Backyard Suites Review

What We Heard Report

July 2025

From May to July 2025, The City engaged residents as part of its review on backyard suite regulations. Backyard suites, also known as garden suites, laneway homes, or carriage houses, are small, self-contained homes located in the backyard of a main residential dwelling.

This review is about exploring how backyard suites are regulated in all neighbourhoods, with special attention to:

- Height restrictions, including defining “storey”
- Lot size, site coverage, and floor area requirements
- Considerations for Woodlea, Waskasoo and Parkvale

ENGAGEMENT TECHNIQUES:

The following techniques were used to gather community input:

- Online Survey (May 21- July 18, 2025)
- Neighbourhood Conversation with Woodlea, Waskasoo and Parkvale (June 11, 2025)

WHO WE HEARD FROM:

- 100 participants at the June 11 meeting
- 79 responses to the Online Survey
- 74% of online respondents identified as homeowners, 8% identified as renters, 3% reported having a backyard or secondary suite, and 1% identified as a developer.

WHAT WE HEARD:

A. WOODLEA, WASKASOO AND PARKVALE FEEDBACK:

This is a summary of the input heard at the June 11 meeting. This input is being considered to inform potential considerations for Woodlea, Waskasoo and Parkvale as it relates to backyard suite regulations in Red Deer.

1. Neighbourhood Uniqueness:

The following top themes emerged when asked *“What makes your neighbourhood unique? How can backyard suites respect the uniqueness?”*

- Historic Character and Architectural Uniqueness:
    - Strong desire to preserve unique architectural styles (Victorian, craftsman, etc).
    - Historical overlays and character statements are valued and residents are concerned they will be overlooked or diluted.
    - Desire to avoid "cookie-cutter" development to maintain uniqueness.

- Natural and Environmental Features:
    - High value placed on mature trees, gardens, wildlife (birds, deer, bees, rabbits, etc.), and open green spaces.
    - Concerns that backyard suites could negatively impact wildlife corridors, green spaces, and natural sunlight.

- Community Cohesion and Familiarity:
    - The community highly values knowing neighbours, social interaction, and sense of safety stemming from low-density environments.
    - Concerns expressed about transient populations, increased rental units, and diminished neighbourly interaction.

- Family-friendly and Senior-friendly Environment:
    - Neighbourhood characterized by safe play areas, quiet streets, and low traffic volumes.
    - Backyard suite development must preserve quietness, walkability, and safety for seniors and children.

- Privacy and Space:
    - Large lots and adequate spacing between houses are important to residents to maintain.
    - Worry about privacy loss, overlooking (due to height), and visual intrusion from backyard suites.

2. Height

The following themes emerged when asked *"What factors should determine maximum height of a backyard suite? What height feels appropriate?"*

Factors:

- Privacy Concerns: Maximum height should prevent sightlines into neighbouring properties. Concerns about placement of windows and orientation to protect privacy.
- Sunlight and Shadow Impact: Height limitations crucial to minimize shadows cast on adjacent gardens, yards, and homes. Protection of sunlight access is a significant concern.
- Scale Relative to Main Dwelling: Participants unanimously felt that suites must be subordinate to primary buildings, with many suggesting heights no greater than the main home or a one-storey limit.

Appropriate Height:

- Majority of participants indicate an appropriate height as no taller than the primary dwelling, typically one storey, approximately 5 – 7.5 meters maximum.

3. Size of a Backyard Suite

The following themes emerged when asked *"What factors should determine maximum size of a backyard suite on a site?"*

- Lot Size and Coverage: Residents emphasize that lot size should dictate backyard suite size, ensuring ample green space remains. Concern expressed about the loss of permeable surfaces, gardens, and existing vegetation.
- Relative Scale to Main House: Clear preference for suites to be smaller, secondary structures, with many suggesting a size of no greater than 700 sq ft or approximately 75% of primary dwelling footprint.
- Impact on Neighbourhood Density: Sentiment that suites must not significantly increase density or disrupt low-density characteristics.
- Affordable Housing Consideration: Many residents highlight that the goal should be affordable, modest-sized suites rather than large secondary homes.

4. Considerations for Woodlea, Waskasoo and Parkvale

The following themes emerged when asked *"What specific rules should apply to backyard suites in Woodlea, Waskasoo and Parkvale? Why?"*

- Historical and Architectural Protection: Stricter height (maximum of 5–7.5 meters) and size regulations to protect historic character. Desire for backyard suites to strictly align with existing historical overlays and character statements.
- Owner Occupancy and Rental Restrictions: Requirement for primary dwelling occupancy by property owner. Prohibition and/or strict regulation of short-term rentals (e.g., Airbnb).
- Infrastructure and Access Constraints: Upgrades to infrastructure such as narrow alleys, limited lighting, insufficient parking, and utility capacity before approving suites.
- Mandatory Community Consultation: Suites should remain discretionary use, requiring consultation and explicit community input for approvals and variances.
- Limit or restrict subdivision of properties. Desire for large lot sizes to be maintained.

