

Missing Middle Housing

What is Missing Middle Housing?

Missing Middle Housing is a term coined by Daniel Parolek in 2010 to address the often-



Figure 1. Missing Middle Housing represents the portion of the housing spectrum between single-family homes and large apartment buildings. Image Source: Alliance for Housing Solutions

neglected middle of the housing spectrum between single-family homes and large apartment buildings that is often underrepresented in many American cities. Housing types commonly considered to be part of the Missing Middle include townhomes, live-work units, duplexes, triplexes, fourplexes, and other multi-family buildings of up to eight units (Figure 1). This range of housing is seen as being compatible in scale with single-family housing, while providing a variety of more affordable housing options.

Benefits of Missing Middle Housing

Missing Middle Housing – generally medium-density housing – is usually more affordable than single-family housing, due to its smaller size and land requirement. It can increase housing options, allowing people of different incomes, household sizes, and stages of life to live within the same neighborhood (Figure 2). This can allow residents to remain in the same neighborhood as their housing needs change over time. The additional residential density provided by medium-density housing can provide more walkable and transit-friendly neighborhoods, and the smaller unit sizes generally use less water, consume less energy, and help to preserve more undeveloped land than detached single-family housing.



Figure 2. Medium-density units can be integrated within a residential neighborhood. Image Source: Opticos Design, Inc.

Why is “Missing Middle” “Missing”?

For much of the past 75 years, housing in the United States has primarily consisted of either single-family homes in low-density suburbs or large apartment buildings in urban or commercial centers. Medium-density housing has been limited over this time for multiple reasons, including the prevalence of zoning codes that restrict these types of housing units within single-family neighborhoods, which often cover much of a city’s land area. While zoning codes often do include

medium-density residential zones, these zones typically make up a smaller portion of the city than areas dedicated to single-family zoning. Additionally, single-family housing generally faces less opposition from the public than medium-density housing, which can lead to developers preferring this type of product, as it is less likely to be delayed or denied.

Medium-Density Housing in the Treasure Valley

The number of medium-density (Missing Middle) housing units constructed in Ada and Canyon Counties has varied widely over the past 15 years, from a low of 51 in 2010 to over 1,466 in 2021 (Figure 3).

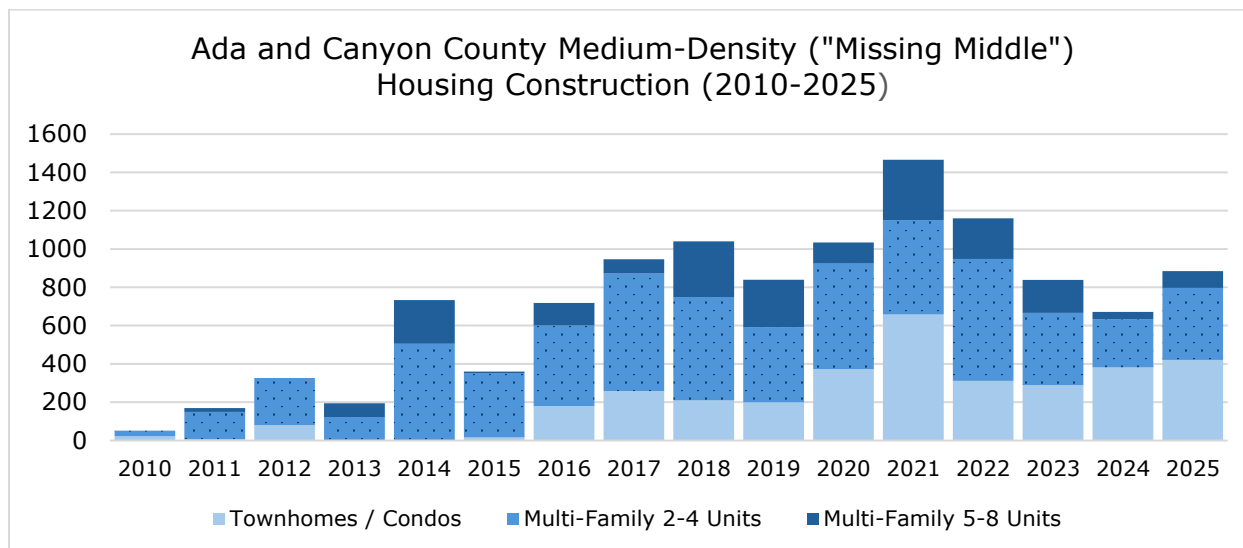


Figure 3. The amount of medium-density housing being constructed has fluctuated over time. Source: COMPASS

