



THE **RUNDOWN**

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NATION

Tiny houses are trendy, minimalist and often illegal

 7382

BY REBECCA BEITSCH, STATELINE *July 6, 2016 at 9:58 AM EDT*





EMAIL



Cities and states are having trouble creating rules for increasingly popular “tiny houses.” Photo [Tammy Strobel](#)

Sarah Hastings’ 190-square-foot home was on 3 acres of farmland next to a small garden in Hadley, Massachusetts. Now it’s in storage.

The 23-year-old recent college graduate built the house last year while she was a student at Mount Holyoke College. But like many who want to live in a “tiny house,” generally defined as a home smaller than 500 square feet, she has struggled to find a place to put it.

Living micro: Single residents embrace tiny apartments

After somebody reported her for violating Hadley’s zoning ordinances, Hastings proposed changing the town’s laws to allow for backyard apartments, but the measure was voted down in a town meeting.

Some local governments around the country are welcoming tiny houses, attracted by their potential to ease an affordable housing crunch or even house the homeless. Cities such as Washington, D.C., and Fresno, California, have eased zoning and building rules to allow them, and in May California’s housing department [issued guidance](#) to help builders and code enforcers know which standards they need to meet. They are even the subject of the HGTV shows “Tiny House, Big Living” and

“Tiny House Hunters.”

But lost in the enthusiasm is the fact that in many places, it is hard to live in them legally.

Many residents and local officials fear they will drive down property values. Some state and local governments, perplexed about whether to classify tiny houses as RVs, mobile homes or backyard cottages, still refuse to allow them.

And as for tiny houses being a solution to the affordable housing crunch, some housing experts caution they aren't right for everyone.

“People using affordable housing are a diverse group. You've got retired people, disabled people, families,” said Robert Silverman, a professor with the University of Buffalo's School of Architecture and Planning. “A 300-square-foot trailer with a loft up top may not be suited for all those groups.”

Hastings said Hadley rejected her tiny house proposal because some residents were afraid the town would be overrun with them. “There was kind of a backlash. It only takes a few people saying ‘Oh, there'll be 500 of them,’” she said.



Cities and states are having trouble creating rules for increasingly popular “tiny houses.” Photo Tammy

Strobel

The ‘Wild West’ of Construction

In 2015, the median new family home in the U.S. was 2,500 square feet, [61 percent larger](#) than homes from 1975.

Tiny houses have gained traction with people who want to live a simpler life with fewer possessions and financial obligations, and who want to have a smaller environmental footprint. Some nonprofits are eyeing them as a possible solution for people priced out of overheated housing markets.

The difficulty has been where to place them. Those built on foundations must meet local building and zoning regulations. But many tiny houses are built off-site, sometimes without knowing where they will ultimately rest. That makes it difficult to know which building codes to meet, especially if owners plan to move them from place to place.

Bill Rockhill, the founding president of the American Tiny House Association and a New York-based builder who primarily builds tiny houses, said he and other builders try to follow uniform building codes for houses or a similar set of standards for RVs. Still, not all requirements can be met — the ladders in a tiny house may not meet requirements set forth for stairs, and lofts may not have high enough ceilings.

During construction, Rockhill takes photos of everything inside the walls so that customers can talk with building inspectors about construction. He said code enforcers can be flexible on some safety requirements, such as allowing a loft as long as it has a large enough escape window.

“It’s kind of the Wild West of building,” said Tony Gilchrist, a builder based in Washington, D.C. But Gilchrist notes that the lack of clear standards makes some builders more cautious. That is especially true when the owners of a tiny house plan to move it frequently, and it must be sturdy enough to be driven down the highway at 60 mph.

“I think people overbuild because they’re afraid,” he said.

But Dan Buuck, a specialist on codes and standards for the National Association of

Home Builders, insists that some tiny houses are filled with dangers. Smoke can accumulate more quickly in low-ceiling and loft areas, and ladders and small windows make it harder for help to get in and out.

Those concerns have spawned a cottage industry of firms willing to certify that a tiny house is safe. Chuck Ballard with Pacific West Associates Inc. said his company reviews architectural plans and photos of construction before issuing the certification, which costs around \$2,000.

