



# ADUs: An affordable housing tool or the loss of neighborhood character?

PlaceEconomics  
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## INTRODUCTION

PlaceEconomics and our companion firm, Heritage Strategies International, work at the intersection of historic resources and economics. To inform our own research, but also to provide insights to those working in the field of heritage conservation, we periodically conduct online surveys which we call *PresPolls*. These surveys are conducted using Survey Monkey, a link to which is provided through our direct mail list and through social media.

This poll asked about ADUs – Accessory Dwelling Units. As we explained in the survey, we described ADUs as “independent housing units that occupy a lot that is otherwise zoned for a single-family home.” ADUs may be converted from existing structures such as a garage, basement, or carriage house, or they may be new construction.” The link to the survey was shared via our three Facebook pages (PlaceEconomics, Heritage Strategies International, and Donovan Rypkema) as well as on the “Historic Preservation Professionals” Facebook page, a private group with approximately 5,400 members. Additionally, we sent a link to the survey to our domestic and international mailing lists of more than 6,000.

The survey was open from April 5 through April 9, 2021. Two hundred ten responses were received. It is important to understand this is *not* a random survey of the general population. The vast majority of both our Facebook Friends and our mailing lists have at least an interest in and are often vocal advocates for historic preservation and many are professionally involved in the fields of historic preservation and heritage conservation. In fact, more than 8 in 10 of the respondents to this survey reported that historic preservation was a major or minor part of their job. As a result, these findings offer a snapshot of the current perspectives of preservationists towards ADUs.

## KEY FINDINGS

Based on the responses of 210 survey participants, here are the eight most significant findings:

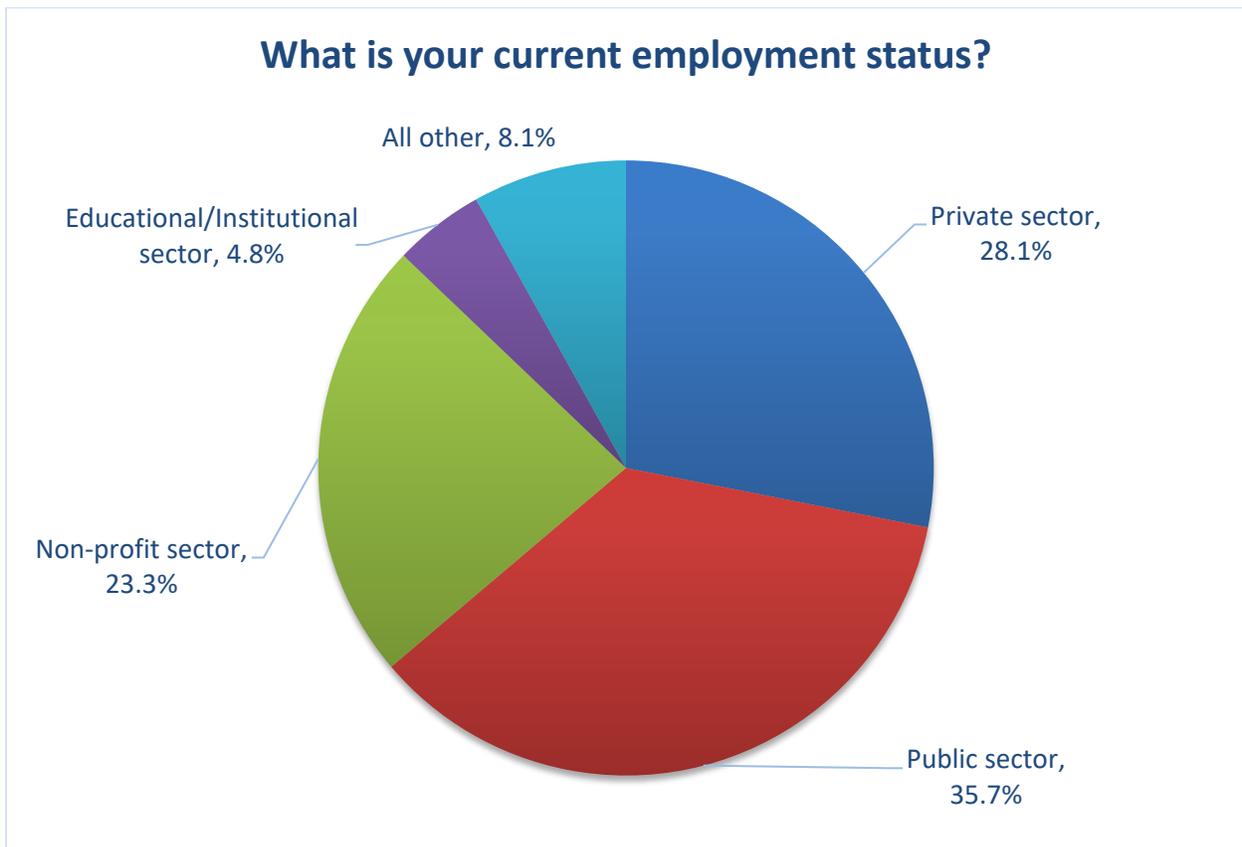
1. Preservation professionals are overwhelmingly in favor of ADUs. (See Question 7)
2. Among all employment sectors, age groups, and owner/renter households, the highest ranked positive benefit of ADUs is affordable housing. (See Question 5)
3. Loss of neighborhood character is a relatively minor concern as a possible negative consequence of ADUs. (See Question 6)
4. Preservationists are *not* NIMBYs. Nearly 8 in 10 (79.8%) say historic districts should not be exempt from ADU legislation. (See Question 4)
5. This belief that historic districts should not be exempt is held regardless of age, sector of employment, homeownership status, or the type of housing they occupy. (See Question 4)
6. While increased demand for parking and additional traffic are concerns, the potential negative impact of ADUs causing the greatest concern is the possibility that the extra unit will be used for short term rentals rather than permanent housing. (See Question 6)
7. More than 60% of respondents reported that their city already has legislation related to ADUs. (See Question 3)
8. Increased density ranks high on the positive consequences of ADUs and low in importance on the negative consequences. (See Three Cheers for Density).

Preservationists are often accused of a variety of transgressions against equitable cities – claims that they are unconcerned with affordable housing; that they are opposed to density; that they want their neighborhoods to be frozen in time with no change; that they are the epitome of NIMBYism. This survey should put those erroneous stereotypes where they belong – in the dustbin of false narratives. The preservationists who responded to this survey are nearly all actively engaged in day-to-day preservation, either through their jobs or their advocacy efforts. And what did these professional preservationists say? That providing affordable housing is the most positive benefit of ADUs; that density is a far greater positive than negative consequence of ADUs; that historic districts should not be exempt from ADU legislation; -- in brief, a recognition that change needs to be made in cities, and that historic neighborhoods should be part of that change.

So, you peddlers of mendacious “alternative facts,” it’s time to acknowledge that you are simply wrong. Not only is historic preservation good for cities, preservationists are strong supporters of the changes cities need to make. There certainly are NIMBYs, but preservationists are not the ones leading the NIMBY parade when it comes to ADUs – in fact, they aren’t even part of that procession.

