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Kent wants to see how cottage housing stacks up

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Photo courtesy of The Cottage Company/Ross Chapin Architects
Redmond's Conover Commons Homes were completed in 2007 and are all sold.
The homes, developed by The Cottage Company/Ross Chapin Architects,
are BuiltGreen 4-Star/Energy Star Certified and walking distance to
Kirkland's Mark Twain and Woodlands parks.

KENT IS LOOKING for a few developers and builders to help the city try out a different type of housing. A housing type that would appeal to empty nesters, young couples and professionals, and those looking for a more neighborly community with shared open space and where cars and garages are moved into the background, said Fred Satterstrom, Kent's director of community development.

Kent is seeking proposals for the development of one or two demonstration cottage housing projects. Cottage housing involves smaller homes gathered around shared outdoor space, with garages and parking within walking distance and out of view.

Satterstrom said cottage housing has worked well in other local cities, and he thinks there is a market for it in Kent.

"It's the kind of housing that people will like," said Satterstrom, who has worked for the city for 26 years. "We're looking for a different type of housing here that we don't

typically allow for in our ordinances.” He said they also expect higher quality design for these projects.



Rendering by the Hackworth Group
The Steel Lake Cottages were a demonstration project for Federal Way’s new cottage and compact single-family housing ordinance. They were never built because of financial issues.

“It’s going to have to be better than what might typically be developed following the strict zoning of a property,” he said. “We want to demonstrate that this is something the community can be proud of and is needed and marketable in the community.”

Kent’s demonstration projects should have homes at 1,500 square feet or less with a maximum of 24 and a minimum of six cottages per development. The city is offering density bonuses for developments that include low-impact design elements such as treatment and conveyance of stormwater through bioswales, or use of pervious concrete. The bonus is 1.5 times the density now allowed in single-family zones.

The code also emphasizes proximity to transit and requires 400 square feet of open space per home. Kent officials visited several Puget Sound cities that allow cottage housing — Shoreline, Redmond and Kirkland — and modeled their ordinance after those already in place.

Kent planners also got feedback from the Master Builders Association of King and Snohomish Counties, the King County Association of Realtors, JayMarc Development and The Cottage Company, said Kent planner Katie Heinitz. She said since the ordinance passed, they’ve been getting at least a call a day from builders, developers and others interested in the demonstration program.

Kent is a good location for cottage housing, and the city can take advantage of the lessons learned in other cities, said Linda Pruitt, principal and owner of The Cottage Company, a local cottage home developer with past projects in Shoreline, Kirkland, Redmond and elsewhere.

“Kent has the good fortune at this point to learn from the best practices already in place in other jurisdictions,” she said. “They can take the best of the best and not really have to reinvent the wheel.”

Cottage housing has been very marketable over the past few years and Pruitt said even in the current economy, the developments will fare well.

“I have no unsold projects in my inventory,” she said. That includes the company's most recent development, Redmond's Conover Commons Homes, which went on the market in 2007. The Cottage Company is looking for more sites to develop in Kirkland and Redmond, and is in permitting for a seven-unit project in Kitsap County about a mile from the Silverdale Historic District on a waterfront site at Dyes Inlet. The project, now in pre-sale, will be the first cottage housing development for Kitsap County. Pruitt said they initially planned to start building this summer, but depending on pre-sale success, they could wait until the spring of 2010.

Location is key to making cottage housing work, Pruitt said. Finding a site close to jobs and amenities is essential, she said, and that's why emerging urban centers work so well. She thinks cottage housing makes sense in the first ring of cities around Seattle, places such as Mountlake Terrace, Bothell, Shoreline, and even some larger lots in North Seattle.

The developments work best as infill in lots that might not otherwise pencil for a more traditional development, Pruitt said. Too close in to the city, and developers couldn't afford to build at such a low density, she said; too far away, and the homes wouldn't have access to much-needed infrastructure like sewers and transit lines, or to shops and jobs.

“Our buyers want to be able to bike to work or take the bus,” she said. “They're not interested in commuting long distances from their home to their employer or to all of the amenities they require.”

Pruitt said they might submit an application for Kent's demonstration program, but only if they can find the perfect site.

Higher quality design is also key to making the developments marketable, Pruitt said.

Philip McCullough, principal at the Hackworth Group, agrees. He said he is glad to see some flexibility for the floorplans allowed in Kent. He said some cities' cottage housing

Kent cottages

Interested developers or builders can submit cottage housing proposals between Feb. 2 and July 31 for committee review. Details on the program can be found at www.ci.kent.wa.us/planning or by calling (253) 856-5454.

codes can be too prescriptive, like limiting top floor square footage to too small a percentage of base floor square footage, which can make designing more difficult.

“The buyers are expecting a higher level of design in exchange for the reduction in area,” he said. “You have to think about the spaces and the utility of the spaces has to be much higher.”

McCullough said the housing type makes sense for Kent.

“A lot of people really want to buy smaller homes,” McCullough said. “Not everybody wants to buy a big, giant house.”

He's also glad to see the low-impact development bonus. He said the most successful cottage housing developments have site plans and designs that reinforce the buyers' desire for a pedestrian-oriented, neighborly community that is sustainably constructed and carefully designed. Those types of demands can only grow in the future, he said.

“When we emerge from this downturn, I think what we'll find on the other side is the homes that are built will be a little smaller, that buyers will demand higher quality design, that the shape and size of the building is going to have to be more carefully considered,” he said. “I would think the appeal of cottage housing would be at least as high as it was before the downturn and I think the more people who see it, the more will like it.”