

# Cluster-detached housing

A land use analysis of an affordable compact housing typology.

Cluster-detached housing can be a viable component of a multi-prong housing solution that addresses accessibility and affordability in pursuit of better housing outcomes for southern Albertans. If developed in accordance with established planning principles, cluster-detached housing is also a tactical and economical solution to realize a more efficient use of land by adding gentle density to built-up areas.



# What is cluster-detached housing?

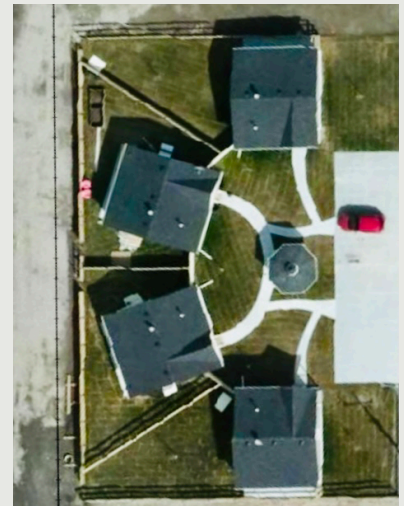
Cluster-detached housing is a compact housing type consisting of multiple detached principal dwellings spatially articulated around a centralized amenity space. The term compact is used in this report to indicate a gross floor area measuring less than 800 ft<sup>2</sup>. While cluster-detached housing could manifest at a variety of scales, this preliminary analysis focuses primarily on the single-lot context and seeks to explore the potential to develop multiple detached principal dwellings on a single lot. The spatial configuration of larger-scale implementations of cluster-detached housing may bear some resemblance to a manufactured home park.

Certain municipalities in southern Alberta such as the Town of Stavely (cover image) and the Town of Raymond include "dwelling group" as a use involving the development of a cluster of buildings, each of which contains one or more dwelling units. A dwelling group meets the definition of cluster-detached housing if each of its residential buildings contain only one dwelling unit. However, a dwelling group may also accommodate proposals of a significantly higher density involving multi-unit buildings.

In the spirit of imagining small-scale infill redevelopment that contributes gentle density to an existing neighbourhood, the analysis herein imposes a limit of one dwelling unit per building. The term gentle density refers to ground-oriented housing that is more dense than typical single-detached houses, but has a smaller scale and character therefore having minimal impact on a neighbourhood. Gentle density could be in the form of smaller single-detached homes (as with cluster-detached housing), adding a garden or garage suite to an existing lot, or even the development of semi-detached or row housing.

## Policy context

The Federation of Canadian Municipalities has proclaimed the need to develop more innovative housing solutions during the rebuild of the national economy. In fall 2020 this position was proactively supported by the federal government through the launch of its Rapid Housing Initiative, and by the Alberta Affordable Housing Review Panel in its submission to the Alberta Government. Compact housing types such as cluster-detached housing are well-suited to become a pillar of this multi-tiered framework to achieve better housing outcomes for southern Albertans.



**Town of Stavely**

*In 2015, Stavely added Dwelling Group to their Residential Multi-unit land use district to accommodate their cluster-detached development. The dwelling group was further defined by the following criteria:*

- *density of existing development within the block*
- *no minimum floor area*
- *adequacy and proximity of community and recreational facilities and open space*
- *adequacy and proximity of community facilities such as schools, shopping, recreation facilities and open space*
- *adequacy of utilities to accommodate the use*
- *impacts on future land uses and the street system*
- *10% minimum landscaping for common open space and onsite amenities such as playground equipment, barbeque and recreation areas and similar features*

*The completed development features 4 - 686 ft<sup>2</sup> single bedroom units on a single 100x145 ft lot. Each moved-in unit is individually serviced and has private and common amenity space linked by ample walkways. Rent has been around \$600/month and has housed mainly couples. The location is walkable to the mainstreet and other amenities in town.*



**South Saskatchewan Regional Plan (SSRP) Strategy 8.14**

*Feature innovative housing designs, range of densities and housing types such as mixed-use, cluster developments, secondary suites, seniors' centres and affordable housing. Provide the opportunity for a variety of residential environments which feature innovative designs and densities and which make efficient use of existing facilities, infrastructure and public transportation.*

At the provincial level, the 2020 Final Report of the Alberta Affordable Housing Review Panel advocates for transformative change respecting the delivery of affordable housing. Most notably, the Panel recommends engaging the private sector to develop and operate affordable housing units.