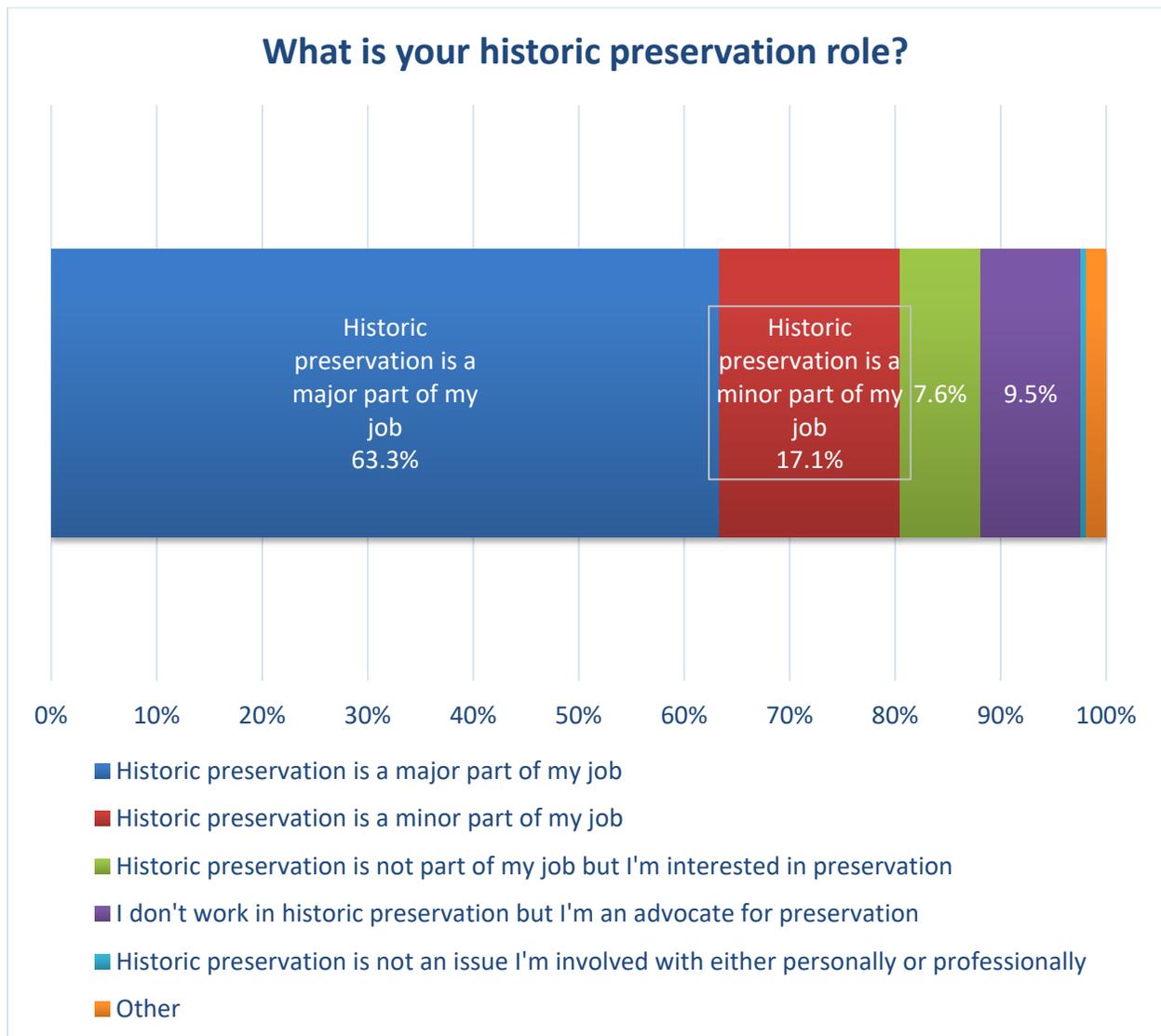
**QUESTION 1 – WHAT IS YOUR CURRENT EMPLOYMENT STATUS?**

The respondents to this PresPoll reflect the wide distribution of preservation jobs among all three major sectors of the economy (Public, Private, Non-Profit) with between a quarter and a third coming from each of those sectors. An additional ~5% came from the Educational/Institutional sector. The “All other” category included “retired,” “student,” and “not in the work force.”

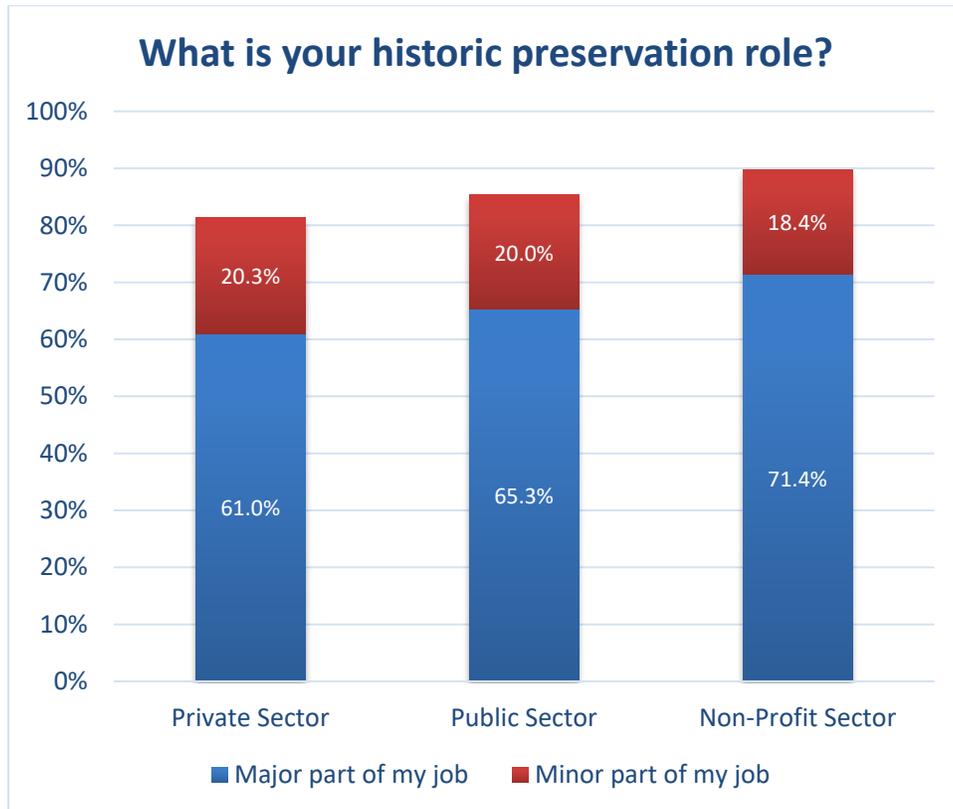


**QUESTION 2 – WHAT IS YOUR HISTORIC PRESERVATION ROLE?**

This survey reflected the opinions of historic preservation professionals, with more than 80% responding that historic preservation was a major or minor part of their job. Almost all the rest of the respondents had either an employment-related interest in historic preservation or were preservation advocates. There was an alternative answer, “Historic preservation is not an issue I’m involved with either personally or professionally,” but only one respondent out of 210 chose that answer.



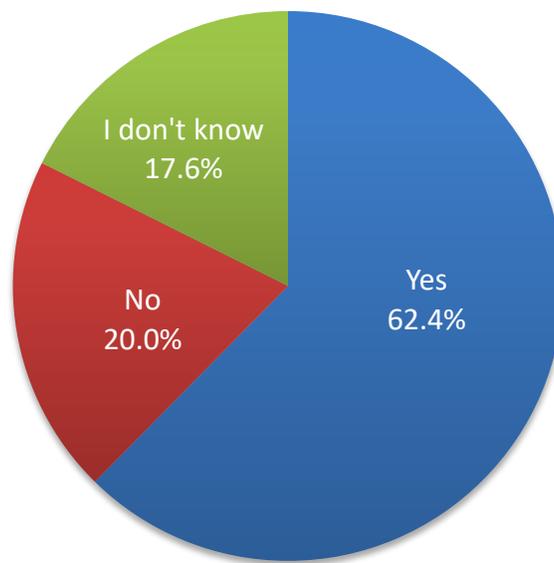
The majority of respondents from all three sectors indicated that historic preservation was a major part of their job, including the private sector (61.0%), the public sector (65.9%) and the non-profit sector (71.4%). The combined percentage of respondents stating that preservation was a “major part of my job” or “minor part of my job” totaled more than 80% for all three sectors.



QUESTION 3 – DOES YOUR CITY CURRENTLY HAVE LEGISLATION RELATED TO ADUS (INCLUDING IF MANDATED BY THE STATE)?

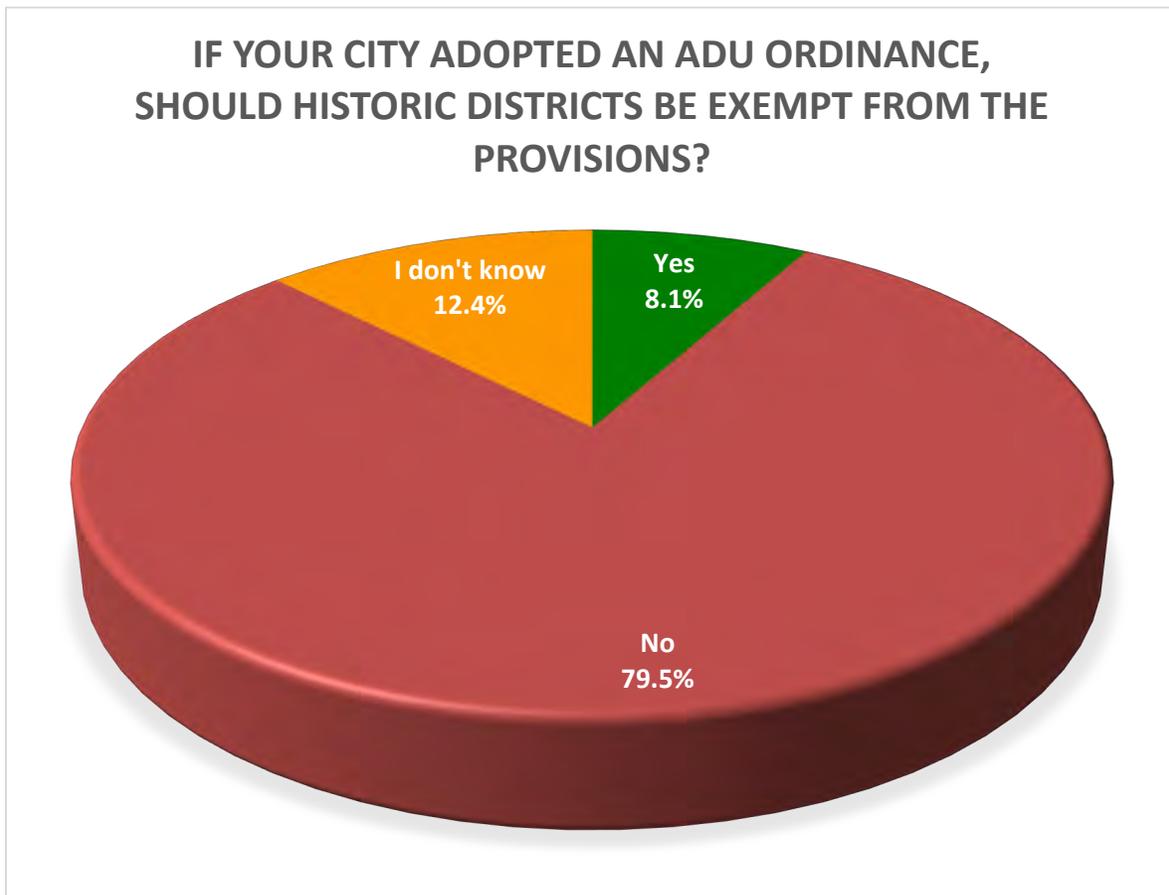
The move on the part of cities to allow ADUs may be happening more quickly than is widely known. Almost two-thirds (62.4%) of respondents said that their city has already adopted ADU legislation.

