

REAL ESTATE

# Where Can You Park a Tiny Home?

By LISA PREVOST OCT. 6, 2017

Darryl Bray had hoped to park the 84-square-foot house that he built for himself in a secluded place, maybe on some spare acreage on a farm in Connecticut.

But finding that kind of spot proved harder than expected, so instead Mr. Bray's tiny home on wheels sits in the parking lot of the light industrial complex where he works, outside of New Haven.

Mr. Bray, 28, has lived behind the U-shaped complex for more than two years now, though not without hassle — even though the parking spot was offered to him by the complex's owner. He started out near a noisy auto shop that was attracting unwanted attention, but has since moved to a quieter space.

The city zoning enforcement officer once put him on notice that he was violating various zoning codes. While no one has ever followed up, Mr. Bray lies low when he sees a police cruiser patrolling the complex. (For that reason, he asked that his precise location not be disclosed in this story.)

“I do fear coming out of my tiny house and having the police see me there,” he said. “I have blackout curtains on the windows, and I lock my door whenever I'm in there.”

Mr. Bray's situation highlights one of the biggest challenges of tiny-house living: finding a place to park. HGTV programs like “Tiny House, Big Living,” which have helped popularize the movement, often gloss over this not-so-tiny detail. But the many Facebook pages and websites devoted to tiny-house culture are obsessed with

it: Online discussions are dominated by requests, if not outright pleas, for tips on how and where to find tiny-house-friendly locations.

Zoning regulations in most places — especially densely developed regions like the New York metro area — typically do not allow full-time living in temporary structures like R.V.s or movable tiny houses. Most tiny homes are built on wheeled trailers that can be towed. Unlike R.V.s, however, tiny houses are generally not wheeled for touring, so much as for flexibility of location.

Zoning also commonly specifies a minimum home or lot size that is too large and expensive for a lifestyle geared toward affordability. Residential building codes can also present a problem for tiny houses built on foundations.

As a result, “easily upwards of 90 percent of tiny-house owners are living illegally, when it comes to zoning,” said Andrew Morrison, a professional builder and tiny-house advocate in Oregon who travels the world teaching seminars on tiny-house construction.

“A very small minority live in R.V. parks, though they usually have a limit on how long you can stay,” he said. “A friend or family’s backyard, or land in the country, is much more common.”

For some, flouting zoning restrictions is an accepted, even celebrated, aspect of a culture that rejects the American appetite for big houses, rampant consumption and excess stuff. “It’s one of the last things we have where you can kind of stick it to the man,” Marcus Stoltzfus, a co-owner of Liberation Tiny Homes, near Lancaster, Pa., said with a smile.

In the right setting, illicit tiny-house dwellers can usually get away with it. “If it’s off the road and you’re on good terms with your neighbors, you probably won’t have an issue,” said Dave Cramer, an owner of Hudson River Tiny Homes, in the Albany area.

But with the tiny-living craze having lasted well past the fad stage, pressure is growing for municipalities to embrace tiny houses as legal residences. And more tiny-house building companies are popping up, anticipating just such a shift.

“The way they’re legalizing it, it’s coming from West to East,” said Tori Pond, who opened a tiny-home company called **Craft & Sprout** with her husband, Ken, in Greenwich, Conn, last year. “It’s a matter of when, not if.”

So far, advocates have made the most progress in changing ordinances governing so-called accessory dwelling units and backyard cottages. Some high-cost municipalities, including Fresno, Calif., and Nantucket, Mass., now allow tiny houses to share land with existing homes.

“It’s a spirit of cooperation,” Mr. Morrison said. “It’s a simple way to bring in affordable housing that doesn’t cost the municipality anything.”

Advocates hope the movement will gain more ground in coming years now that the International Code Council has approved a model code for tiny houses for inclusion in its International Residential Code, the most widely recognized residential building code in the country. Mr. Morrison, who led the effort to write the code, said it should alleviate both safety and aesthetic concerns for those states and municipalities that adopt it.

“There’s a fear that people are going to end up living in shanty shacks,” he said. “We don’t want that either. We want people to be safe in their houses, and in something they can afford.”

For the time being, however, finding a place to live long-term in a tiny house requires creativity, flexibility and considerable networking.

For Amy Garner and John McCarthy, it was a conversation over coffee with a well-connected architect that led them to the ideal location for their 340-square-foot tiny house in New Haven: waterside, at a marina on the Quinnipiac River.

For about \$400 a month, including utility hookups, the couple enjoy up-close views of the river through the glass front of their Traveler XL, a high-end tiny home made by **Escape Traveler**. The spot alongside the docks has made their home a favorite hangout for friends, despite the close quarters, and it is only about a mile from their business, a Pilates studio.