On the Ground

As of now, few cities allow stand-alone tiny houses. Most communities have minimum square footage requirements for single-family homes mandating that smaller dwellings be an “accessory” to a larger, traditional house. Many also have rules requiring that dwellings be hooked up to utilities, which is a problem for tiny-house enthusiasts who want to live off the grid by using alternative energy sources such as solar panels and rainwater catchment systems.

That’s the case for Brian Levy, whose 210-square-foot tiny house in a peaceful back alley alongside a cemetery in Washington, D.C., isn’t considered fit to be occupied full-time because it is on its own piece of land and it is not connected to city utilities.

Many cities are more accommodating to tiny houses on foundations, which are considered guest cottages — as opposed to those on wheels. Starting in the fall, D.C.’s new zoning regulations will permit tiny houses in some neighborhoods, as long as they are on a foundation and are connected to utilities.

When cities require the same permitting for tiny houses on foundations as they do for traditional houses, it often doesn’t make financial sense to build tiny. “At that point it’s really more of a lifestyle choice than an economic choice,” said Nick Krautter, a real estate agent in Portland, Oregon, who abandoned plans for a tiny house development.

Just a few cities allow tiny houses that rest on wheels, including Fresno, where they are now considered backyard cottages.

Tiny Towns, Tiny Houses

Alexis Stephens, a tiny house dweller who has been traveling the country making a documentary on how people are living in tiny houses legally, said small towns have been more open to tiny houses than their larger counterparts.

One example is Spur, Texas — population 1,318 — where people hope tiny houses will help revitalize the shrinking community. In 2014, Spur declared itself the nation's first [tiny-house-friendly town](#).

John Schmidt, the city's home inspector and code enforcement officer, said the process began by selling lots in town for as little as \$250. The town has already sold 60 lots, and though they're a little less than a quarter of an acre, that's plenty of room for a tiny house, a driveway and a garden.

There are three tiny houses now, and five more are expected to be finished by the end of the summer. Because the key is to get these new residents to stay, they must put their house on a foundation and connect to city utilities. If the tiny house was originally constructed on wheels, the owner needs to remove the wheels and axles and put a skirt around the base to keep out critters. "We've got people paying taxes, going to schools, buying groceries. It's a boon to the town because of the income," Schmidt said.

Stephens said Rockledge, Florida, is taking a different approach. The town recently approved zoning regulations that would allow for a "pocket neighborhood," or cluster, of tiny houses.

Tiny houses there can keep the wheels on, but they must build both a front and a back porch.

"It's enough to discourage frequent travel but it doesn't prevent it if needed or desired," Stephens said.

A Home of Their Own

Many advocates of tiny houses see them not just as part of a trendy minimalist movement, but as a way to offer affordable housing to millennials, retirees, low-income people and even the homeless.

There are a handful of tiny house communities for the homeless in places like

Oregon, Texas, Washington and Wisconsin. More are on the way in Detroit and Kansas City.

Panza in Olympia, Washington, and Mobile Loaves & Fishes in Austin, Texas, are nonprofits that rent tiny houses to the homeless for a small sum. Panza's Quixote Village started as a tent camp. Now it includes 30 tiny houses which people can rent for 30 percent of their income, or at least \$50 a month. And a Mobile Loaves & Fishes program called Community First Village just finished building over 100 tiny houses in a mix of architectural styles, which will rent for \$225 to \$375 a month.

In both Olympia and Austin, the tiny houses lack bathrooms and kitchens. Instead, residents must share common bathrooms and kitchens — an arrangement designed to foster a sense of community and keep the cost of the houses low.

Some of the tiny house communities in development around the country will take a different approach.

Cass Community Social Services, a nonprofit in Detroit, is building 25 tiny houses. The rent-to-own structures will have both bathrooms and kitchens. The Rev. Faith Fowler, the group's director, said the homes will be available to those transitioning from homeless shelters, students who are aging out of the foster care system and low-income seniors.

Fowler said her main goal isn't just to house this population, but to address asset inequality — to give people something so they can borrow money, leave property to their kids, or even sell. People will rent the tiny house for the first three years and be added to a lien for the last four. After seven years, the house will be theirs.