**Does your city currently have legislation related to ADUs?**

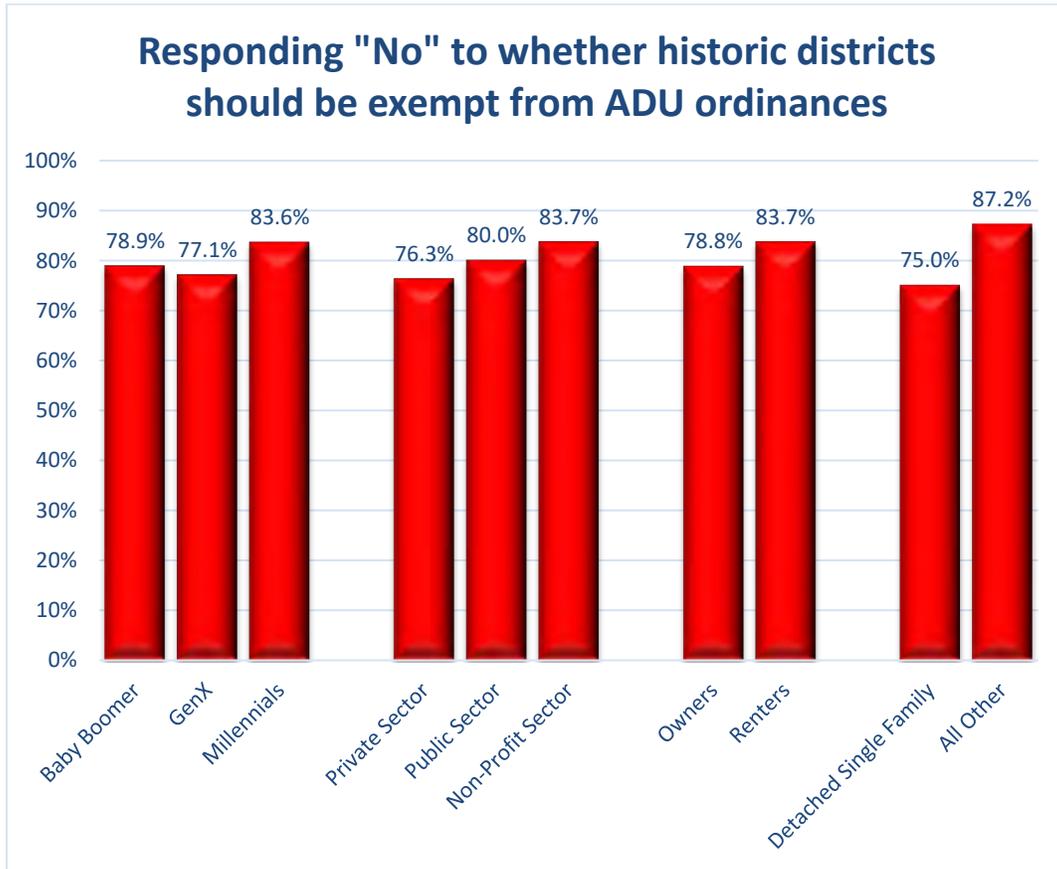


**QUESTION 4 – IF YOUR CITY ADOPTED AN ADU ORDINANCE, SHOULD HISTORIC DISTRICTS BE EXEMPT FROM THE PROVISIONS?**

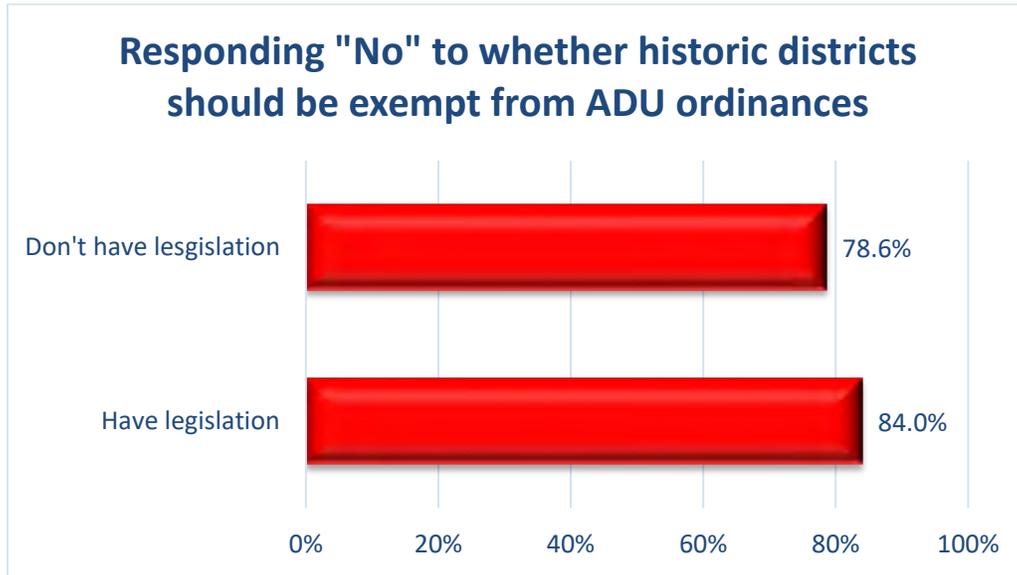
Historic preservations are sometimes accused of being open to change in other parts of cities, but not in historic districts. According to these preservation professionals, such accusations are patently false. When asked if historic districts should be exempt from provisions allowing ADUs, and overwhelming percentage (79.5%) said “No.”



The consensus that historic neighborhoods should also accommodate accessory dwelling units was shared regardless of age, of sector of employment, of owner/renter status, and of single-family home occupancy. In fact, in every sub-category of survey respondent, at least three-quarters felt historic districts should not be exempt from ADU ordinances.



The belief that historic districts should not be exempt from ADU ordinances was also overwhelmingly held whether or not the respondent's city already had an ADU ordinance. In fact, there was a slightly higher commitment to include historic districts in ADU-permitted areas in cities that already have such land use provisions.

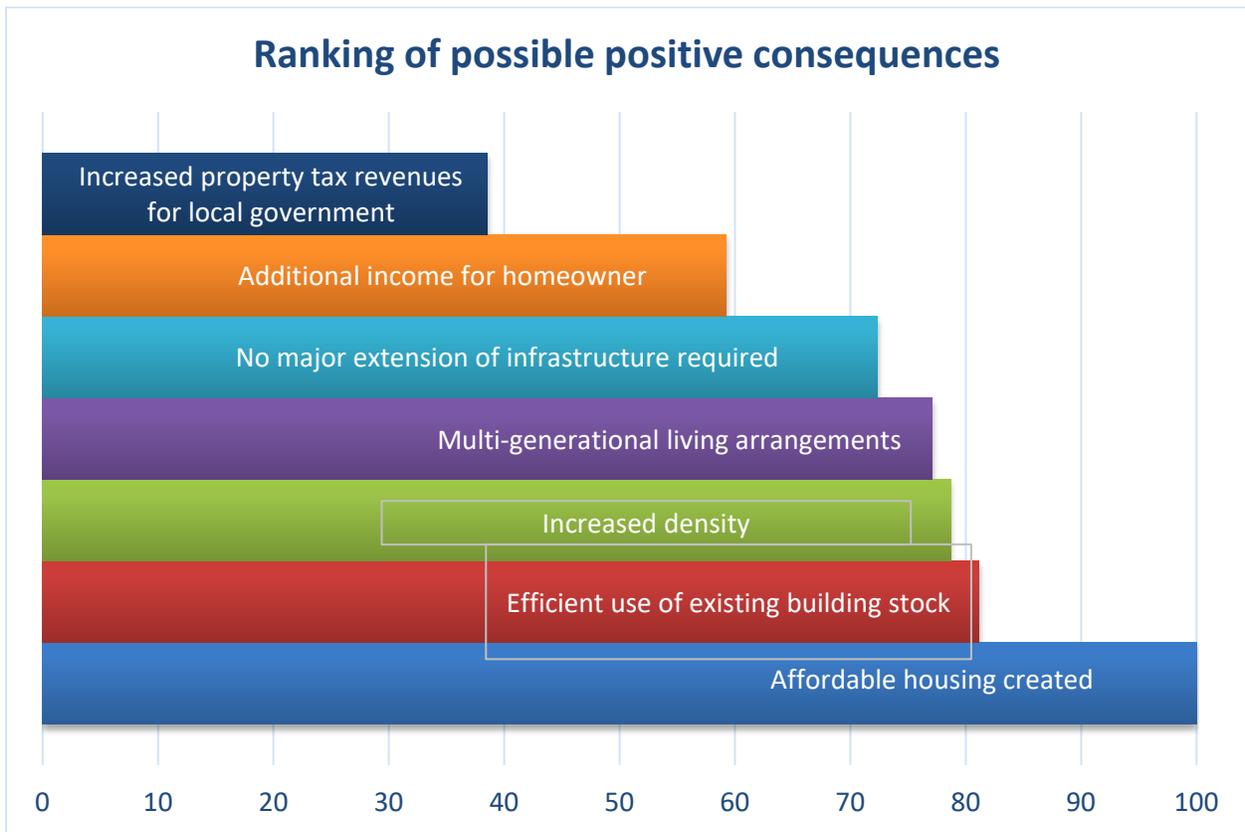


**QUESTION 5 – PLEASE RANK THESE POSSIBLE CONSEQUENCES OF ADUS AS BEING MOST POSITIVE (IT IS NOT NECESSARY TO RANK EVERY CHOICE)**

Survey takers were asked to rank possible positive consequences of allowing ADUs. The creation of affordable housing was by far ranked as the most positive benefit.<sup>1</sup> The lowest ranked possible positive consequences were financial measures, including “Additional income for the homeowner” and “Increased property tax revenues for local government.”

