

Chilmark Tiny House Pilot Project

Proposal:

To develop a homesite housing option that allows the town to provide a shared greywater septic system, a shared drinking water well, road access and solar power to three (or four) separate eligible lease-lot renters per acre to build their own small, code-compliant dwelling no larger than 389sf (or 292sf).

Rationale:

Household sizes have been steadily shrinking over the past decades. According to the 2013 Martha's Vineyard Housing Needs Assessment, "There is a pressing need for a greater number of smaller units to accommodate a growing population of small households."¹ The study found that single-person households comprised about 1/3 of all households and 78% of all non-family households (unrelated people living together), and that two-person households comprised an additional 42% of all households. So although the housing shortage is particularly difficult for young families, homeownership options geared towards these smaller households could go a long way towards taking the pressure off by reducing the number of people seeking housing.

The affordable build of a tiny/small house offers the possibility of housing security, homeownership and independence for people who would otherwise compete for insufficient (and frequently sub-standard) living space. In addition, the small size of the house enables more efficient use of (limited) land area for a greater number of (very small) households. It is especially likely to attract retirees of modest means seeking to downsize from a standard-sized family home, and young people starting out who would prefer independent living to temporary quarters in their parents' basement.

Tiny houses re-conceive homeownership in a way which does not require relentless long-term individual indebtedness up to and beyond the margins of financial viability. Like all housing proposals for MV, tiny houses are *a* solution, not *the* solution to our need for housing. The intent of this pilot project is to make space for those people who do not feel deprived by living in a smaller space and who aspire to homeownership. Not everybody is attracted to the tiny house lifestyle, but those who are, tend to feel passionately about their preference, and will work tirelessly to achieve it.

Tiny/Small House Definition

As understood in this proposal, a tiny house is **building-code compliant construction**, hooked up to approved water, sanitation and utilities, and secured to a slab foundation or sona-tubes in compliance with wind-resistance and snow-load requirements for our region. It is *movable*, (in the same way that houses have traditionally been moved all over the island), but *not mobile* (on a trailer).

¹ <http://www.ihtmv.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/MV-Housing-Needs-Assessment-2013.pdf>, Part I, section 3.4: Households—Increasing numbers of smaller households

Size-considerations: the Chilmark “Big House Bylaw” provides a town-approved maximum living area of 3,500sf on a 3-acre lot. That will allow for either **four 292sf homes**, or **three 389sf homes per acre**.

Either one of these (or both) could be considered for this pilot project. There are pros and cons for each: the smaller size is ample for a single person and allows the town to accommodate four households per acre instead of three; however, a maximum size of 389sf is more realistic for a two-person household (a couple, or single parent with child, for example). The larger home may result in greater tenant-retention and may be attractive to those people who would feel constrained in the smaller house size.

Water and Wastewater

The key to the increased affordability of this tiny house proposal (aside from the inherent affordability of the house-size), is to be able to share the most expensive components, land and septic, among a number of tiny house homeowners. Under this pilot project, 3 one-bedroom homes can be considered equivalent to one three-bedroom home. (Note that Title 5 presumes a single family home to have a *minimum* of three bedrooms; having to build a Title 5 septic system for *each* tiny house would wipe out a significant part of the benefit of the small build).

A *shared* septic system, (which is in fact provided for under Title 5), not only cuts down on the cost of providing sanitation for each individual household, but also makes better use of land area. This would enable the tiny house pilot project to easily accommodate Chilmark BOH septic system separation requirements, which greatly exceed Title 5 requirements. Use of a composting toilet further cuts the size of the required leaching system by 50%, removes most of household-produced nitrogen from the groundwater, and can be built using a filter instead of installing a 1,500 gallon concrete tank.

Proposed Mechanisms

This proposal is not currently viable under Chilmark the zoning bylaw, and probably cannot be enabled by simply amending the Homesite Housing Implementation Guidelines. While ch.40B could probably achieve the proposal’s aims fairly easily, it is not the most desirable route for other reasons.

The simplest, least-invasive solution might be to add a section to the Chilmark Zoning Bylaw, modeled on section 6.10, with elements borrowed from section 6.9 and the Basin Road lease lots. The section could be entitled: “EXCEPTION FOR AFFORDABLE TINY HOUSE LEASE-LOTS” and could be structured as in the attached draft.