Overall housing production has increased significantly since 2010, from fewer than 2,000 units per year in 2010 and 2011, to over 8,000 units per year from 2018 to 2025 (Figure 4). There has also been a significant increase in the proportion of multi-family housing – both medium and high-density – constructed since 2010.

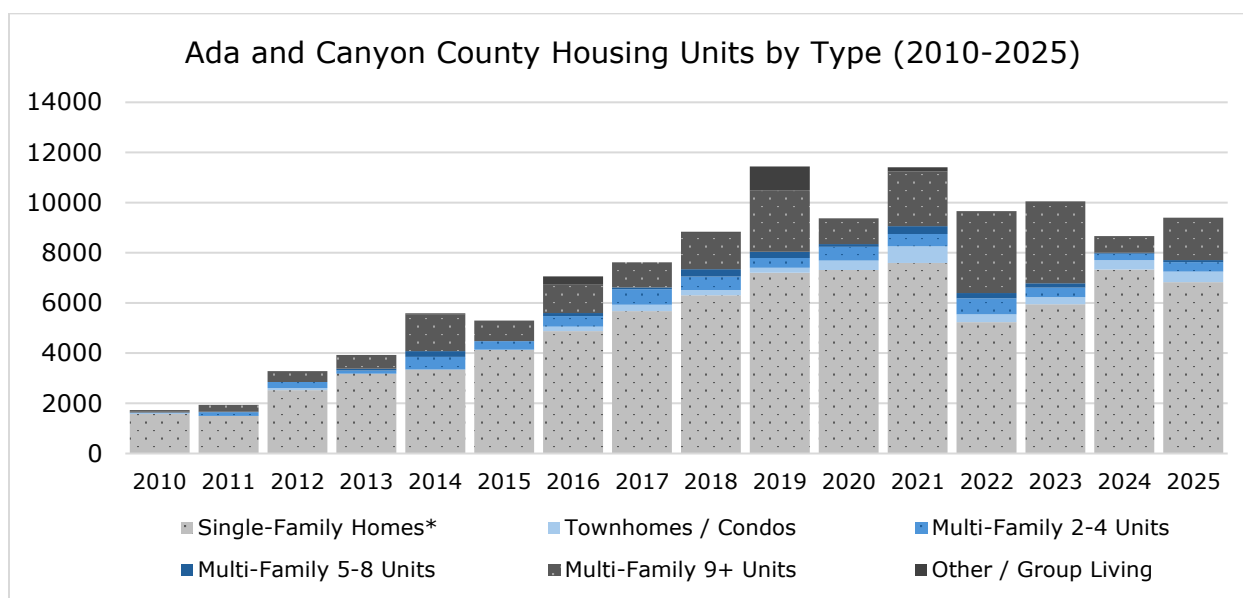


Figure 4. Medium-density housing accounts for a small portion of overall housing construction. Source: COMPASS

*Includes Manufactured Homes and Accessory Dwelling Units

When comparing the number of housing units built across three, five-year periods in Ada and Canyon Counties, the number of medium-density housing units increased dramatically from 2011-2015 to 2016-2020, along with a sharp increase in overall housing units constructed (Table 1). The percentage of medium-density units rose significantly as well, from 8.7% to 10.3%. From 2016-2020 to 2021-2025, the amount of medium-density housing constructed increased nearly proportionally to the overall number of housing units, falling slightly from 10.3% of all units constructed in 2016-2020 to 10.2% in 2021-2025.

