FIVE THINGS TO KNOW: BUILDING AN ADU

1. Where do I begin?

Before choosing a builder or falling in love with a particular ADU design, homeowners should first understand what their property, budget and local regulations will actually support, advises Talitha Abramsen, who managed the Lower Cape Housing and ADU Resource Center from 2023–2026 and currently directs the Pioneer Valley ADU Accelerator program. A call to your town's building department and board of health can tell you what your lot and septic system will support, and that one conversation can save you months.

"Make sure you know who you are building for, a good budget based on real plans, and then it's time to spend on a survey," adds Christopher Lee of Backyard ADUs.

2. What kind of ADU can I build on my property?

Homeowners can choose between detached, attached and space conversions, says Lee, whose firm builds modular units.

The Massachusetts Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities' ADU Design Challenge Showcase (***mass.gov/adu-design-challenge-showcase***) includes more than 100 publicly available designs.

"It's a great way to see what's possible, understand different layouts and construction approaches, and begin refining your own vision before paying an architect to start from scratch," says Abramsen.

3. How much does it cost to build an ADU?

The size and type of the project determines the cost, as well as design features and fixtures, site conditions, septic and stormwater details and geographic location. According to the Mass ADU Resource Center, an interior conversion can range from $120,000 to $270,000; a detached studio from $200,000 to $300,000; a two-bedroom attached ADU from $235,000 to $360,000; and a two-bedroom detached ADU from $250,000 to $450,000. Prices on the Cape can trend higher overall, so budget a cushion.

4. Is financing available?

MassHousing's Accessory Dwelling Unit Loan Program offers loans of up to $250,000 for detached ADUs and up to $150,000 for attached ADUs. It's open to income-eligible homeowners who live in the home, and plans and permits must be in hand before applying.

Still to come is a new round of help from the Massachusetts Housing Partnership for the costs that tend to stall projects before construction starts.

In addition, many local banks offer ADU loan programs that allow the projected rent of the unit to be calculated when determining the owner's ability to repay the loan.

5. What is the biggest issue facing homeowners and ADUs?

"The biggest issue is bedroom capacity, constrained by septic systems and site limitations like topography and wetlands," says Yousef Ellis-Reich of Eastern Mass ADU.

"Septic is challenging, but not necessarily a deal breaker," says Lee. "Your local health agent isn't always right, so pick a septic engineer willing to back and follow the science."

If you remove a bedroom from your main house, you can reapportion that bedroom to the ADU to stay within your allowable total.

While homeowners may be required to increase the capacity of septic systems, alternative systems might be worth looking into, says Abramsen, who advocates eco toilets.

"Especially on Cape Cod, septic capacity, sewer availability and wastewater requirements can fundamentally affect whether an ADU is feasible. If a homeowner hits what appears to be an insurmountable hurdle, such as the cost of upgrading to an I/A system or needing to wait years for sewer, I would also encourage them to ask their local health department whether an already-approved composting or incinerating toilet could provide a third pathway for addressing wastewater."

Homeowners can check with the Massachusetts Alternative Septic System Testing Center for more information on regulations.

RESOURCES

Free ADU designs: *mass.gov/adu-design-challenge-showcase*

State ADU FAQs: *mass.gov/info-details/accessory-dwelling-unit-adu-faqs*

ADU approvals by town: *mass.gov/info-details/accessory-dwelling-unit-tracker*

Feasibility studies (Massachusetts Housing Partnership): *mhp.net/one-mortgage/adu-incentive-program*

ADU loans (MassHousing): *masshousing.com/adu*

MassCEC ADU resources: *goclean.masscec.com/adu*

Backyard ADUs: *backyardadus.com*

Eastern Mass ADU: *easternmassadu.com*

BuildX: *buildx.com*

ADU Pulse town bylaw and cost calculator: *adupulse.com*

Lot analysis tool from Future Lot: *futurelot.com*