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<sup>1</sup> Responses were weighted based on the ranking received and the highest scoring response was assigned a score of 100. Each of the less strongly held possible consequences received a score as a share of the highest ranked alternative. For this question, the second highest weighted alternative was for “Efficient use of existing building stock,” which was just over 80 percent of the top-ranked positive consequence.



For most answers in this PresPoll, there was little variation in how different generations answered. In addition to the inter-generational consensus regarding the highest-ranked positive consequence, there was consistency in the ranking of other benefits between generations as well. “positive consequences” that was true of the highest ranked alternative as well. All three generations chose “Affordable housing created” as the highest-ranking positive consequence<sup>2</sup>. However, for Gen Xers, the second-highest identified possible positive consequence was the opportunity for ADUs to provide multi-generational living arrangements. This may be explained by the fact that Gen Xers (now aged 41 to 56) are a generation with a unique perspective on housing, as they are currently facing housing issues for both their parents and their children.

| Benefit Ranking | Baby Boomers                             | GenX                                     | Millennials                              |
|-----------------|--|--|--|
| 1               | Affordable housing created               | Affordable housing created               | Affordable housing created               |
| 2               | Efficient use of existing building stock | Multi-generational living arrangements   | Efficient use of existing building stock |
| 3               | Multi-generational living arrangements   | Efficient use of existing building stock | Increased density                        |

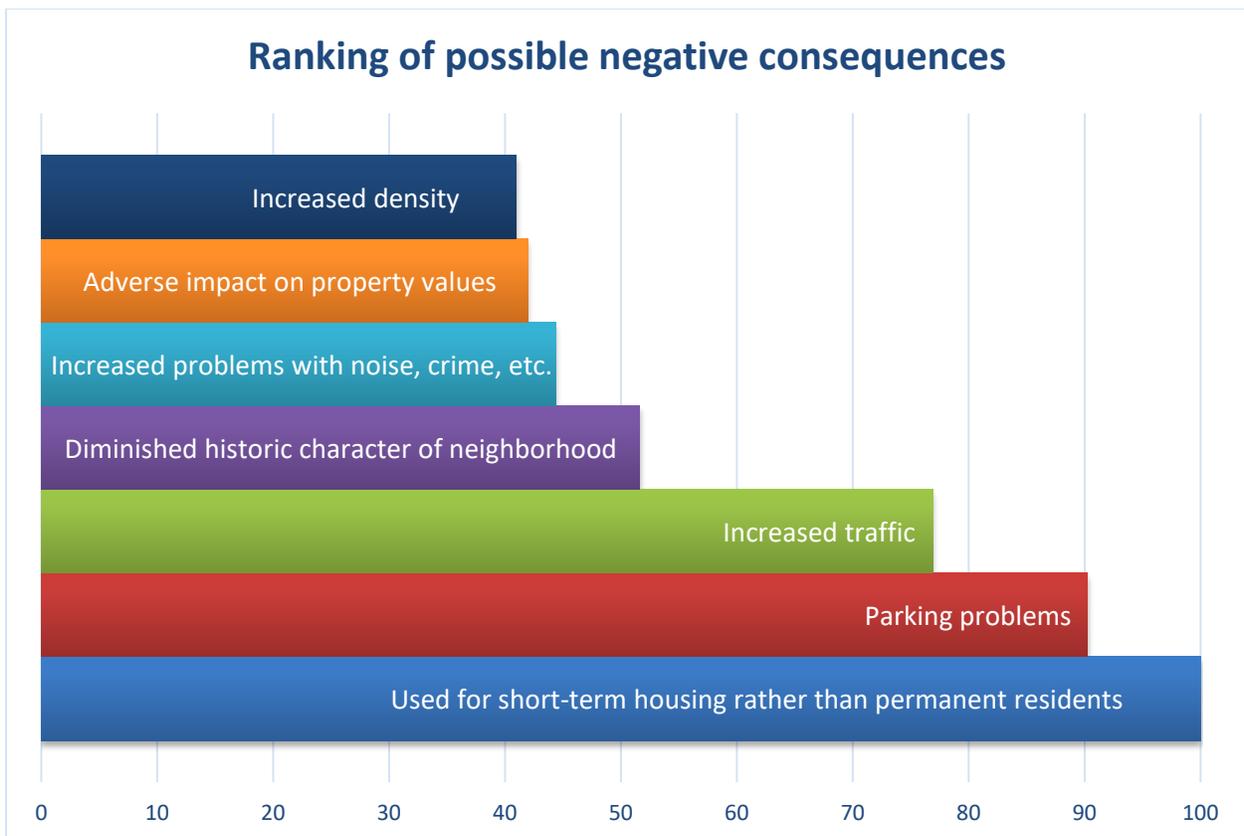
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<sup>2</sup> Two other generations were included in the survey choices – Silent Generation and GenZ. However, the share of respondents in those two groupings was too small (Silent Generation – 1.9% and GenZ less than 1%) to be statistically reliable when viewed as a discrete numerical subset of data.

**QUESTION 6 – PLEASE RANK THESE POSSIBLE CONSEQUENCES OF ADUS AS BEING MOST NEGATIVE (IT IS NOT NECESSARY TO RANK EVERY CHOICE)**

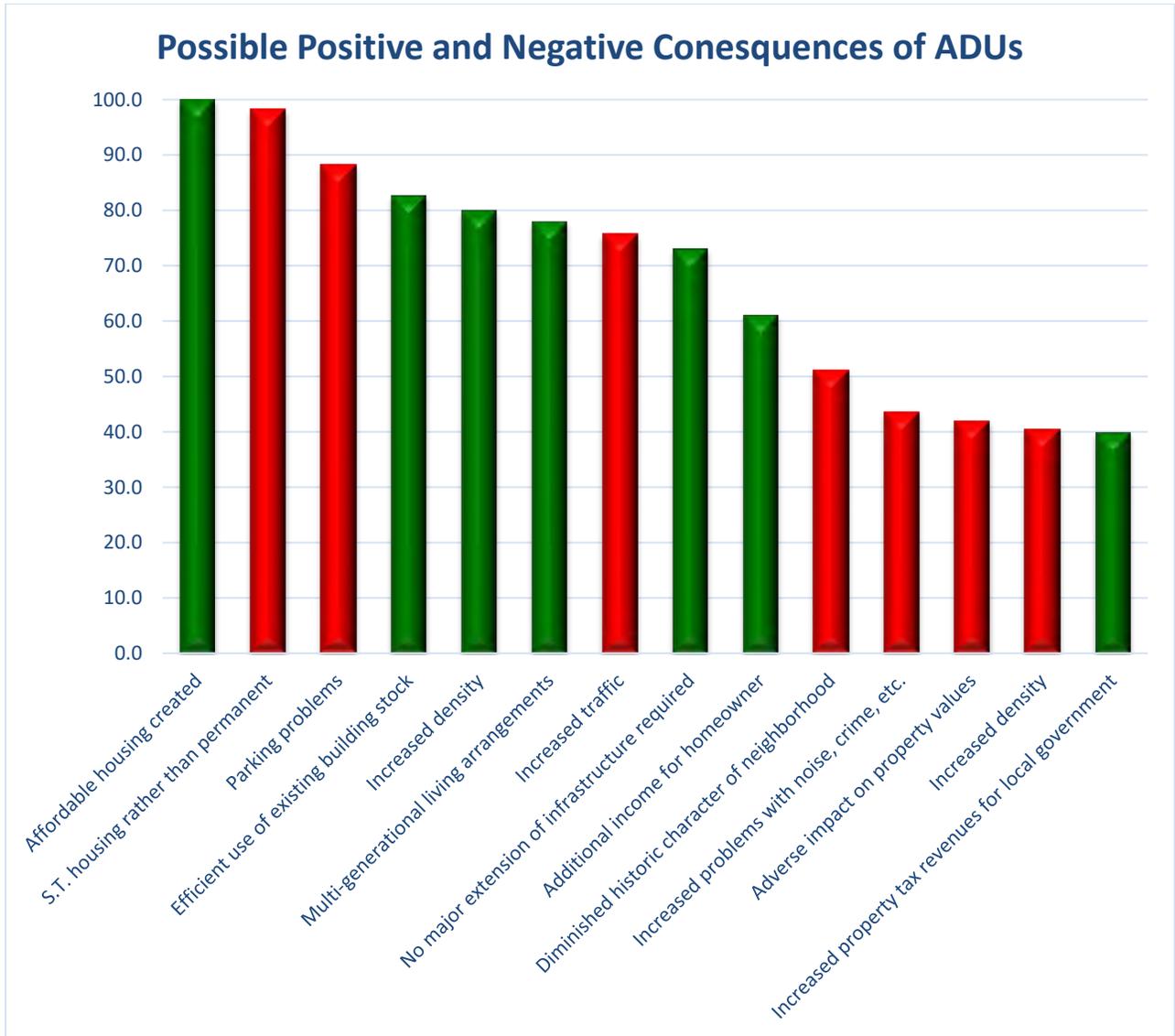
Even the most vociferous supporters of ADUs, when being objective, will acknowledge that there may be some possible negative consequences. There were about twenty percent fewer responses to the question ranking negative consequences than the question ranking positive ones, but potential negative results were recognized. While there were concerns about the impacts of ADUs on potential parking and traffic challenges, those issues did not rank as the top concern. Rather, the primary concern cited by respondents was that ADUs might be used for short-term housing rather than for permanent residents. At least in the minds of some, allowing ADUs to be used for short-term rentals rather than permanent residents contradicts the importance of ADUs as affordable housing. Nearly half (47.0%) of those who identified “Affordable housing created” as the highest-ranking positive consequence also identified “Used for short-term housing” as the highest negative consequence.