Fowler said the project will be different from other affordable housing because it will provide a path to ownership for tenants. It also offers GED classes, and a gym and small store within walking distance. All will employ residents.

But Cate Mingoya, who oversees public housing and rental assistance for Massachusetts, cautioned that not all tiny houses are a good solution for the homeless.

When Mingoya toured several tiny house homeless communities she found that some homes were well constructed but others weren't properly built, leaving them

vulnerable to the elements. “How much choice do they really have to live in that house?” she said. “When you’re segregating people based on income and tell them you get 120 square feet, there’s a social cost.”

This story was produced by [Stateline](#), an initiative of The Pew Charitable Trusts.

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[ctonyperry](#) • 2 days ago

Commodification of necessities is hurting the middle class and poor. Preserving the values for existing home owners should be the absolute last priority. It is the height of greed to deny someone else housing because you are trying to artificially inflate the value of your property.

That sort of NIMBY, anti-development attitude is largely responsible for a lot of the housing problems that are occurring across the country and it really needs to stop.

36   • Reply • Share ›



[Me](#) > [ctonyperry](#) • 2 days ago

There are probably people who want to NIMBY the middle class (or those who make less than \$100K per year) and the poor from the ENTIRE United States...but that's another story. smh

11   • Reply • Share ›



[fishydude](#) > [Me](#) • 2 days ago

\$100K income will barely afford a bare bones apartment in crappy neighborhoods in most of California.

It is all relative.

But it is pretty easy to make the case that the rulers in California are doing everything they can to drive out the middle class while increasing taxes to subsidize their servant class.

12   • Reply • Share ›



[Me](#) > [fishydude](#) • 2 days ago

Very true. Although if they NIMBY tiny houses, where do the wealthy expect their servant class to even to live? In the over priced apartments the poor can't afford anyway (and are owned by the wealthy)? Tar paper shacks or in a van down by the river? In their own mansion homes (a'la the in-house servants on Downton Abbey)? A revolving door between the US & Mexico? (An outsourcing of household servants like "You can clean my house/fix my car/water my grass for next to nothing in my California home...but you can't reside here/in the US...& have to go back to Mexico to sleep.") o.O

10   • Reply • Share ›



[oldman](#) > [Me](#) • 2 days ago

The issue is they don't care where they live as long as it is not in there neighborhood. They don't want the masses driving down their property values.

8   • Reply • Share ›



[JeanSC](#) > Me • a day ago

Decades ago, when I lived in L.A. and got a great education there, I went to Malibu on some Saturdays. It was a number of bus rides from the San Fernando Valley and took a while, but it was feasible and worth it. I saw a number of people I'd guess to be in the "servant class" probably going to work in the homes of wealthy people in Malibu. They lived in the more modestly-priced housing well inland. Wealth enables people to buy convenience, which in many cases translates into high-priced housing close to where they work. They're able to buy the political power to "clean up" the low-priced housing near city centers, whose businesses nevertheless employ workers who can't afford to live close and pay in commuting time what they can't pay in commuting or housing costs. Time is the one thing that rich and poor all get the same amount of. When rich people can't take any more money or property or safety from the poor, they take time from these people in various forms.

1 • Reply • Share ›



[T Bahry](#) > fishydude • 2 days ago

It is not the "rulers" that are driving out the middle-class via housing costs in California....it is the again out-of-control rising real estate market.

The middle-class has not been represented well by the housing market since the 1970's, in my area. Migrant and or low-income housing has been well represented, as have homes for higher-paid commuters who work elsewhere.

2 • Reply • Share ›



[James](#) > T Bahry • 2 days ago

Thats a lie. It is the middle class that has driven up real estate costs with their demand for ever growing homes.

1 • Reply • Share ›



[Ellen](#) > T Bahry • a day ago



So true. The 5 year supply of buyers in the central coast to Northern California are all what was once considered "middle class"

👍 | 🗨️ • Reply • Share ›



[Alpha Q](#) > fishydude • 2 days ago

This is such a pathetic attitude. Cry me a river already. \$100k/yr is over \$6k/mo *take home*. I bought an 1800 sq ft, 3br/2ba house in a nice area while making \$62k/yr. "Wahhh, wahhhh, I can't live in Beverly Hills or at the beach....everywhere else is crappy!"