The Affordable Housing Review Panel also highlights the unique capacity for municipal planning regimes to enable more diverse housing supplies in anticipation of a protracted economic recovery. Seeking expedited development timelines, CMHC structured the Rapid Housing Initiative affordable housing delivery program to reserve the entire \$1 billion for projects that utilize modular construction practices. However, municipalities may not be set up to take advantage of these government opportunities as local regulations may be inflexible and ill-equipped to provide for innovative housing forms. As a specific example, modular dwellings and site-built dwellings are typically treated as separate uses in local bylaws, and in many cases modular dwellings are prohibited where a proposal involves the development of multi-unit dwellings. These regulations would then prevent a municipality from accessing the federal money available under the Rapid Housing Initiative.

At the regional level, the South Saskatchewan Regional Plan (SSRP) supports the strategic direction espoused by the Affordable Housing Review Panel. Strategy 8.14 in the regional plan expresses that municipalities should feature innovative housing designs and provide for a diversity of residential environments, including cluster developments and affordable housing. Compact forms of housing are expressly endorsed in the companion piece to the SSRP: The Efficient Use of Land Implementation Tools Compendium.

## Minimum size for living space

Building code regulations are the logical place to start when it comes to contemplating minimum standards for living space. The pertinent code in Alberta is the 2019 National Building Code – Alberta Edition, abbreviated as NBC(AE) and brought into legislative standing by the Safety Codes Act. The NBC used to contain minimum requirements for individual rooms and spaces; however, they were eliminated for all (non-daycare) spaces in the transition to objective-based codes.

Unlike the NBC(AE), the Ontario Edition of the NBC does include minimum floor area requirements for dwelling units. A 2019 report by the Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing clarifies that while those requirements vary depending on whether the rooms and spaces are separated by walls, the smallest possible configuration for an open-concept single-storey layout is 188 ft<sup>2</sup>. In all provinces, local planning jurisdictions can require minimum floor area requirements

above and beyond those needed to comply with building code legislation.

Building code requirements safeguard public health and safety but do not deal with livability except to the extent that it overlaps with the other two elements. Cluster-detached housing may get equated with tiny homes, which are single-detached dwellings under 400 ft<sup>2</sup>, but they are not the same thing. The “tiny house” movement can be seen as a reaction to contemporary economic, social and environmental challenges, but its viability as a long-term solution to systemic imbalances in the housing market is challenged by the transient nature of the housing form and by conventional financial lending guidelines. As compact cluster-detached housing shows, plenty of opportunity exists to provide for imaginative housing types without contemplating dwellings under 400 ft<sup>2</sup>.

While lowering floor area has some merit, its role in supporting municipal viability by preserving a reliable tax base should not be overlooked. Local governments committed to planning resilient communities have a vested interest in calculating how much land could or should be dedicated to alternative housing types. Land Use Bylaw implementation ought to be a pivotal component of a proposed cluster housing approval process.

## Site planning

Depending on its design and sensitivity to the local context, infill residential development can contribute to, or detract from, the character of a neighbourhood. The impacts of a specific cluster housing proposal will largely be determined by the degree to which the concept exhibits sensitivity in terms of siting, scale and appearance. In other words, how cluster detached housing fits into a neighbourhood is contingent on lot size, 2-dimensional building footprints, and 3-dimensional massing. In smaller urban areas where height restrictions preclude large multi-storey buildings, a 2-dimensional site plan analysis should give a reasonable indication of how a cluster detached housing development will ultimately fit on a street.

Within the cluster-detached framework it is assumed that all dwellings are principal dwellings regardless of their orientation in relation to the street. Some dwellings will typically be removed from direct street access; however, dwellings situated at the front of the lot should generally be positioned parallel to, and directly engaged with the street (front entrances and/or architectural interest facing the street). Ideally, the dwellings should be oriented to provide a generous exposure to sunlight while retaining privacy. This can be achieved through a minimum separation distance between dwellings as outlined in the local land use bylaw and/or Safety Code requirements.

*Municipalities often use minimum floor areas on the basis of achieving an anticipated assessment value for dwellings based on the intended use of the land. Minimum floor areas can be a useful tool supporting predictably in housing developments for existing landowners and prospective purchasers. Architectural controls may also be utilized in new subdivisions for this purpose by both private developers and municipal land development entities.*

*On the other end of the spectrum, the City of Lethbridge has adopted an approach whereby it does not regulate the size of single-detached dwellings, instead relying on lifestyle preferences and market forces to dictate outcomes in the built form. Where utilized, minimum floor requirements in land use bylaws should be established judiciously, with an awareness of the need to provide a range of housing types across the spectrum of affordability.*