Table 1. Housing Construction within Ada and Canyon Counties from 2011 to 2025

	2011-2015	2016-2020	2021-2025
Total Housing Units Constructed	20,468	44,331	49,176
Medium-Density Units Constructed	1,782	4,577	5,019
Medium-Density Percent of Total	8.7%	10.3%	10.2%

Source: COMPASS

Methods for Increasing Medium-Density Housing

One way of increasing medium-density housing is to expand the areas in which these housing types are allowed. This can include eliminating single-family-only zoning districts, or allowing housing options such as townhomes, duplexes, triplexes, and fourplexes by right without the need for a conditional use permit or public hearing.

In 2018, the City of Minneapolis became the first major US city to formally eliminate single-family-only zoning citywide, allowing up to three dwelling units on all residential lots (Gibson, Scott. "Minneapolis to Eliminate Single-Family Zoning." Green Building Advisor, 28 December 2018, www.greenbuildingadvisor.com/article/minneapolis-eliminate-single-family-zoning). In 2019, Oregon passed a statewide law requiring cities and towns with populations of 10,000 or more to allow duplexes on all lots zoned for single-family homes, and cities and towns with populations of 25,000 or more to allow up to four units on all such lots ("Eliminating Single-Family Zoning and Parking Minimums in Oregon." Bipartisan Policy Center, 26 September 2023, www.bipartisanpolicy.org/article/eliminating-single-family-zoning-and-parking-minimums-in-oregon). Several cities and states have followed suit, passing similar measures to help ease housing shortages.

In 2022, the City of Greenleaf requested COMPASS perform an analysis of its zoning code to identify potential impediments to the development of affordable housing within the city (Hoskins, Dane. "Greenleaf Affordable Housing Zoning Code Review." COMPASS, 27 July 2022, www.compassidaho.org/wp-content/uploads/Greenleaf-Affordable-Housing-Zoning-Code-Review.pdf). Following its review, COMPASS suggested several code changes to allow more affordable housing within the city, with an emphasis on Missing Middle Housing. Specific suggestions for increasing the supply of Missing Middle Housing included the following:

- Adding language to the comprehensive plan supporting affordable housing, Missing Middle Housing, and the higher residential densities needed to accommodate it.
- Allowing duplexes to be constructed by right on all residential lots.
- Differentiating between small-scale and large-scale multi-family housing types, and allowing small-scale buildings, which would be compatible within single-family neighborhoods, in more areas of the city.

- Designating small-scale multi-family development as a permitted use in more zones throughout the city, as requiring conditional use permits can add time and uncertainty to the approval process.
- Increasing residential densities, and decreasing lot size, setback, frontage, and parking requirements to more easily facilitate the construction of Missing Middle Housing.
- Considering a form-based code that would regulate buildings based on their size, scale, and design rather than number of dwelling units contained within.

Some of the above recommendations could be applicable to other cities or counties seeking to increase their supply of Missing Middle Housing. In general, less restrictive zoning requirements regarding densities, lot dimensions, setbacks, and parking allows for a greater variety of housing and can open more lots for development or redevelopment that may currently be limited to only single-family homes under existing zoning codes. A Missing Middle Housing Typology Guidebook was developed by COMPASS as part of the zoning analysis providing images, descriptions, regulatory considerations, and suggested dimensional standards for different medium-density housing types that could serve as a guide for cities or counties considering changes to their zoning ordinance (Hoskins, Dane. "Missing Middle Housing Typology Guidebook." COMPASS, July 2022, www.compassidaho.org/wp-content/uploads/Missing-Middle-Housing-Typology-Guidebook.pdf).

Accessory Dwelling Units

Accessory dwelling units (ADUs), also referred to as secondary dwellings or mother-in-law units, are self-contained, independent living spaces within, or on the same lot as, a single-family dwelling (Figure 5). While not generally considered to be Missing Middle Housing, ADUs can fill a similar role, by providing smaller, affordable housing options that are compatible with the scale of single-family neighborhoods.