Also notable – particularly since nearly all respondents viewed themselves as active preservationists – was that concern about the diminished historic character of the neighborhood did not emerge as a highly ranked negative consequence, nor did the possibility that ADUs might have an adverse impact on property values.



When responses about the potential positive and negative consequences are considered together, affordable housing ranks highest, followed by two possible negative consequences – the potential use of

ADUs as short-term<sup>3</sup> housing rentals, and their potential strain on parking, followed by three additional positive outcomes – the efficient use of building stock, increased density, and the provision of multi-generational housing.

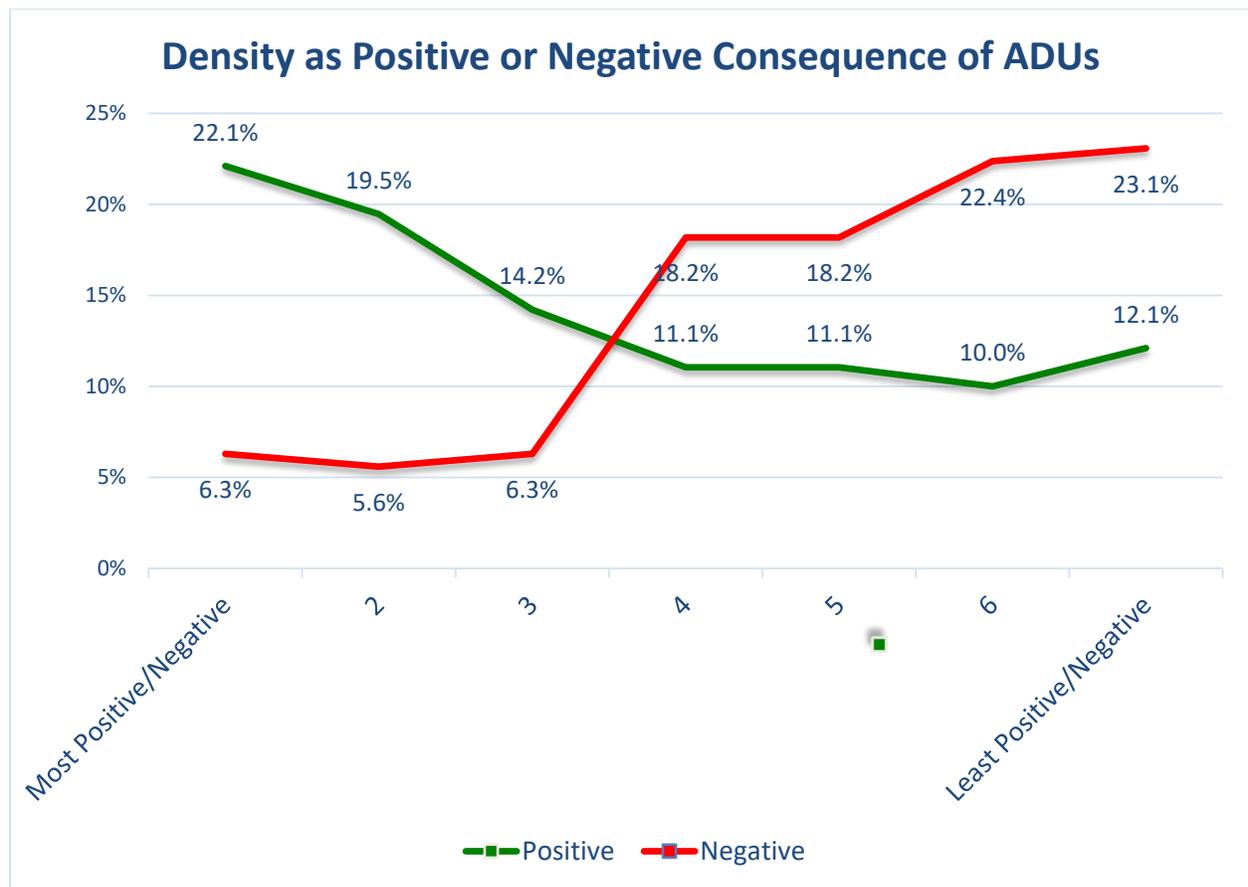


<sup>3</sup> For readability, the response “Used for short-term housing rather than permanent residents” has been shortened to “S.T. housing rather than permanent” in the graph.

THREE CHEERS FOR DENSITY

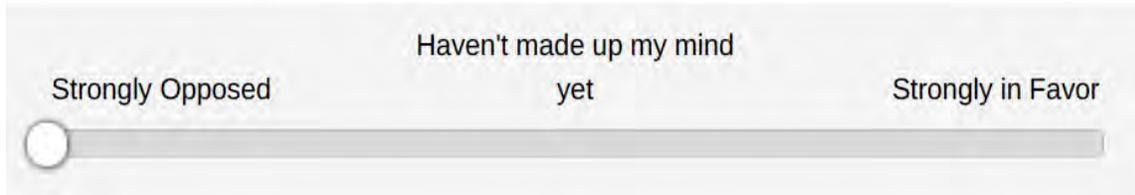
“Increased density” was included among the choices for both the “positive consequences” and “negative consequences” questions. Despite the fact that historic districts in most cities are among the densest of all residential neighborhoods, preservation is often accused of being anti-density. These survey results should definitively put that uninformed canard to rest. The “positive consequences” and the “negative consequences” questions asked survey respondents to rank from highest to lowest seven possible consequences. The graph below illustrates the preservationists’ attitudes toward density. The green line represents the density positioning as a positive consequence, the red line as a negative consequence. More than a fifth of all respondents (22.1%) ranked density as the highest positive consequence of ADUs plus an additional 19.5% viewing density as the second most positive result. In other words, more than 40% of all respondents saw density as one of the top two positive consequences of ADUs. Only 12.1% ranked density as the lowest positive consequence. On the negative side less than 12% ranked density among the top two negative consequences (6.3% and 5.6%) while nearly a quarter (23.1%) ranked density as the least significant negative consequence.

Most historic neighborhoods are inherently dense, and professional preservationists are willing for them to become even more so with the addition of ADUs.