### **Cluster-detached development in Oregon City, OR**

*Oregon City in the United States allows cluster detached housing (also called cottage housing) in their Municipal Code (Land Use Bylaw) with the following intent:*

- *Provide options and affordability to homeowners*
- *Support efficient use of existing housing stock and infrastructure*
- *Develop housing units that support people at a variety of stages in the life cycle*
- *Create new housing units that respect the look and scale of single-family neighbourhoods*

*Oregon City regulates cluster detached housing by setting a maximum floor area per dwelling of 1000 sq ft, rather than a minimum floor area. The City also requires a minimum open space of 400 sq ft per dwelling unit. 50% of the required open space per unit must be part of the central common area to foster a sense of community.*

*Image source:*

*<https://www.orcity.org/planning/cluster-housing>*

*Text source:*

*Oregon City Municipal Code – Section 17.20.010*

How cluster-detached dwellings are configured relative to one another, and how they interact with the property boundaries, parking area, pathways and common spaces will inform the design of the drainage facilities. Already a paramount consideration for infill development, drainage takes on even greater importance for proposals involving multiple dwellings on a single lot. An adequate drainage plan should encompass the entire property. Larger projects may need to complete a storm water management plan. Whether infrastructure servicing is provided individually to each dwelling or through shared hookups, will depend on the tenure format (rented, condominium etc.), but will have to be satisfactory to the municipality.

The dwellings should also be configured to be clearly delineated and accessible from the street for emergency service providers. The typical front and rear yard setback is generally sufficient to accommodate this. In terms of the designated access for occupants of the dwelling, a laneway is preferred where a residential lot abuts an arterial or collector street. Where multiple dwellings are developed on a lot, the importance of pathways becomes amplified to the aesthetics and accessibility of the site, and creating a meaningful sense of arrival for visitors. Ultimately, pathways create cohesion and position the site more comfortably within the streetscape.

Given that cluster-detached housing proposals will involve a greater number of vehicles per lot on average, the presence of a laneway is even more important because it offers the ability to concentrate the parking area at the rear of the property. It can be anticipated that cluster-detached housing may often be developed in the form of 1-bedroom dwellings; however, prescribing parking requirements for cluster-detached housing on a per-bedroom basis will ensure the number of spaces remains correlated to the intensity of use irrespective of project scale. Moreover, since the shared common areas associated with cluster-detached housing offer unique venues for hosting private social gatherings, requiring an additional parking space per lot to accommodate visitors is a logical standard for this housing type.

Despite their comparatively smaller footprint, compact dwellings should not be exempted from needing to be placed on a permanent foundation approved under the NBC(AE). At the most fundamental level, a permanent foundation helps secure the safety and well-being of occupants by protecting the structural components of a dwelling against wind loads. Foundations also imbue a development with a sense of permanency, which can preserve and enhance the existing aesthetic of a residential neighborhood.

# Tenure

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The term tenure is used to describe how land and real property are owned, occupied, used, and for how long. A spectrum of tenure possibilities exists for housing; however, they all fall within the two basic types: freehold and leasehold. Within these basic types, cluster developments may be built with a single owner who manages and rents the units, or within a co-ownership arrangement where every resident has their name on title, or may be condominiumized. Each type of tenancy will have particular ramifications for conditions of approval and implementation. Dependent on the developer's intent, certain tenure types may be better suited to particular types of inclusionary housing. Whereas a lower income model may be best suited to a single owner who manages the units, using co-ownership models in cluster-detached housing may be uniquely suited to accommodating the demand for seniors housing.

# Inclusionary housing

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The physical design of housing should support the continued integration of each demographic within the local community. As a compact housing type, cluster housing may be particularly suited to the space demands associated with ageing and affordability. The shared amenity space that typifies cluster-detached housing has the capacity to become a venue for hosting private social gatherings, thereby supporting social cohesion in a community as well.

# Implementation

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Local authorities interested in providing opportunities for the development of cluster-detached housing may choose to pilot a cluster detached housing project under a direct control land use district if the use has not been introduced into their land use bylaw. Other options include introducing the use into a new standard land use district or adding the use to an existing multi-unit residential land use district.

Ultimately, cluster-detached housing should be included in land use bylaws as a discretionary use. Proposals for cluster-detached housing should be accompanied by a conceptual scheme. This approach is preferable as it provides the opportunity for Administration and the Development Authority to review the essential land use elements and consider and mitigate, through development permit conditions, expected impacts on the adjacent landowners and the community.

*For more information on this topic contact [admin@orrsc.com](mailto:admin@orrsc.com) or visit our website at [orrsc.com](http://orrsc.com).*

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