

By Nicole Wiesenthal / Correspondent **Tuesday**

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A possible solution to affordable housing in Gainesville might come in just 600 square feet — or about the size of a two-car garage.

The tiny housing movement has been growing in popularity as more people recognize it as economically and environmentally friendly, but older zoning ordinances around the country have kept it from taking root.

Last month, the Gainesville Community Development Committee met and discussed tiny housing as a feasible solution for homelessness, more affordable housing and downsizing for the elderly.

Alachua County has also taken up the idea and held an Affordable Housing Summit Tuesday where county leaders discussed current restrictions that don't allow tiny houses except for a few unincorporated areas where property owners can build a small, fully-functioning building separate from the main house.

The maximum size of a tiny house would probably be about 600 square feet, said Alachua County Commissioner Robert Hutchinson, or about the size of an average two-car garage.

Some people cringe when they hear of the size, said Nichole Campbell, a research scholar at the University of Florida's Shimberg Center for Housing Studies, who specializes in design and building that optimizes health and well being for older adults.



Volunteers construct a functional tiny house during the Alachua County Affordable Housing Summit on Tuesday at the Alachua County Health Department. — Rob C. Witzel/The Gainesville Sun

But she said small spaces don't have to feel cramped if they're designed with function in mind, and they have a lot of benefits.

City Commissioner Craig Carter said tiny housing was initially brought up as an alternative for people looking to buy homes for less money

"What this is is if a young couple or old couple needs a place to stay and live or call their own, if you have a mother that needs to be close by and there's limited resources, you could move them into this," he said. "It's another option of lifestyle for people who have limited resources."

Lily Kirk, her husband, Matt, and her dog, Uwharrie, live together in a tiny house on the outskirts of Gainesville. The graduate students decided to build their own 128-square foot house to save money and live independently in an environmentally conscious way.

"It's a smaller carbon footprint, and there's a sense of pride in that," Lily said. "That's why people like to grow their own food, it's empowering. Building your own dwelling is also empowering."

Lily Kirk said she wouldn't recommend the tiny house lifestyle to everyone. She and her husband spend a lot of their time outdoors and got accustomed to the minimalist lifestyle when they hiked the Appalachian trail.

"If I need space, I just go for a walk," she said. "I don't think every couple is well suited for it, but for Matt and I, neither of us really need much."

She said the house cost about \$12,000 to build and includes features like sliding doors and wood floors.

Kirk said she originally wanted to keep her house in the city, but feared getting in trouble. She's looking forward to the policy change because she said she sees it as a viable alternative to dormitories or apartments for students

Campbell said she's excited to see Gainesville consider tiny housing.

The benefits include not having a mortgage or having a small mortgage, being closer to other houses and businesses, and less land and house to tend.

One of the reasons tiny housing has become so relevant, Campbell said, is because suburbs are losing their relevance.

Suburbs sprang from a need for housing after World War II ended and more people bought cars.

"It's not working anymore," she said. "If you're under 16 or can't drive for any reason, then you're really in a crunch. It's not designed for you. If you're 42 and have a vision issue, then suddenly you're in a pinch. That model used to limp along, but it's becoming less popular. Fewer people have driver's licenses, and it becomes more of a challenge for getting places."

But tiny houses bring people closer to together and, when built correctly, to other places, Campbell said

Bigger houses, she said, are no longer practical.

"In the '80s, '90s, there were these huge McMansions, and the occupants couldn't even afford to furnish all the rooms, so people were building houses bigger than they can afford, and I think the pendulum has swung the other way now," she said, "and we're realizing it really isn't fun to have a house payment you can't afford. It's really not fun to have to pay the utility bills and taxes on a huge house, so think it's a reaction to the overzealousness a few years back."

However, one of the challenges with tiny housing, Campbell said, is when they're built without good function, such as a house with stairs for an older, less-able person.

She said such problems need to be addressed before, rather than after such houses are built, and Alachua County and Gainesville commissioners plan to take that approach.

During the daylong summit, workers built a 128 square foot house.

"Tiny houses is a solution, but we have to allow them to really work," Hutchinson said. "They're being adopted by people who believe the giant houses we live in are a waste of resources, over-complicated and cluttering our lives."

He said while it may only take a day to build a tiny house, it will take much longer to change the policies to allow for tiny houses.

Carter said the Gainesville Community Development Committee based part of its plans around those of Rockledge, a Brevard County city near Cape Canaveral, that has a tiny-house ordinance.

Jim McKnight, Rockledge city manager, said they got the idea to allow tiny housing from interested residents and have since made provisions to allow the houses under certain circumstances.

“I see them as a positive alternative for people who are looking to minimize their lifestyle,” McKnight said. “People will have more time for their families and less time to take care of their yards. I see a lot of positives.”

Rockledge is close to approving a neighborhood with about 15 tiny houses in it that span over 1.3 acres. He said one of the only problems he can think of would be people feeling uncomfortable having the neighborhood by their house.

Brett Hiltbrand, CEO of Cornerstone Tiny Homes in Longwood, Florida, said he’s glad to hear about the changes Gainesville is trying to make, because it could help combat two of the obstacles most people face when trying to get a tiny house: Right now, they’re mostly being placed or parked in Florida RV parks, and across the country, there’s a lack of bank financing for tiny houses.

Hiltbrand, a licensed building contractor, began to focus his business on tiny houses about two years ago after he realized it was a great way to build and afford a home, and more viable for many people.

Hiltbrand said he builds the houses as he would a regular home. He builds them from wood, and the only differences are the size and that the plumbing connects underneath to septic sewage or plugs in, like an RV

The houses he makes comply to Florida Building Codes, he said.

Dwight Fitzpatrick, a local construction cost consultant, has commissioned and received design plans to build what might be the first tiny-house neighborhood in Gainesville.

“It’s a trend that has been going all over the United States,” Fitzpatrick said. “The demographic of Gainesville with the large student population and percentage of income are what make Gainesville compatible with the plan.”

Fitzpatrick has submitted his plans to the City of Gainesville and hopes to begin constructing houses soon on a local lot a few miles east of downtown.

The houses will be about 700 square feet, and he said he believes he’s met all code regulations.

“I have designed restrooms or bathroom additions that are bigger than this,” he said. “All of the real amenities and comforts are there, though. It’s just that the amount of space is smaller.”

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