

# Post-Webinar Q&A Responses

## Webinar on Updating Neighborhood Regulations

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Webinar panelist, Mike Miller, Montpelier's planning director, provided the following written responses to audience questions that could not be addressed during the live session, due to time constraints.

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***Q1. Can you talk more about how to address opposition to allowing duplexes? How do you counter the somewhat reasonable argument that it doubles density and means increased vehicle traffic and parking problems?***

**A1.** We had prepared for a big push-back on this idea but that push never came. Our first argument was going to be that people could already do a house and accessory apartment. A duplex is really not much different in traffic impacts. Parking was less of an issue as they still need to provide an off-street parking space for each unit (2 in each configuration). The next case we would make is that larger homes can have many people living in them. A 4-bedroom home could have four cars in the driveway if rented by a "non-family" household. Subdividing a 1500 square foot home into a 1000 square foot home with a 500 sq ft. accessory unit or two 750 square foot units makes the original home smaller. Our roads in Montpelier do not have capacity issues for traffic so I would push back on the assumption that traffic is an issue. Also many of these units are close to the downtown and walking and biking are real options for people and could reduce overall traffic in the region (for example people who used to live in Berlin and drive to work in Montpelier, could move to Montpelier and walk to work from close by).

***Q2. Assuming there is competition in your community for limited existing housing stock, did you adopt any strategies for slowing the conversion of single-family homes into apartment buildings or offices so that some of these can remain in use as single family homes?***

**A2.** Excellent question! It was proposed many times by my predecessor but not while I was here. It never passed. What we find now is offices being converted back to apartments because you can get more money in housing. Commercial landlords would be more cautious of doing it if they thought they might not move it back to office in the future, so we have kept away so far. Most of the conversion to offices/apartments happen in mixed use buildings- a commercial first floor and the upper floors shift between office to apartment. Single family homes are rarely the target here for that change.

***Q3. Allowing Duplexes for all units. Does the duplex need to be owner occupied? And does the wastewater permit need to be amended?***

**A3.** No duplexes do not need an owner-occupied component. We really support and promote rental housing. Most people do not have the resources to afford to own and maintain a home, so we are ok with rentals. Any change that requires a WW permit must still get it. We have sewer

capacity in Montpelier, so that usually is more of a paperwork (and financial) exercise for the applicant.

***Q4. Can you explain more about the change from counting units by parcel instead of by structure?***

**A4.** It was something that actually came up when we were testing the new rules. We had a few larger parcels that could, for example, support 4 DUs and quadplexes were conditional use. We asked each other how a project with 2 duplexes would be managed on this parcel. Is it 2 permitted uses or one conditional use? The impacts on the neighborhood are the same. We had bulk and massing requirements that are separate so it's not that one 4-unit building is bigger than two duplexes. I pushed (and it was eventually agreed) that we would count by parcel.

We recognized that counting by units by structure would actually work against our housing goal because (let's say) in the example above, multifamily is not allowed in the district. If they had the density for 10 units, could they put 10 single family dwellings (all permitted) or are they capped at 4 without subdividing? Our decision capped the amount of development at 4 so that hurt the housing goal but it helped to make more styles of homes possible. We did not need to come up with a special use for a group of tiny homes or a single-family home with two apartments over their garage. Having rules that are clean from an administration standpoint helps everyone down the line. Hope that answers your question.

***Q5. Can you expand on that?***

**A5.** One way this helps is in making sure the permit process is clear for multi-unit projects. Confusion can lead to wasted time. So, if you have the density for 5 units and want to put five tiny homes on it for rent, is it a multifamily application (which could be a conditional use) or is it five permitted uses? As a ZA we don't care which answer it is as long as it is clear. I found many times people counted by structure and was surprised by that. We found that counting by parcel a lot cleaner. If someone has a home and wants to put another home on their property without subdividing, then go for it. We treat it as a two-unit parcel. If they want to put an apartment over the garage as well, then it becomes a three unit. Many places want them to be connected (as in a triplex). It's mostly just about having a clear process for these more unique projects that we now see today with the interest in tiny homes and accessory apartments.

***Q6. For the southern portion of the state, we have a barrier related to the availability of contractors and trade professionals to meet workforce housing goals at the local level.***

**A6.** It's a bigger issue than just in southern Vermont. We talk a lot in Washington County about the same problem. Our advantage is talent is close by, and we want to see how we can get them to work in Montpelier. Most of the local contractors are home builders or renovation and repair guys/gals. If we want a 40-unit building, we are drawing from Chittenden Co. We have discussed creating a program or incentive to get a "professional developer" class here in the County but never quite figured out how. And not just builders. Financing, permitting, and getting folks to buy and build master plans over time. We feel your pain on this one. I don't have a solution but it would be worth setting up a meeting on the topic with those in the field.