

Proposed Zoning Code & Older Philadelphians

An Age-friendly Philadelphia Report, June 2011



This report is intended to help policy makers and administrators learn more about how zoning affects the health and well-being of older Philadelphians, and is part of a larger PCA agenda called *Age-friendly Philadelphia*. We hope that the below information contributes to the discussion of these issues as the proposed code is being reviewed in City Council. It is important to note that the new Zoning Code Commission (ZCC) has been very forward-thinking; prior to its appointment in 2008, the words “aging,” “elders,” and “senior citizens” were not mentioned in the code. Today, the following topics that relate to seniors are among the ZCC’s recommended additions: accessory dwelling units, visitability, adult day care, long-term care facilities, and parking requirements for senior housing.

Background

Philadelphia has the highest proportion of older persons (age 60+) of any of the ten largest cities in the United States. Over the past ten years this number has grown and become increasingly diverse with respect to race, ethnicity, income, educational attainment, health status, and national origin. The implications for the future of the City are significant – in order to help these elders remain active and engaged members of their neighborhoods and communities Philadelphia must consider how elements in the physical environment, including housing and other aspects of the physical environment covered by the Zoning Code, may impact on the ability of older adults and others who face mobility challenges.

While many aspects of the proposed Zoning Code may have an effect on the lives of older adults, we feel that the items below will have the greatest impact.ⁱ

1) Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs)

An accessory dwelling is an additional residence that is constructed within a residential property. These dwellings, often called “In-Law Apartments”, are used for a variety of purposes. They provide senior citizens the opportunity to live in the same building as family members and caregivers, they provide housing options to a variety of income levels and lifestyle needs, and they allow additional housing units to be created while preserving the character of existing neighborhoods. Some Philadelphians have built ADUs illegally, which poses a great challenge for emergency personnel who cannot identify the units. As waiting lists for senior housing increase, and as the number of older Philadelphians with functional health impairments increases, Philadelphia will see a greater need for innovative housing options if we wish to allow older adults to remain in their communities and neighborhoods.

27% of Philadelphia households with at least one older adult are multi-generational households; *therefore the demand for multigenerational housing in the city is significant*. Additionally, many of Philadelphia’s elders are active community members, the eyes and ears of their blocks, and the caretakers for their grandchildren. Enabling seniors to “age in community,” therefore, benefits the individual and the neighborhood as a whole. 208,429 Philadelphians age 60+ are home owners; 66% of whom wish to remain in their current homes for at least ten more years. Of these older homeowners, 23% report using a cane and 22% report using a railing (indicating mobility problems). Additionally, 38% report that it is difficult to cover housing costs. If seniors cannot use their homes to the full extent due to mobility restrictions or they cannot maintain their homes financially, both their homes and their streets can be negatively affected. For example, a senior who cannot use their home’s second and third floors will not be aware of leaks, or broken windows, which can impact the home’s integrity and increase housing and maintenance costs. Additionally, there are long waits for senior subsidized housing facilities.ⁱⁱ

Note: The current proposal for ADUs is to allow these units only on lots occupied by single detached houses and semi-detached houses, and only in areas approved through City Council ordinance.

2) Visitability

When a home is “visitable,” it is a place where people of all ages and abilities can enter, circulate, and enjoy. Fortunately, visitability is a proposed addition to the code (***in any subdivision containing 50 or more detached semi-detached, or attached houses, at least 10% of the those types of houses shall be visitable dwelling units***) aimed at new construction and features three key requirements:

1. One entrance to the home at grade-level (i.e. zero-step). This is a critical matter because the majority of Philadelphia’s homes are row houses that feature front steps. The zero-step would eliminate the need for retrofitting via ramps and exterior lifts, which are costly, complicated to install and in many cases, illegal. If the entrance is in the back, this would mean that, for a row home, alleys and backyards would need to be wide enough to accommodate a wheelchair.
2. One half-bathroom on the first floor.
3. All hallways and doorways on the first floor should be wide enough to accommodate a wheelchair

People with housing difficulties are less likely to report that they know where to turn for information about aging services. People who have trouble being mobile in their own homes also report greater difficulty in finding information about services for the elderly than people without such difficulty.

These features are important to people of all ages, including older people who have difficulties with stairs; disabled persons who use wheelchairs; parents with children; bicyclists; and those with temporary disabilities, such as a broken leg. Currently, all city and Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency funded housing must be visitable, but not privately developed housing.

Note: Subdivisions are rarely created in the city of Philadelphia.

3) Adult Daycare Centers

The new code will define that daycare center includes services for both children and adults. The new addition/inclusion of adults is also intended to enable older adults to age in their homes and communities for as long as possible, and to provide caregivers with more options for their families. In 2010, 10% of the city’s older population reported some difficulty in remembering, and memory problems are a primary reason that older adults need adult day care. This number is likely to increase in the coming years.

More on Age-friendly Philadelphia

Age-friendly Philadelphia is an award-winning agenda initiated by Philadelphia Corporation for Aging (PCA) to help older adults remain healthy, active, and engaged in their communities for as long as possible. An “age-friendly” city is one that is committed to improving both the physical and social environments that surround the city’s elders to facilitate independence and neighborhood cohesion. Accessible housing, ease of public transportation, readily available fresh foods, safe and inviting public spaces, and a vibrant workforce that is aware of issues facing older adults are essential ingredients of this type of city. The premise of this agenda is that improvements of this kind will benefit Philadelphians of all ages.

For Further Information

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ⁱ Note all data comes from the Public Health Management Corporation’s 2010 Household Health Survey

ⁱⁱ The current proposal for ADUs is to allow these units only on lots occupied by single detached houses and semi-detached houses, **only in areas approved through City Council ordinance**. The principal dwelling unit or the ADU must be occupied by the owner of the lot. Before final occupancy of the ADU, the property owner must record an affidavit and deed restriction, stating that the property owner will reside on the property, in either the principal or ADU. Once recorded, the deed restriction (requiring owner occupancy) may not be removed or modified without Zoning Board approval. No more than one ADU is allowed per lot and its floor area may not exceed 800 sq. ft.