted zoning districts, accessory dwelling units shall not exceed 25 feet or the height of principal building, whichever is less.
- iii. Any portion of an accessory dwelling unit over 15 feet in height shall be located at least 15 feet from a rear property line that does not abut a lane.

BACKGROUND:

The City has been working with MPC to revise Sec. 8.7 Accessory Structures and Uses of the Zoning Ordinance to provide greater flexibility for accessory dwelling units (ADUs) and reduce the number of variance requests submitted to the Zoning Board of Appeals. These changes aim to support the creation of new housing supply through ADUs that can offer increased housing variety, support aging in place, and provide existing residents with opportunities to generate additional income from their property.

In 2019, the adoption of NewZO permitted ADUs in single-family districts for lots at least 200% of the district's minimum lot size except in the TC-, TN-, D-, and PD districts. Many of these already have ADUs due to the historic character of these districts. In May 2023, Council approved a zoning text amendment that reduced the minimum lot size requirement from the 200% standard to 125%. They also approved the ability for property owners to secure variances to this requirement which were previously prohibited.

Please note, the text amendment does not set a minimum floor area for ADUs. While the original 2019 NewZO required at least 400 sq ft, that minimum was removed in a 2023 amendment. ADUs must now meet the City of Savannah's building codes. The City follows the 2018 International Residential Code (IRC) which sets minimum standards for living space, bathrooms, kitchens, ventilation, and fire safety. These ensure ADUs are safe and habitable. The City has approved ADUs under 400 square feet as long as they meet IRC requirements and pass review by the City's Development Services Plan Reviewers.

The recently adopted GPS Strategic Plan provides multiple goals that support this amendment, including:

- Goal 2, Part I., Item 1. Implement programs and partner with organizations to build, retain, and improve affordable and workforce housing options for individuals and families.
- Goal 2, Part I., Item 2. Update housing policies and ordinances to remove barriers and offer incentives that encourage the development of affordable housing.

The amendment is also aligned with the goals of the 2021 *Housing Savannah Action Plan*. Specifically, *Strategy 5A.4* of the Action Plan calls for the City to:

- Support, where appropriate and possible, zoning, development standard, licensing and similar ordinance amendments and/or new ordinances that promote housing affordability.

The proposed revisions seeks to reduce permitting time and costs while maintaining appropriate regulation of the scale and impact of accessory structures and ADUs. By reducing barriers to ADU production, it supports housing accessibility for a range of households and creates opportunities for residents to build wealth.

FINDINGS:

1. In 2024, 37 building permits were issued for ADUs, with 11 (28%) requiring variances for issues such as reduced setbacks, lot area, increased lot coverage, or footprint size. Of those, eight (22%) involved multiple variances.
2. For *Section 8.7.4.b*, the data below shows that many lots do not meet the current 125% threshold, but most comply with the 100% standard, which would significantly reduce the number of variance requests and expedite the building permitting process.

a. District 1: Hudson Hill

Zoned RSF -6

~ 409 lots

Min. Lot Area is 6,000 sq ft

Current ADU regulations require 7500

23% of lots meet current requirements (94 lots)

60% of lots would meet new requirements (249 lots)

b. District 2: Midtown

Zoned TR-1 and TR-2

~ 1,097 lots

Min. Lot area is 3,000 sq ft

Current ADU regulations require 3750 sq ft

57% of lots meet current requirements (620 lots)

76% of lots would meet new requirements (835 lots)

c. District 3: Victory Manor

Zoned RSF-6 and RTF

~ 368 lots

Min lot area is 6,000 sq feet

Current ADU regulations require 7,500 sq ft

62 % of lots meet current requirements (194 lots)

84% of lots would meet new requirements (308 lots)

d. District 4: Ardsley Park/Chatham Crescent

Zoned RSF-6 and RSF-5

~ 620 RSF-6 lots

49% of lots meet current requirements (306 lots)

85% of lots would meet new requirements (524 lots)

17% of lots meet current requirements (78 lots)
55 % of lots would meet new requirements (245 lots)

e. District 5: Jackson Park

Zoned TR-3
~ 463 lots
32% meet current requirements (148 lots)
90 % would meet new requirements (417 lots)

f. District 6: Windsor Forrest

Zoned RSF-6 and RSF-10
~ 757 RSF-6 lots
97% of lots meet current requirement (737 lots)
100% of lots meet new requirement (757 lots)

~ 1264 RSF-10 lots
64% of lots meet current requirement (815 lots)
94% of lots would meet new requirement (1194 lots)

ORDINANCE ANALYSIS:

Per section 3.7.7 of Article 3, Savannah's Zoning Ordinance offers four (4) review criteria for consideration of proposed text amendments:

- a. **Consistency** – The extent to which the proposed text amendment is consistent with the remainder of the Zoning Ordinance, including any purpose and intent statements.

MPC Staff Comment: *The proposed text amendment is consistent with the remainder of the Zoning Ordinance. It is not in conflict with other Ordinance provisions, but rather provides greater clarity to the process of ADU establishment and removes a potential barrier to the provision of otherwise safe and affordable housing.*

- b. **New or Changing Circumstances** – The extent to which the proposed text amendment represents a new idea not considered in the existing Zoning Ordinance, or represents a revision necessitated by changing circumstances over time.

MPC Staff Comment: *The amendment modifies existing provisions within the text. The proposed text amendment represents a revision necessitated by changing circumstances over time. The request is a response to the increasing need for a diversity of affordable housing options throughout the City.*

- c. **Error or Inappropriate Standard** – Whether or not the proposed text amendment corrects an error in the Zoning Ordinance, or otherwise improves upon existing requirements or standards.

