

Accessory Apartments Can Help Meet  
Town Housing Needs...And More  
By Greg Brown

Dummerston's greatest housing need is for small, affordable rental units according to a housing needs assessment completed for the Dummerston Housing Advisory Commission. Fifteen to twenty new apartments would make it easier for young people, lower wage households and seniors to live in town. Accessory apartments offer a viable strategy that can provide many of the needed rental units while also providing homeowners with some potentially important benefits. First though, exactly what are "accessory apartments"? Generally they are small, one bedroom or efficiency apartments, equipped with their own kitchen, bathroom and entrance, but built within an existing single family home. In some cases, accessory apartments have been built in barns, carriage houses or other outbuildings associated with a larger home. A true accessory apartment is separate from the primary single family home and does not involve sharing interior space. Accessory apartments are obviously not a new idea. In fact there are 44 such apartments in Dummerston homes right now (Many thanks to the listers who did the research on that number - GB). It does take some time, and usually some modification of an existing single-family home to create an accessory apartment, and of course that would involve some expense to the homeowner. On the other hand, these apartments offer several advantages to both tenants and landlords. For tenants, the small size of such units is often off-set by more affordable rents and utilities. An apartment in a single-family home can be more desirable than a larger one in a multi-family building in a more urban community. For landlords, the rent from an accessory apartment may be an important supplement to household income. For both tenant and landlord, there may be additional security from having more people around the home more often. Probably the greatest advantage, and the reason for the construction of most accessory apartments, is to keep family members close by. A son or daughter fresh out of college who need a place to start their lives, a retired couple who choose not to look after a large home of their own, but who do not want to leave Dummerston, all are potential tenants of accessory apartments. As with any other housing option, both prospective tenants and landlords have to give careful thought to the special issues that go with accessory apartments. For example, it is important for tenants to understand that unlike larger, more traditional apartment buildings, living in an accessory apartment will probably require greater sensitivity to the fact that you are living in your landlord's home (even though you are not sharing space bathrooms, kitchens etc). For landlords, while additional income from apartment rental can be helpful, it is also true that the appraised value of the primary residence may go up leading to some increment in property taxes. Because it can be relatively easy to create an accessory apartment in a large single family home, and because of the advantages offered to both tenant and landlords, the Dummerston Housing Advisory Commission has launched a program to make more detailed information about these units to Dummerston residents. The program will have at least three parts. First, we are working on a web-page and on hard-copy handouts that will identify resources for more detailed information about creating an accessory apartment in your home such as; what town zoning will allow, where a homeowner can find help with the layout of an apartment, information on what kinds of renovation would be necessary and what they might cost, and finally what financial assistance may be available to help pay for the work. These will be available this Fall. Second, in future "Views" articles, we will report on interviews with both landlords and tenants of accessory apartments to bring you their first hand experience with these units. Finally, the Housing Advisory Commission will sponsor a workshop on accessory apartments next winter to provide more information about where to get help with the design and financing of an accessory apartment and specific answers to questions from prospective landlords and tenants. The specific date and location for the workshop will be posted on the town website and will be announced in future editions of the "Views". In the meantime, if you have any questions about accessory apartments, please call Greg Brown, Chair of the Housing Advisory Commission, at 272-5634.