Figure 5. ADUs can be compatibly integrated into existing residential neighborhoods. Image Source: City of Boise

COMPASS began tracking the construction of ADUs within Ada and Canyon Counties in 2017, when 32 units were recorded. There was a nationwide surge in ADU construction following the COVID-19 pandemic, when they were often used as home offices or residences for family members. This likely contributed to the 95 ADUs built within Ada and Canyon Counties in 2021. This number wasn't exceeded until 2025, when a dramatic rise in ADUs resulted in 159 units being constructed within the two counties (Figure 6).

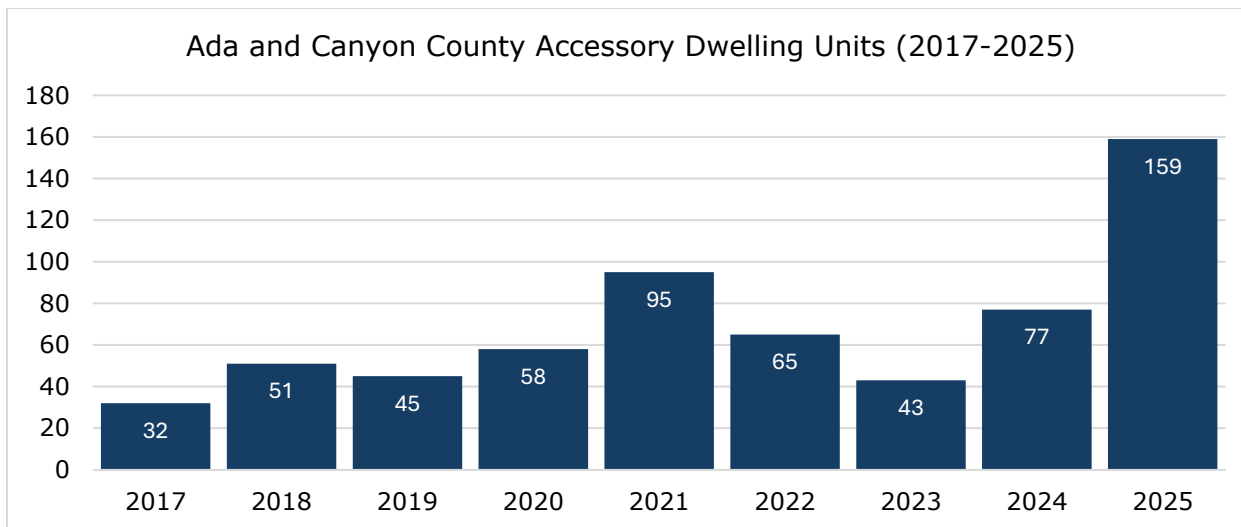


Figure 6. ADU construction increased significantly in 2025. Source: COMPASS

Many states and local governments throughout the country have loosened restrictions on ADUs in recent years to help relieve housing shortages and provide more affordable housing options. The dramatic increase in ADUs in Ada and Canyon Counties in 2025 could partially be due to recent local code changes intended to increase the supply of ADUs.

As part of its 2023 zoning ordinance update, the City of Boise removed requirements that parking be provided for ADUs and that the primary home be owner-occupied. The maximum allowable size was also increased from 700 to 900 square feet. In an effort to further encourage ADUs within the city, Boise has several sets of pre-approved ADU plans on its website available for members of the public to use at no cost (Figure 7). Residents will ultimately have eight different plan sets to choose from. These pre-approved plans will save residents on design costs and streamline the approval process.