MPC Staff Comment: *The proposed text amendment further clarifies and improves upon existing requirements and standards. It is intended to reduce the number of variance requests submitted to the Zoning Board of Appeals, which minimizes a barrier to ADU development.*

- d. **Compliance with Higher Law** – Whether or not the proposed text amendment revises the Zoning Ordinance to comply with state or federal statutes.

MPC Staff Comment: *The proposed amendment is not intended to align the Ordinance with state or federal statutes.*

POLICY ANALYSIS:

The text amendment revises the standards for accessory structures and ADUs to expand options for ADU construction, ensure consistency, enhance clarity within the ordinance, and better align with current housing development goals. At the same time, the standards remain attentive to the need for accessory structures and uses to be secondary to the principal use of a property in both form and function. These changes will ease the permitting process and support the development of additional housing in the community.

- **Sec. 8.7.3.e.:** Based on the appeal of the COA for 11 E. Gordon Street, the revisions clarify that accessory structures count toward maximum building coverage and are limited to 40% of the principal building's footprint. For attached structures, the combined footprint would apply.
- **Sec. 8.7.4:** Language was added to clarify which zoning and housing types allow ADUs to help applicants and staff quickly identify eligible districts. While the current ordinance requires an ADU to be associated with a principal dwelling, it does not specify which types. Staff have historically interpreted this to include single-family, two-family, three-family, four-family, and townhouse dwellings based on their common use with ADUs in our community. Apartments (five or more units) have not been permitted to have ADUs, and the amendment codifies this interpretation.
- **Sec. 8.7.4.a.:** Revisions allow for easier development of existing garages and structures, potentially reducing the number of variances for applicants looking to adapt existing accessory structures.
- **Sec. 8.7.4.b.:** The proposed changes include reducing the 125% minimum lot area requirement to 100% and removing the need for HPC recommendations when seeking a variance. See the "findings" section for related data.
- **Sec 8.7.4.d.:** The revision clarifies the standards for multiple dwelling units on a single parcel and reflects the historic interpretation of this requirement. Another modification includes allowing variances for more than one bedroom in an ADU.
- **Sec. 8.7.4.e.:** The revision defers to the appropriate historic review board for review of the architectural style. The will ensure the historic pattern of carriage houses and garages reflect the historic development pattern and they remain subordinate and more modest in design than the principal dwelling.
- **8.7.7.4.h.:** The standard requiring the Historic Preservation Commission to provide a recommendation for ADU variances has been removed. This will expedite the building permitting process.

The proposed modifications represent an attempt to codify lessons learned since the most recent amendment of this text in [May 2023](#). And while most amended provisions can be expected to yield greater clarity and efficiency, viewed in context, concerns emerge about the implications for ADUs as sustainable, long term housing options. More directly, of concern is the variability of the number of bedrooms in the absence of 1) a stated dwelling unit minimum square footage and 2) a clear set of criteria for the suitability of a particular site to contain an ADU housing multiple bedrooms.

First, as the impetus behind the proposed modifications also includes motivations for increased housing affordability and equity, it is worthwhile noting that such housing is typically linked to *housing quality*

standards that go beyond IRC and IBC minimums for safety. Truly affordable housing is built with respect for the needs and dignity of occupants, recognizing long-term residents' requirements for *functional space, storage, privacy and accessibility*. To this end, housing developed around State and Federal affordability standards is commonly larger than would be permitted on the basis of IRC or IBC compliance. Though there is an urgent need for additional housing units, care should be given to avoidance in creation of substandard housing or living conditions.

The Georgia Department of Community Affairs establishes the following dwelling unit minimum sizes.

Minimum Unit Sizes

(waiver may not be requested for new construction)

DWELLING TYPE	MINIMUM SQUARE FOOTAGE	KITCHEN	BATHROOM
Studio	375	Cooking area	1
Efficiency	450	Full kitchen	1
1 Bedroom (Atlanta Metro only)	500	Full kitchen	1
1 Bedroom	650	Full kitchen	1
2 Bedrooms	850	Full kitchen	1
3 Bedroom	1,100	Full kitchen	2

Source: Georgia Department of Community Affairs Architectural Manual

Granted, these standards are applied in a context in which financing is provided in support, *substandard housing outcomes for what is intended to be long term housing should not be encouraged*.

Secondarily, added bedrooms equate to added demand on all engineered systems that support our neighborhoods, including traffic, stormwater, and water and sewer systems. Concentrated growth is ideal, however, a methodology should be established to determine where underutilized capacity exists versus where the development pattern or supporting systems may require upgrades or modifications to avoid creating burdensome new development that degrades the quality of life for both new and existing residents.

Moving forward, MPC Staff encourages the Planning Commission to consider establishment of dimensional minimums like the one removed from *Section 8.7.4.d.ii* in 2023 in an effort to ensure a measure of housing quality as the private sector responds to Savannah's affordable housing challenge.

Additionally, Staff encourages the adoption of criteria for determining the appropriateness of allowing multiple bedrooms in an ADU. This policy would go hand-in-hand with the establishment of [priority growth areas and contextual guidelines](#) previously referenced in consideration of the Housing Density and Diversity text amendment.

RECOMMENDATION:

The Planning Commission recommends **approval** of the proposed amendments to Article 8, Section 8.7, Accessory Structures and Uses of the Zoning Ordinance with the following condition:

- 1) Establishment of variance criteria for *Sec. 8.7.4.d.iii* permitting ADUs to contain multiple bedrooms within 90 days of Council adoption.