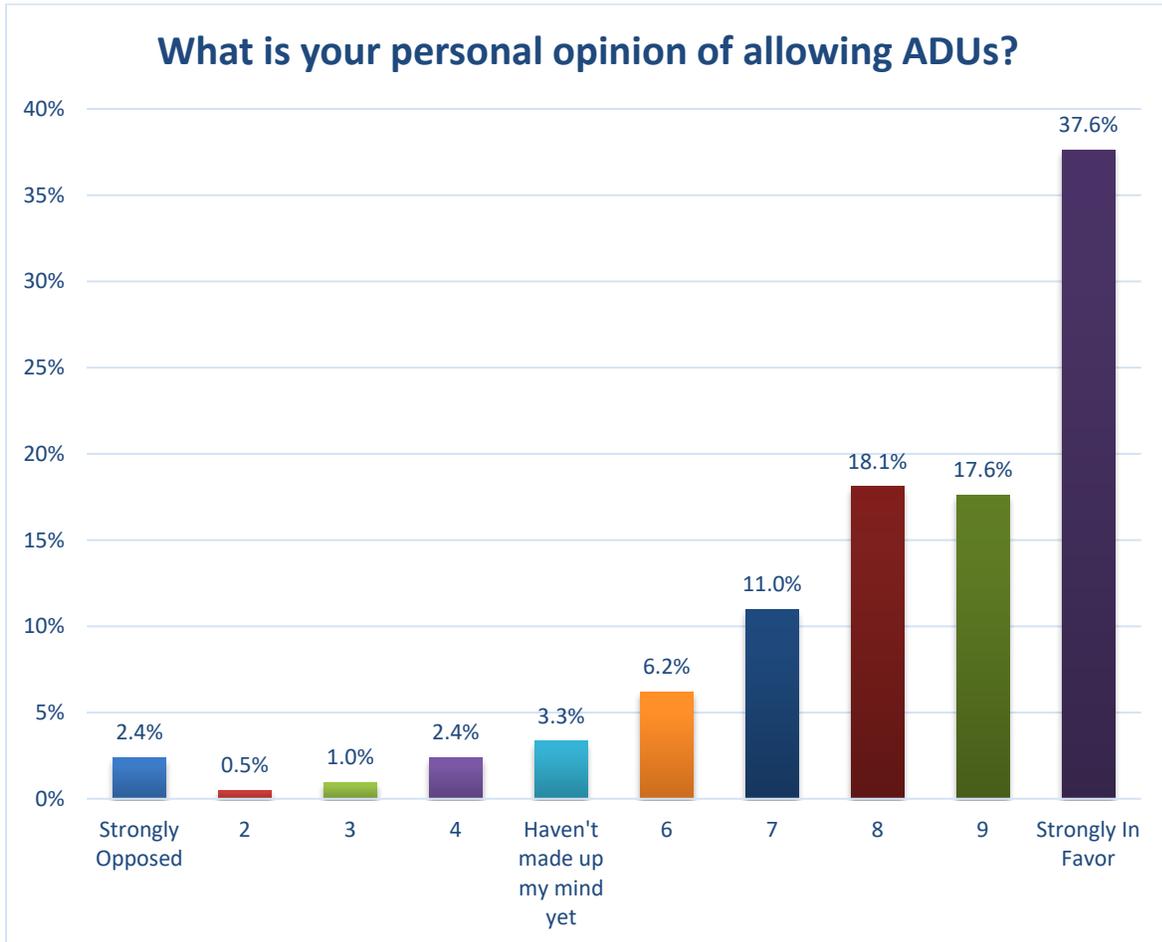


**QUESTION 7 – WHAT IS YOUR PERSONAL OPINION ON ALLOWING ADUS?**

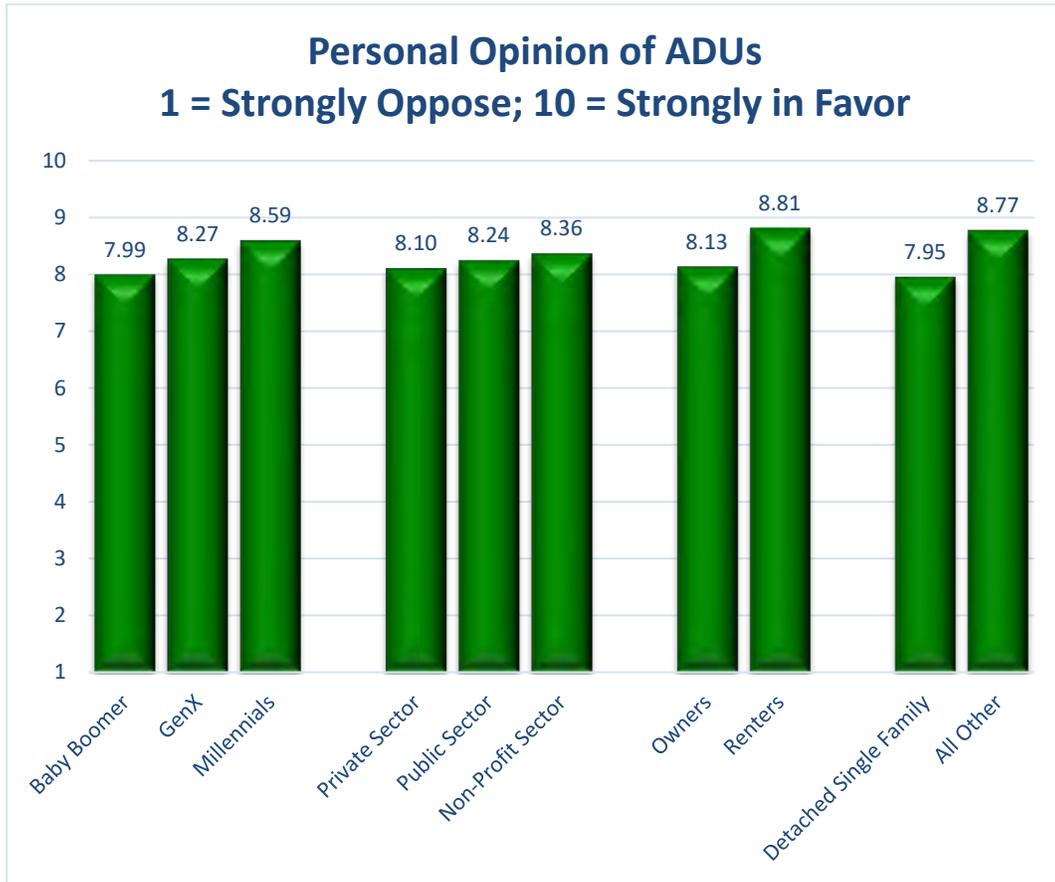
Survey respondents were asked to state their own personal opinion on allowing ADUs by choosing a point on a scale from 1 (identified as Strongly Opposed) to 10 (Strongly in Favor) with a midpoint identified as “Haven’t made up my mind yet.”



The response of these preservationists was unequivocal – 37.6% placed themselves at 10 -- the high end of the favorability scale. More than 70% placed themselves at 8 or higher. This compares with a mere 3.9% in the three positions on the “Strongly Opposed” end of the spectrum. Among all respondents, the average position was 8.26.



To test the breadth of this support for ADUs among respondents, responses were sorted into subsets based on age, employment sector, owners and renters, and type of housing respondents personally occupy. In each category the scores were at nearly 8 (7.99) or higher.



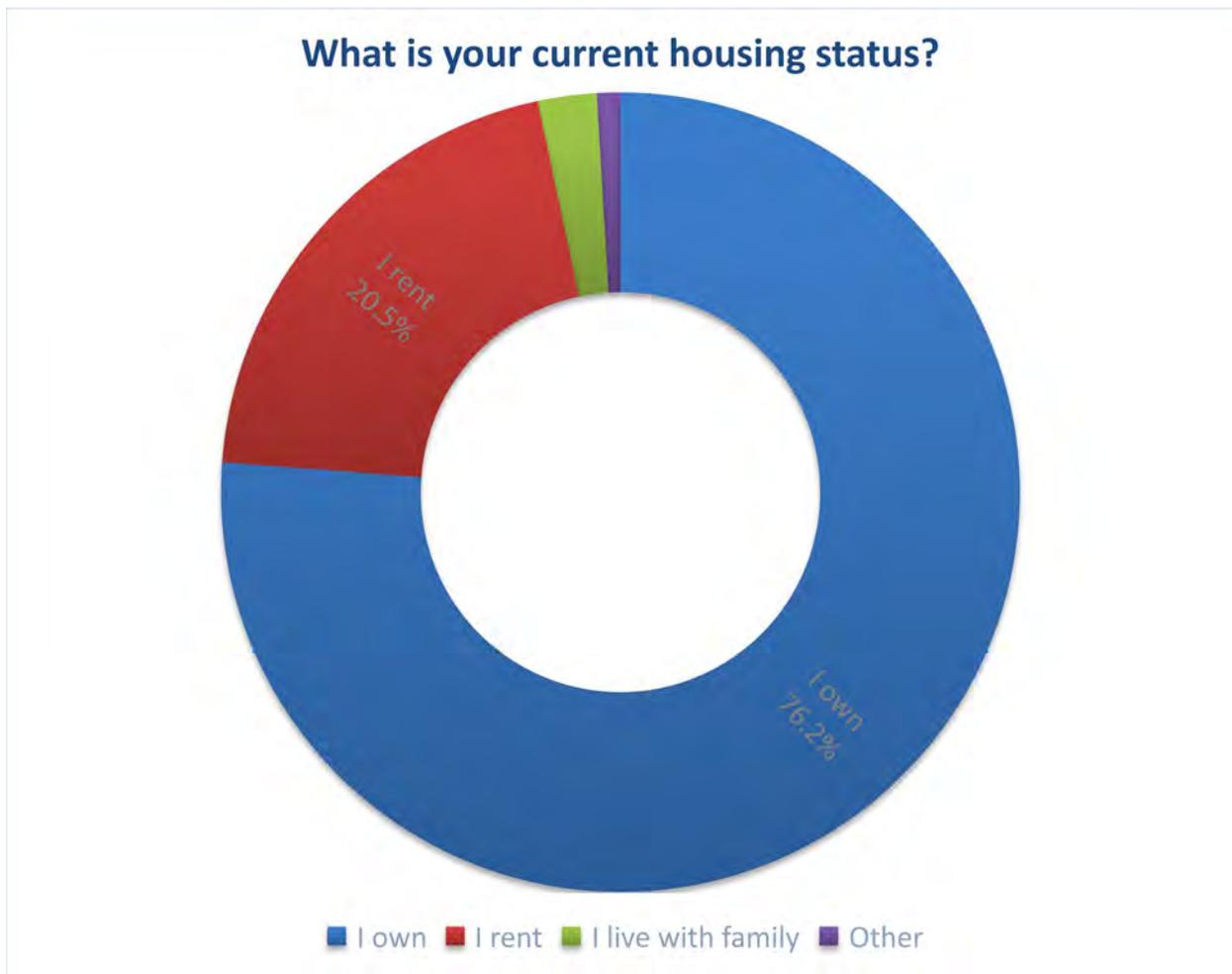
Finally, personal opinion was compared between cities that currently have ADU legislation and those that do not. Again, there was slightly higher personal support for ADUs in places that have already established pro-ADU ordinances.