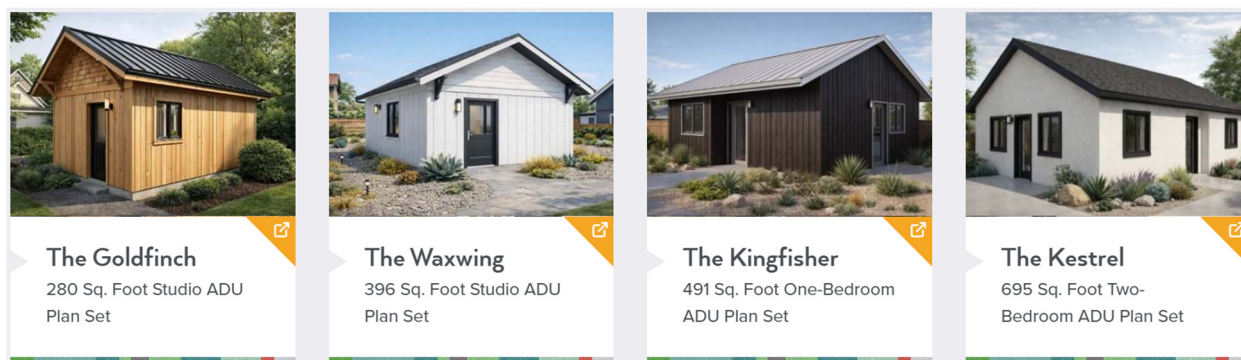


Figure 7. The City of Boise provides several pre-approved ADU plan sets to the public at no cost. Image Source: City of Boise

To facilitate the construction of additional ADUs statewide, the Idaho State Legislature in 2026 passed Senate Bill 1354, requiring cities with populations of 10,000 or more to allow ADUs on all residentially-zoned lots containing single-family dwellings, with the exception of historic properties and districts ([State of Idaho, Legislature. Senate Bill 1354, An Act Relating to Accessory Dwelling Units as Passed by the Senate, 26 March 2026. Idaho Legislature, www.legislature.idaho.gov/wp-content/uploads/sessioninfo/2026/legislative/S1354E1.pdf](https://www.legislature.idaho.gov/wp-content/uploads/sessioninfo/2026/legislative/S1354E1.pdf)). The bill allows one ADU on all such lots and requires that they be approved administratively rather than through a discretionary process. It also prohibits off-street parking requirements (with some exceptions), owner-occupancy requirements, and limiting the size of ADUs to less than

1,000 square feet, or 75% of the size of the primary dwelling. This legislation is similar to that of other states, beginning with Oregon in 2019, and will likely lead to an increase in ADUs throughout the state over the coming years.

Conclusion

While medium-density housing may be limited or appear “missing” from many communities due to the small portion of the housing supply it comprises, there is momentum among many local and state governments to prioritize this type of housing due to the role it can play in easing housing shortage and affordability challenges many parts of the country are facing. Removing barriers for medium-density housing can allow for a greater variety of housing choices and lower housing costs in a manner that is compatible with existing single-family neighborhoods.

Additional Resources

Link	URL
Missing Middle Housing	https://missingmiddlehousing.com
Opticos Design	https://opticosdesign.com
Municipal Research and Services Center (MRSC) Missing Middle Housing	https://mrsc.org/explore-topics/housing-homelessness/housing/middle-housing
Missing Middle Housing: Keys to Unlock the Missing Middle	https://www.gsd.harvard.edu/project/missing-middle-housing-keys-to-unlock-the-missing-middle/
Municipal Research and Services Center (MRSC) Accessory Dwelling Units	https://mrsc.org/explore-topics/housing-homelessness/housing/accessory-dwelling-units
City of Boise Pre-Approved ADU Plans	https://www.cityofboise.org/pre-approved-adu-plans
Idaho Senate Bill 1354	https://legislature.idaho.gov/wp-content/uploads/sessioninfo/2026/legislation/S1354E1.pdf
COMPASS 2025 Development Monitoring Report	https://compassidaho.org/wp-content/uploads/2025_DMR.pdf
COMPASS Missing Middle Housing Typology Guidebook	https://compassidaho.org/wp-content/uploads/Missing-Middle-Housing-Typology-Guidebook.pdf
COMPASS Greenleaf Affordable Housing Zoning Code Review	https://compassidaho.org/wp-content/uploads/Greenleaf-Affordable-Housing-Zoning-Code-Review.pdf
COMPASS Compact Housing Guidebook	https://compassidaho.org/wp-content/uploads/Compact_Housing_Guidebook_Dec2014.pdf