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Easing of rules for ohana units sought

A City Council measure aims to address a shortage of affordable housing

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A plan to allow more Oahu homeowners to create second dwellings on their lots is gaining momentum at Hono-lulu Hale.

Easing restrictions on the number of accessory dwelling units, or ADUs, is hailed by both Mayor Kirk Caldwell and key members of the Hono-lulu City Council as one of the quickest and simplest means of tackling the island's affordable-housing crunch.

The city currently allows for an eligible homeowner in certain Oahu neighborhoods to establish an ohana dwelling, an ADU that must be attached or part of an existing dwelling and is only supposed to be occupied by relatives. Opening up the ADU process to more neighborhoods, allowing for second detached units or converted garages to become ADUs, and making them available to nonrelatives are among the changes being considered.

The Council Zoning and Planning Committee will hear Resolution 24-200 at its 9 a.m. meeting Thursday. The measure calls on the administration to come up with a bill that would make it easier for a homeowner to create a second dwelling.

"The amount of affordable housing being built currently is inadequate to meet the pent-up demand," said resolution author Councilman Ron Menor. "Thousands of additional affordable rental units are going to be needed to address the housing needs of the residents of this island."

Allowing more accessory dwellings is one of the three major components of Caldwell's recently announced Islandwide Housing Strategy, which also calls for giving bonus incentives to developers to build more affordable units aimed at the low-income categories and keep them affordable longer, and to those who construct affordable units around key stations of the city's upcoming \$5.26 billion rail line.

The administration said more than 24,000 additional housing units are needed in the coming years and that three-fourths of that total needs to be for those earning less than 80 percent of area median income, or about \$76,650 for a family of four.

City planner Harrison Rue, who is assisting the administration with its affordable-housing strategy, said the administration will testify in strong support of the concept of the ADUs, although a number of key points still need to be hashed out.

Some of those issues include the maximum allowable size of the ADUs, the minimum number of on-site parking stalls required, and adequate infrastructure to support the additional units without burdening the existing neighborhood, Rue said.

Jenny Lee, a staff attorney for the nonprofit Hawaii Appleseed Center for Law and Economic Justice, said private developers on their own have not been able to meet the need for rental units on Oahu. A key advantage to ADUs is that there are built-in incentives for homeowners such as having tenants paying rent that could help them with their mortgages.

Mainland studies show a majority of ADUs are rented at prices affordable to those earning less than 80 percent of median income, Lee said. But even if an ADU unit does rent at market levels, a party moving into it would be giving up another unit and opening it to other families — at very little investment on the part of the city, she said.

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