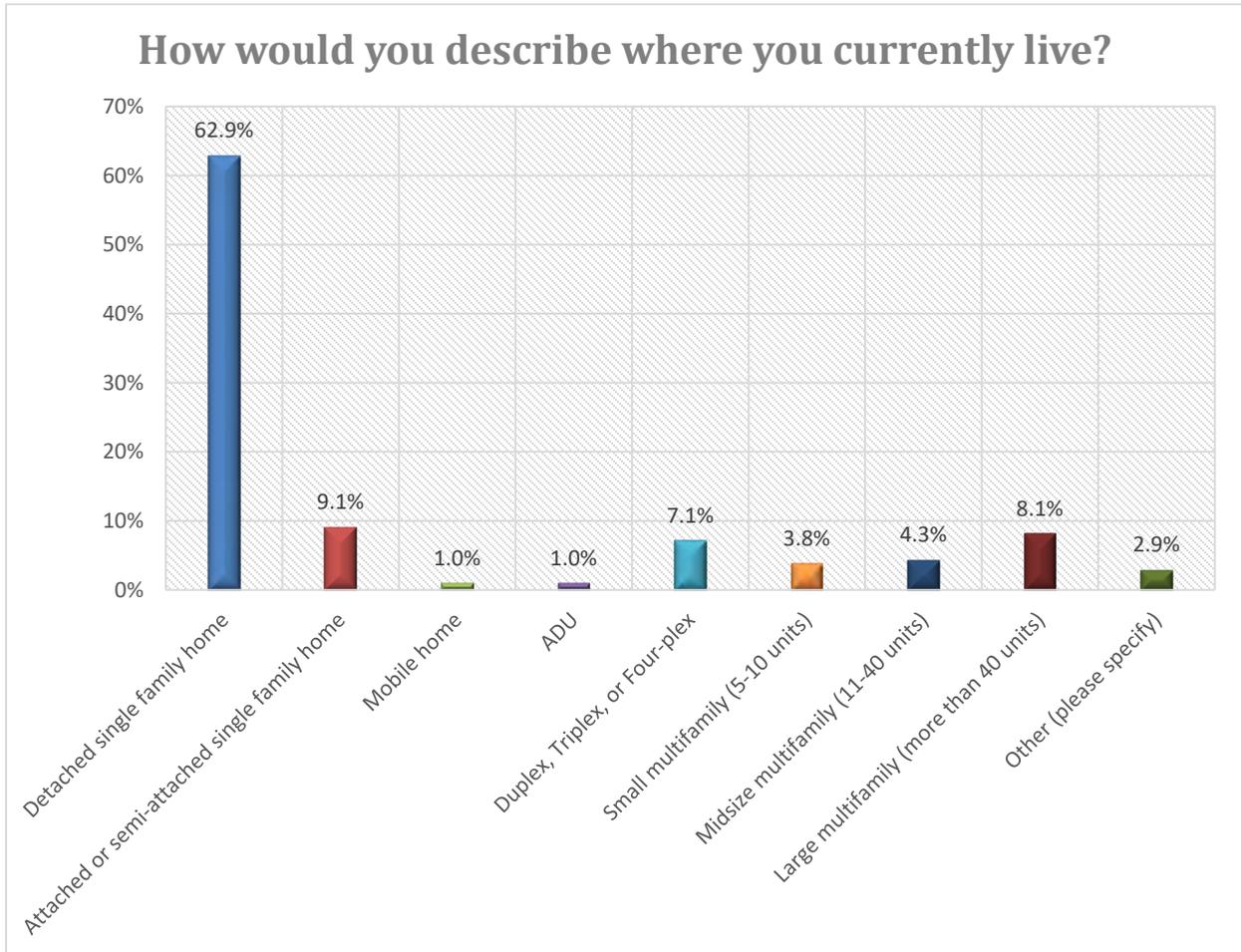
**QUESTION 8 – WHAT IS YOUR CURRENT HOUSING STATUS?**

Survey respondents were asked what their current housing status was. Just over three-quarters (76.2%) reported owning their own home, while 20.5% said they were renters. This is higher than the national home ownership rate of 65.8%. This higher rate is probably attributable in part to the fact that most of the respondents are likely college educated, given the requirements for most jobs in historic preservation. Households with college degrees tend to have higher rates of homeownership than less formally-educated households.



**QUESTION 9 – HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE WHERE YOU CURRENTLY LIVE?**

A significant majority (62.9%) of those responding to this PresPoll said they lived in a detached single-family home. This is comparable to the national rate where 63.9% of households occupy this type of dwelling.

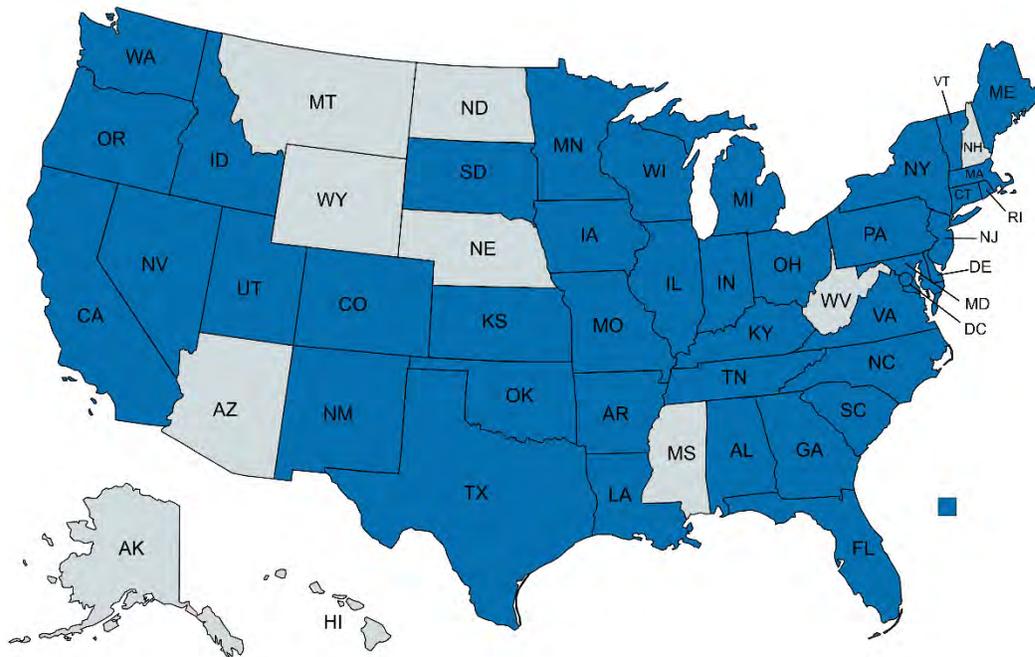


### QUESTION 10 – IN WHICH COUNTRY DO YOU CURRENTLY RESIDE?

In some PresPolls there is significant participation from non-US respondents. Although there were respondents from Canada, Ecuador, and Spain, the overwhelming majority answering questions about ADUs lived in the United States.

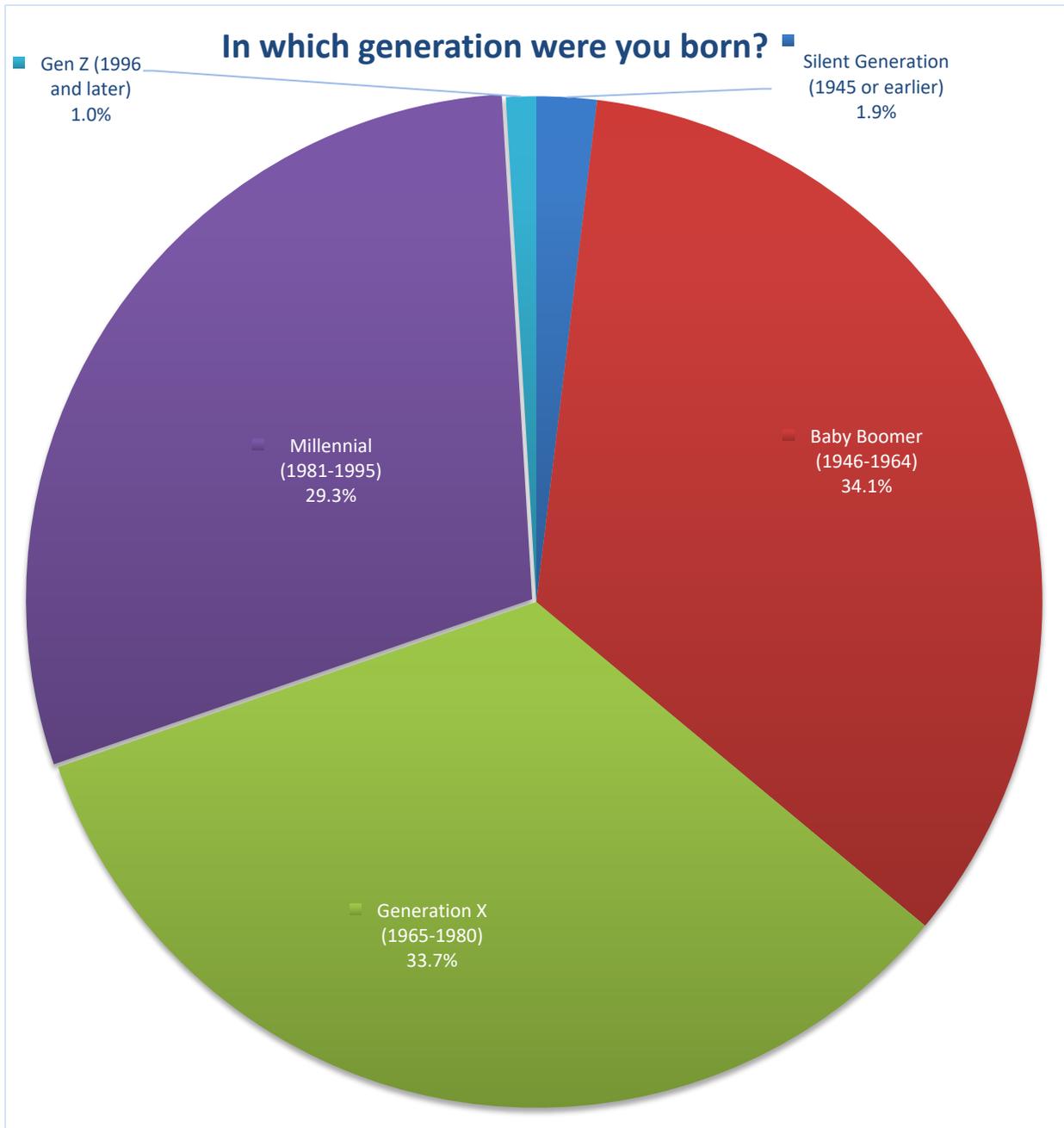
### QUESTION 11 – IN WHICH STATE, PROVINCE, OR TERRITORY DO YOU RESIDE?

While as noted above, most respondents live in the US, they were widely dispersed throughout the country. Preservationists from 40 states plus Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia took the survey, as indicated in the map below. Blue colored states each had at least one poll taker.



**QUESTION 12 – IN WHICH GENERATION WERE YOU BORN?**

The three largest demographic groups by age – Baby Boomers, Gen Xers, and Millennials each comprised nearly a third of all respondents. The two other age groups represented – the Silent Generation and Gen Zers--had too few responses to be reliably evaluated as separate groups.