“It’s perfect,” said Ms. Garner, 30. “You wake up in the morning, and the sun reflects off the water, and you get this twinkle effect on the bedroom ceiling.”

They have been there since April without issue, other than the occasional curious passers-by. And now they have a like-minded neighbor: A woman living in an Airstream, an aluminum-sided travel trailer, recently moved in behind them.

Lisa Cohen and Richard Ratcliff, who met last spring while hiking the Appalachian Trail, are hoping for similar stability while they finish converting a school bus they bought on eBay into a tiny house. Finding a place to park it within reasonable commuting distance of Sarah Lawrence College, in Bronxville, N.Y., where Ms. Cohen is a graduate student, was no easy feat.

“We asked a few farms, a gardening center and a flea market,” Ms. Cohen, 27, said in an email. “Everyone was kind and said they would think it over, but then would either not answer calls or said ‘no’ in the end.”

Eventually the couple found a restaurant owner in Dutchess County willing to let them park off to the side of his lot for \$150 a month. (They asked that the restaurant not be identified.) Settled there for about a month now, they have access to electricity and well water. The train ride to Sarah Lawrence takes Ms. Cohen about 90 minutes, with three transfers, but she is appreciative of the spot, which she deemed preferable to “ending up in Walmart parking lots.”

Brianna Welch, 25, starts graduate school at the University of Vermont in January, and hopes to move from her Bronx apartment to the Burlington area in a 340-square-foot tiny house being built by Craft & Sprout. She and her husband, Chris Murphy, a 24-year-old software product manager, are actively hunting for land to rent, hoping to get settled before the first snow.

As of last week, they had no promising prospects. A year-round R.V. campground they looked into is already booked for the winter. Someone offered to rent them a building lot, but that particular town would require them to install a septic system, at a cost of about \$18,000, and pay an \$8,000 impact fee. As they look for farmland to rent, the couple are tapping sites like **Tiny House Hosting**, on Facebook, for connections.

“I think it’s going to be through our network that we find someone who knows someone who has land,” Ms. Welch said. “We knew this would be the hardest part, but I didn’t think it would be this hard.”

Finding a site in rural towns is often easier, because of the likelihood of looser zoning and enforcement. In Lodi, N.Y., for example, Eleanor Liebson, an occupational therapist, is hoping to start a tiny-house community on a portion of the 100-plus acres she owns near Finger Lakes National Forest. “There’s the potential because there’s no zoning in our town,” she said. “We can do it.”

The downside to remote sites, however, is the absence of readily available utility hookups. Seth Porges, a science and technology journalist, found that out after he bought a 180-square-foot tiny house last February. He put the house on rented farmland in the Hudson Valley to use as an Airbnb rental, and imagined it would be an off-the-grid experience.

The house had a solar energy system, 50-gallon water tanks and a dry-flush toilet. But he quickly realized that the solar power supply was not nearly robust enough, especially when the air-conditioner was on. And the water supply lasted only a few days before it had to be replenished.

“People think they’ll throw their house on a cheap piece of land and that’s the end of it,” said Mr. Porges, who lives in a regular house in a nearby town. “They don’t realize all the logistical challenges they’re going to face.”

He wound up hiring an electrician to lay heavy-gauge extension cords connecting the tiny house to a power supply elsewhere on the farm. And he invested in hoses specially designed for potable water to run downhill to his house from a spigot. But come winter, he expects those hoses will freeze, once again necessitating the use of the water tanks.

As for the dry-flush toilet, it functions as expected, essentially “shrink-wrapping your waste,” Mr. Porges said. But the disposable cartridges are fairly expensive: He calculates the cost at about \$1 per flush. Other bathroom options for tiny homes include composting and incineration toilets.

For Kerri L. Richardson, a clutter-clearing coach and the author of “What Your Clutter is Trying to Tell You,” the hassles of tiny-house living are more appealing than the headaches of being tied to a traditional single-family home. She and her wife, Melissa Silk, sold their 2,200-square-foot home in Newburyport, Mass., about three years ago and have been gradually downsizing ever since. They are currently renting a 500-square-foot apartment in Groton, Conn., while building a 240-square-foot tiny home on a trailer.

“The roots that we had planted felt more like shackles,” said Ms. Richardson, 46. “It takes some courage to go against that societal template of life, but we decided we wanted to have more experiences and less things.”

As they both are able to work remotely, their plan is to tow their house up to northern New England later this fall – although they haven’t yet found a place to park it. While they’re not entirely averse to living under the radar, they would prefer to find a town where they can live aboveboard, Ms. Richardson said.

And if all else fails, they have a fallback: a year-round R.V. park they heard about in New Hampshire. “That’s our last choice,” Ms. Richardson said. “But if we have to, we will do it.”

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