4 👍 | 🗨️ • Reply • Share ›



[Ellen](#) > fishydude • a day ago

Exactly my point in my post above!

👍 | 🗨️ • Reply • Share ›



[fishydude](#) > ctonyperry • 2 days ago

Try, all of the housing issues. Those that bought high don't ever want housing to meet demand because that would cause housing prices to come down. That is why cities like San Fransicko have a city council that proposes building public housing for the city employees. 'The Help' can't afford to live within a 90 minute drive of their masters.

7 👍 | 🗨️ • Reply • Share ›



[hobgoblin11](#) > fishydude • 2 days ago

nor should the "help" live within 90 minutes.. there is a reason property values are higher.. its a very desirable place to live and if you havnt worked you way up the ladder and EARNED the income to buy a house close to work.. then you pay by having to commute. NO ONE is entitled to live anywhere unless they can afford it.

5 👍 | 🗨️ • Reply • Share ›



[Mark Obbanya](#) > [hobgoblin11](#) • 2 days ago

When the help becomes scarce...the policy will change. When the current model doesn't make money, it will change. Hence, small towns that are already doing poorly being willing to allow tiny houses. Anything to gain revenue.

6 | • Reply • Share ›



[hobgoblin11](#) > [Mark Obbanya](#) • 2 days ago

EXACTLY.. thats how its supposed to work.. when help becomes scarce.. the market value of "help" rises ergo their wages rise.. its simple economics most of these m0r0ns dont understand. The problem arises when you subsidize CHEAP housing in places the "help" cant currently afford to live which artificially suppresses wages and the "help" never moves up.. d4mn at least someone here gets it,

1 | • Reply • Share ›



[david scott](#) > [hobgoblin11](#) • 2 days ago

AVE, ol' illustrious goblin, I bow to your greed.

7 | • Reply • Share ›



[Ralph Spooner](#) > [hobgoblin11](#) • 2 days ago

After a while, nobody can afford to work for a local govt. because half their pay or more is going into transportation cost, gas, car payments, car insurance, car maintenance cost or public transportation cost. They will wind up spending 4 to 6 hours a day just in trying to get to and from work. What is happening is that the groups of people that sweep the streets, wait on you in the eating places, pick up your garbage, etc, cannot afford to live in the very cities they serve.

Some years ago, back in the late 90's, I was in a training class in Dallas, TX with some folks from the LA and San Francisco area. We got talking about housing cost during one of the guys from SF talking about trying to sell his house. He was describing the house and I could not believe how small it was with the asking price of over 250K. Out of curiosity, I asked him what a house, stick built ranch style, with 2400 sq. ft. on 3/4 acre would sell for. It blew my

mind at the figures he quoted. I understood very quickly how much I appreciated where I lived instead of where he did. For him, a traffic jam going to work might mean thousands of cars at a stand still at any given time. For me, it might be 10 cars backed up at the red light.

4  |  • Reply • Share ›



[amyinnh](#) > Ralph Spooner • 2 days ago

This comes from way too much commerce concentration. No commerce to residence ratios in zoning. Without it, urban planning is a joke.

4  |  • Reply • Share ›



[T Bahry](#) > ctonyperry • 2 days ago

Most communities' zoning regulations are reflections of a "general plan", which is a comprehensive document that establishes population density criteria, open space, building setbacks, traffic circulation, and other factors that define the needs and goals of the local community. Those regulations are normally adopted in a process of public hearings held both by planning bodies and legislative bodies. The legislative body is elected by and represents the citizens of the community.

Many states with large populations also oversee local zoning and building processes with basic rules local governments must abide by. Building codes are essential to make sure the buildings are safe and not situated so as to spread fire easily, collapse in an earthquake, or float off in a flood.

In California, for example, in an attempt to create lower cost units, small second units are now allowed on many single family lots if certain criteria are met - as long as they meet certain basic requirements.

A local government has to look at adequate tax generation for street, fire and police services, infrastructure maintenance, etc., and property values are part of that equation. Frankly, a homeowner has the right to expect their local government to support a minimum standard of density and build-quality that represents the neighborhood they reside in, zoning-wise. Also of concern is adequate sanitary sewer capability and water quality control (meaning if you have a county or municipal sanitary sewer plant you have to pay for the necessary expansion needed, and if you are using a septic tank, increased effluent may be a problem for water quality standards should too many residences be constructed in any given area).