B. ONLINE FEEDBACK:

The following is a summary of the feedback received online through Engage Red Deer.

1. When asked, "*What benefits do you believe backyard suites provide? (Select all that apply)*", participants selected the following benefits:
   - 65%- Housing for family members (e.g., grandparents, adult children)
   - 46%- Extra income for homeowners
   - 41%- More affordable rental options
   - 33%- Adds housing choice without changing neighbourhood character
   - 28%- I don't see any benefits
   - 26%- Makes better use of existing land and infrastructure
   - 23%- Supports population growth in established neighbourhoods

2. When asked, "*What factors should The City consider when updating the rules for backyard suites? (Select all that apply)*," participants selected the following factors:
   - 91%- Parking requirements
   - 82%- Total building size or floor area
   - 82%- Maximum building height
   - 76%- Design standards (e.g., appearance, materials)
   - 72%- Minimum lot size
   - 67%- Distance from the main house or neighbouring yards
   - 65%- Suitability for character areas or historic homes
   - 55%- Tree protection or yard/garden space

3. When asked, *"In your opinion, what should determine the maximum size of a backyard suite?*" participants selected:
   - 27%- The size of the lot (larger lots could allow larger suites)
   - 26%- A fixed maximum size for all suites, regardless of lot or home size
   - 19%- The size of the main house (suites should be smaller than the main home)
   - 16%- Other
   - 12%- Not sure

4. When asked to elaborate why they answered the previous question in the way they did, the top themes were:
   - Preserve neighbourhood character:
     - Respondents emphasized the importance of maintaining the look and feel of existing neighbourhoods.
       - Suites should not be larger than the main home
       - Concerns about obstruction of views, loss of trees, and overcrowding
       - Desire to keep backyard suites non-invasive and visually subordinate

- Mixed Feedback on Size Caps or Fixed Limits vs Proportional or Site-Specific Approaches:
    - Many supported setting a fixed maximum size (e.g., 500–600 sq ft), regardless of lot or home size.
        - Fixed size is seen as clear, enforceable, and fair
        - Prevents "rule bending" by developers or homeowners
        - Allows for equity and predictability across diverse neighbourhoods

    - Others suggested tailoring suite size based on contextual factors like lot size or the main home's footprint.
        - Emphasis on proportionality: larger lots could allow slightly larger suites
        - Some suggested using combined criteria (lot size *and* house size)
        - Concern for respecting urban diversity across Red Deer, and one size fits all might not work in our city

- Fundamental Opposition to Backyard Suites
    - A portion of respondents strongly opposed the idea of backyard suites altogether.
        - Fears about parking issues, density, and property value decline
        - Belief that suites are being misused as full second homes or rentals
        - Concerns about multi-family use, overcrowding, and urban degradation

- Design, Infrastructure, and Enforcement Concerns
    - Respondents called for clear standards and oversight.
        - Worries about structures becoming derelict or "shed-like" structures
        - Calls for design catalogs, fire safety, setbacks, and mobility
        - Concerns about city's ability to enforce rules or manage impacts

5. When asked "*How do you think a "storey" should be defined when regulating the height of backyard suites?*", participants selected the following options:
    - 44%- Any above-ground structure, even if not livable (like a garage), should count
    - 25%- Only the livable space above ground should count as a storey
    - 12%- A garage or enclosed parking area at ground level should count as one storey
    - 10%- Other
    - 9%- Not sure

6. When asked to provide any additional comments or ideas, the following top themes emerged:
    - Infrastructure, Parking, and Safety:
        - Concerns of insufficient infrastructure or infrastructure becoming overloaded (sewer, electrical grid and impact to aging utilities).
        - Parking concerns and traffic congestion. Desire for off-street parking requirements to be mandatory.
        - Fire safety/ emergency services accessibility.
        - Loss of green space, concern this will have drainage issues.

- Support Only with Strong Conditions:
    - Some support for suites but only if carefully regulated. Acknowledgement of the potential benefits, like family housing or affordability, but emphasized the need for:
        - Design limits (e.g., one storey, max height)
        - Owner occupancy requirements
        - Preservation of privacy and sunlight
        - Neighbour approval mechanisms
        - Limitations on rentals

- Opposition to backyard suites:
    - Some comments showed flat-out rejection of backyard suites, with concerns about “slums” and overcrowding.

- Preserving Neighbourhood Character and Quality of Life:
    - Concerns about aesthetics and visual impacts, property values, and loss of charm or appeal in mature and historic areas (Woodlea, Waskasoo and Parkvale).
    - Fears of turning older areas into overdeveloped and transient zones.

- Lack of Trust in Process and Mandatory Neighbour Consultation:
    - Perceptions of pre-decided planning, weak enforcement.
    - Lack of trust in meaningful consultation.
    - Desire for mandatory input from neighbours. Strong belief that neighbours should be involved in decisions that could directly impact their privacy, sunlight, noise levels, and property enjoyment