## CONCLUSIONS

This PresPoll was a myth-breaker. Clearly historic preservation professionals and advocates overwhelmingly support ADUs, particularly for affordable housing. Preservationists are advocates for density, even though historic neighborhoods are already among the densest in most cities. Preservationists are willing to see change in historic neighborhoods, with more than three quarters saying historic districts should not be exempt from ADU legislation.

Once again, preservationists have demonstrated that they are not NIMBYs with some nostalgic yearning for neighborhoods set in amber. Rather, they recognize the needs of cities today and see historic preservation as part of the solution to urban challenges, like affordable housing, and not as a barrier to evolution and change.

If this survey says anything about preservationists it is that they have allowed others to define their positions on issues such as density, affordable housing, and regulatory adaptation. And how many of those others have characterized preservationists is simply wrong. The findings of this PresPoll amply demonstrate that.

APPENDIX 1 – COPY OF SURVEY



PlaceEconomics

HERITAGE STRATEGIES  
international

## ADUs

This month's PresPoll is about ADUs -- Accessory Dwelling Units. ADUs are independent housing units that occupy a lot that is otherwise zoned for a single family home. ADUs may be converted from existing structures such as a garage, basement, or carriage house or they may be new construction. Proponents of ADUs argue that they can add density and provide affordable housing. Opponents say that they may disrupt existing neighborhood character and add to parking and traffic problems. We want to know what YOU think. Thanks in advance for providing your perspective to this PresPoll

1. What is your current employment status?

- I work in the private sector
  I work in the educational or institutional sector  
 I work in the public sector
  I am retired/not in the workforce/student/other  
 I work in the non-profit sector

2. What is your historic preservation role?

- Historic preservation is a major part of my job
  I don't work in historic preservation but I'm an advocate for preservation  
 Historic preservation is a minor part of my job
  Historic preservation is not an issue I'm involved with either personally or professionally  
 Historic preservation is not part of my job but I'm interested in preservation  
 Other (please specify)

3. Does your city currently have legislation related to ADUs (including if mandated by the State)?

- Yes  
 No  
 I don't know

4. If your city adopted an ADU ordinance, should historic districts be exempt from the provisions?

- Yes
- No
- I don't know

5. Please rank these possible consequences of ADUs as being most positive (It is not necessary to rank every choice)



Increased density



Affordable housing created



Additional income for homeowner



Multi-generational living arrangements



No major extension of infrastructure required



Efficient use of existing building stock



Increased property tax revenues for local government

6. Please rank these possible consequences of ADUs as being most negative (It is not necessary to rank every choice)



Increased traffic



Parking problems



Adverse impact on property values



Increased density



Used for short-term housing rather than permanent residents



Diminished historic character of neighborhood



Increased problems with noise, crime, etc.

7. What is your personal opinion on allowing ADUs?

Strongly Opposed      Haven't made up my mind yet      Strongly in Favor



8. What is your current housing status?

- I own
- I rent
- I live with family
- Other (please specify)

9. How would you describe where you currently live?

- Detached single family home
- Attached or semi-attached single family home
- Mobile home
- ADU
- Other (please specify)
- Duplex, Triplex, or Four-plex
- Small multifamily (5-10 units)
- Midsize multifamily (11-40 units)
- Large multifamily (more than 40 units)

10. In which country do you currently reside?

11. In which state, province, or territory do you reside?

12. In which generation were you born?

- Silent Generation (1945 or earlier)
- Baby Boomer (1946-1964)
- Generation X (1965-1980)
- Millennial (1981-1995)
- Gen Z (1996 and later)

## APPENDIX 2 – ADU COMMENTS ON FACEBOOK

The following comments were written the Facebook pages which contained a link to the survey. Some respondents said that room should be provided in the survey for open ended comments. We agree and will include such an option for PresPolls in the future.

- I'm converting my 1926 garage into a guest house this summer. It will be handicap accessible so my mother can visit and I can have AirBnB guests. It'll also make a great cabana for big summer parties in the backyard when we can do that again. In the future it can house my parents or adult children if needed or a helper for me in my old age. I can't wait to finish it!
- Boston did a pilot for ADUs but for some reason excluded carriage houses, which we're losing in alarming numbers. There's no incentive to invest in maintenance of a carriage house or outbuilding if you can't use it for a unit. ADUs should be expanded a...
- I am excited to see an ADU ordinance in Chicago! We are losing affordable units every day.
- I would add that one concern is that often our historic districts are some of the densest populated already. It is the non-historic (or the post WWII districts not listed yet) that are far more wasteful in terms of land. And yet we always hear about the historic districts, many of which have more zoning possibilities than the single-family post WWII suburbs. What is interesting, for many of the Post WWII era suburbs, adding an ADU is trickier because of the historic importance of the acreage to the house, and because so many of those houses are so low to the ground.
- Good question and focus for our work, as ADUs can be a win-win if done right.
- I look forward to the results of this survey. I find the success of ADUs to be very dependent on the configuration of the lot, and I think design guidelines that address potential issues could be very helpful.
- I filled out the survey but didn't see a place to leave a comment, which would have been that I see NO negatives from adding possibility of ADUs. I don't believe any of those suggested as possible negatives actually occur, although public perception that they exist may cause problems and opposition. Requires further study of places where ADUs have been allowed, and everything depends on how the issue is handled by local authorities. Thanks for these surveys, which I think are valuable.
- I agree . I live in a NR district that's mid-century modern single family. I would like to have been able to note in the survey that I live in a historic district and support ADUs, even in my own hood.
- I would like to see ADUs in historic districts follow the design guidelines for that historic district. If there are no guidelines, then the guidelines must be created before enabling ADUs.
- Growing up, Attic and Garage Apartments were the Affordable (first) apartments in my home town.
- The Winter Park, FL ordinance allows existing ADUs to operate on historic properties because so many had ADUs over garages and guest/employee cottages. The code allows them to be added to historic properties as an incentive for preservation subject to meeting parking requirements.
- My daughter's home in a 1930's hillside area of LA is zoned for an ADU. Big terraced yard—I'm counting on that option later as a granny flat.
- I think it is great how you are focusing on important issues for preservation practice, and getting real-time input from people in the field. I also appreciate how some of the concepts you have done surveys on are challenging, or perceived as such by some people. This is a real service to the profession and I just wanted to recognize that and say thank you.
- As with many things, it is all in the implementation and looking at what is appropriate for each city. Then, within the city, each neighborhood. Some neighborhoods are great candidates for ADUs and some aren't. One of my big beefs is that they might not be used for rental housing, just Air BNB. Then, that doesn't help solve the issues in many communities where good, affordable housing close to transit is needed. One of the things we considered in Austin was allowing the smaller house in front to become the "ADU" and letting the property owner build a larger house in the back. This would be for areas where the main house is only about 800-900 square feet. The original house would be kept and contribute to the neighborhood character and the back house would be larger for the family. See More

- I really do wish you'd allow for some free response comment. Twitter character limit is fine, no need for you to read essays.
- This is an important conversation. I'm working on a similar issue in Michigan cities and am glad for the dialogue here.
- These were promoted as granny flats. But are being used for multi generation and Airbnb's. The ones located in Historic Districts must pass local review. Other than additional autos, nobody is unhappy. It may have contributed to a lot of unused dilapidated auxiliary buildings and garages being saved and repurposed. All for the good
- Do you require an off street parking space for the ADU? Just curious.
- we have no parking requirements. Street parking is tight, but not so tight that it is problematic
- Thanks for the reply. I'm working with a town that has a requirement for 2 parking spaces for the main house and 1 for the ADU. There's a historic district that could have ADUs and it might be nice to drop the requirement for the 1 space. The neighborhood is adjacent to a light rail stop and the downtown.
- Neighborhood character is just a slogan for NIMBYs to oppose any change. Simply make the ADU's fit the architectural style of surrounding buildings within any historic overlay area. Done.
- During The Pandemic, many families chose to remove their relatives from extended care facilities so their loved ones could be quarantined with them rather than to be excluded from them. A by-product of this could mean more affordable and distinct housing opportunities for home owners children or an affordable choice for others seeking housing Post-Pandemic. ·
- Just filled it out—curious to see these results. Chicago just passed an ordinance in the last year.
- The implementation of ADUs is varied so hard to assess. Some good some bad. Has anyone done a comprehensive survey of codes and templates?
- We had a small attempt in Pittsburgh combined with Community land trust... drives down cost of ownership and multigenerational traditions in a poor neighborhood
- It's a historic model. Not intended for STR [Short Term Rental]. many are self-contained within the main structure, usually necessitating window and or door changes. Or an addition.

## APPENDIX 3 – ABOUT PLACEECONOMICS

PlaceEconomics, and our companion company Heritage Strategies International, are Washington, DC-based firms which work at the intersection of heritage and economics. Over the past 35 years we have undertaken assignments in 49 US states and more than 50 countries. Our mission statement is: “to arm the preservation world with robust, quality research and creative policy solutions, presented clearly to any audience, to advance the public good of heritage conservation”. These periodic PresPolls are one action we take to meet that mission.

Our clients are primarily public and non-profit sector entities. We work with them in four general areas: 1) measuring the impacts of historic preservation; 2) building capacity through workshops, speeches, training, research, and writing; 3) recommending policies, tools, strategies, and incentives to encourage investment in heritage resources; and, on the international level, 4) introducing and helping to implement the Main Street Approach beyond US borders.

More information about our firms and the work we do can be found at [www.PlaceEconomics.com](http://www.PlaceEconomics.com) and [www.HS-Intl.com](http://www.HS-Intl.com). We can also be contacted at [info@PlaceEconomics.com](mailto:info@PlaceEconomics.com), reached by phone at 202-588-6258; or by mail at PO Box 7529, Washington, DC, 20044.