Housing types and starts are a bit more complicated than your post implies, and for many good reasons that have nothing to do with greed.

2  |  • Reply • Share ›



[hobgoblin11](#) > [ctonyperry](#) • 2 days ago

That has to be the most m0r0nic post I've read in years.. now its greed to not want your property values to crash because someone moves a bunch of tiny houses into your neighborhood? Many of those people paid A LOT of money for their house.. to live in a nice neighborhood free from overcrowding, trash and crime. They have EVERY right to dictate the course of the neighborhood.. who are YOU to tell them otherwise? NO ONE is entitled to live in a neighborhood if they cant afford it.. no more than everyone is entitled to drive a Mercedes or BMW. I know some brain-dead liberal like you doesnt grasp the concept of "value" and somehow think you and your sub-mediocre ilk are entitled to anything you want simply because your parents could breed but that is NOT how the real world works, nor should it. A NICE house in a NICE neighborhood is NOT a necessity its a LUXURY.

8  |  • Reply • Share ›



[ctonyperry](#) > [hobgoblin11](#) • 2 days ago

Manipulating public policy for personal enrichment at the expense of others is not greed? If you say so.

Sounds like crony capitalism to me.

21  |  • Reply • Share ›



[hobgoblin11](#) > [ctonyperry](#) • 2 days ago

They are the homeowners in the area.. its THEIR public policy and THEY get to decide the fate of their neighborhood.. not some poor trash who wants to dump a "tiny home" on any plot of land so they dont have to commute. What you just said is like having a bunch of people from Montana having a say in zoning ordinances in Southern California so they can all afford to move there. I dont know why this is so hard for you to understand.. zoning ordinances are a LOCAL issue decided by LOCAL taxpayers.. not any old random jacka\$\$ who just decides he wants to live there but cant afford it.

6  |  • Reply • Share ›



[Joe Harrison](#) > [hobgoblin11](#) • 2 days ago

hobgoblin11 said..." not some poor trash who wants to dump a "tiny home" on any plot of land so they don't have to commute"

I guess the poor do not have a vote in your America....being poor does not make you trash either...

15 • Reply • Share ›



[hobgoblin11](#) > [Joe Harrison](#) • 2 days ago

When it comes to local zoning ordinances and property owners who live there.. No you dont have a vote unless you are one. they have priority.. they paid for the land and they paid for the right to dictate how its used.

2 • Reply • Share ›



[david scott](#) > [hobgoblin11](#) • 2 days ago

Ergo, you buy the land, put a tool shed on it, city goes nuts because they can't make money off your land. People who have small hoses are not going to 'contaminate YOUR neighborhood, they are trying/wishing to save money. Bless your heart.

13 • Reply • Share ›



[Ezra Tank](#) > [Joe Harrison](#) • a day ago

So I guess you wouldn't mind if you just paid \$500K for a house and someone bought the lot next to you and put 3 tiny houses up. Of course since property taxes are based on size you'll pay \$10K/year in taxes and these people will pay \$1K but use the same services.

Gotta love the progressive leftist thoughts.

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[CATVLLVS XVI](#) > [Ezra Tank](#) • 14 hours ago

"Progressive leftist thoughts"? You seem to be the one

who's champing at the bit for the government to dictate what people are and aren't allowed to do on their own property... to artificially inflate the price of an investment made with no guarantee that it would keep its value?

Did you support the 2008 bailouts?

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[laytonian](#) > Ezra Tank • a day ago

The tiny house proponents I know are right-wing "libertarians".
The lefties know how to dispose of sewage.

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[crystal](#) > hobgoblin11 • 2 days ago

If I buy a piece of property there, I expect to be able to put a shed on it and live in it if I want, and it is none of your business.

14   • Reply • Share ›



[oldman](#) > crystal • 2 days ago

Exactly as long as there are not 20 cars taking up all the parking on the street or the tiny house is not an eye sore what difference does it make? None I bet they don't make a stink over sheds in back yards.

5   • Reply • Share ›



[Ralph Spooner](#) > crystal • 2 days ago

crystal, yes it is if the shed is a fire hazard and not built to minimum standards dictated by the local building codes. Most cities, particularly in rural areas, are pretty lenient if the total cost and size are below a given point, usually 500 to 1k and that may vary depending on where you live. Years ago, like 30 years or so, my wife and I had to move in with her aging parents to take care of them after her dad had colon

cancer. I purchased a 12X50 aluminum building to put in the back yard to handle the excess furniture and belongings of both families after we combined households. Our appliances went into the house as they were only a couple of years old and her parents appliances were 15 to 20 years old. We had a couple of neighbors that were not too happy, but because I had done my homework and complied with all city and county ordinances, there was nothing they could say or do. I planted some screening shrubbery behind the building to help screen and block the reflected sunlight off of the back of the building facing neighbor behind us as the

[see more](#)

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[Commentator Dude](#) > crystal • 2 days ago

Moron. Buying a property in a neighborhood does not entitle you to build a "shed" on it, unless local building codes allow for you to do that. How about you try to park your tiny house, or a shed, on some property in Beverly Hills. See what happens.

2   • [Reply](#) • [Share](#) ›



[SwordofPerseus](#) > [Commentator Dude](#) • 2 days ago

So much for freedom. This is a pervasive and corrosive myth in America(US) that the "consumers" are free to do as they please and you may do as you like as long as you do not harm anyone else. This has been perverted to mean that profit is supreme over personal freedom and the pursuit of happiness. We are living in a sick and immoral society run by jackals and populated by cynics and imbeciles. Government is now a plutocracy rather than a republic. This country was destroyed by enemies from within its borders, not the foreign type as we have always been told to fear. Apathy and greed have destroyed the USA, and it is not likely to be the shining beacon on the hill ever again.

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[Ellen](#) > crystal • a day ago

Yes, and you will have the exact same voting rights as any

other land owner in the neighborhood.

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[Mark Obbanya](#) > [hobgoblin11](#) • 2 days ago

"poor trash".....your description speaks volumes about your worldview.

8   • Reply • Share ›



[hobgoblin11](#) > [Mark Obbanya](#) • 2 days ago

if you have to live in a "tiny house" on someone elses land.. ya that pretty much makes you trash.

  • Reply • Share ›



[Betsy Rose](#) > [hobgoblin11](#) • 2 days ago

Some people like the idea of living less dependent on material acquisition. They mostly wouldn't want to live in your snobbyass neighborhood, anyway. Many of them are monetarily comfortable, too, but don't want the burden of a big house and overinflated taxes.

I hope more states will develop tiny-friendly areas, and regulations that allow off-grid/environmentally conscientious lifestyles. Otherwise RV campgrounds may have to be the new neighborhoods for tiny houses.

4   • Reply • Share ›



[cthomp05](#) > [Betsy Rose](#) • a day ago

Betsy, he said "on someone elses land." That hardly classifies as being "less dependent."

1   • Reply • Share ›



[Betsy Rose](#) > [cthomp05](#) • a day ago

One, my saying "less dependent" was in reference to not wanting to large homes and extensive material goods, not

being a freeloader or a 'welfare' tenant. And two, the "living on someone else's land" is apparently an assumption by that person, not a statement that applies to most people who have been interested in tiny living.

The original article lumps together people who simply want less of the 'burdens' associated with big homes, and those who are poor and need help with housing. The idea of using tiny living quarters for the very poor or the homeless is really a completely separate story. The idea came out of the realization that many "affordable housing" plans don't really solve the problem for some groups.

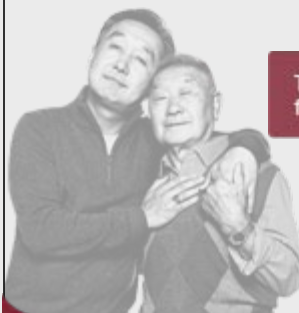
The above discussion is based on a prejudicial assumption that anyone who wants a tiny home is a) poor & b) intending to freeload on just any old piece of property.

Additionally, just to reiterate points others tried to make: towns & cities have building codes and Zoning regulations.



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