

TOWN COUNCIL

STAFF REPORT

Growth Management



MEETING DATE:	April 8, 2025
PROJECT:	Consideration and Direction on Potential Amendments to the Town of Bluffton Code of Ordinances, Chapter 23, Unified Development Ordinance, Article 5 – Design Standards - Accessory Buildings
PROJECT MANAGER:	Kevin Icard, AICP Director of Growth Management

REQUEST: The Department of Growth Management seeks input and direction from Town Council regarding the use of unenclosed carports within Old Town.

HISTORY: A property owner within Old Town Bluffton Historic District was cited by the Town of Bluffton for erecting a stand-alone metal canopy/carport without an approved Certificate of Appropriateness-Historic District (COFA-HD) as required by the Unified Development Ordinance (UDO), and without an approved building permit (see below photo). The owner seeks to correct the UDO violation through a separate zoning text amendment as further explained in the Background section of this memo.



PREVIOUS WORKSHOPS: Workshops have been held by both the Planning Commission and the Historic Preservation Commission (HPC) to discuss potential amendments. No clear direction was provided from either commission. Opinions varied, as well.

BACKGROUND: The property receiving the violation includes an existing two-story single-family residence and an existing detached two-story Carriage House in the rear of the property. Over the years, as shown on Google Street View, the area adjacent to the south side of Carriage House and the property line has been used for unenclosed and uncovered storage of vehicles and watercraft. It is

within this area where a metal canopy/carport was installed without Town approval. Per the UDO, this structure requires an approved COFA-HD from the HPC and an approved building permit.

A Notice of Violation by the Town of Bluffton was the impetus for a text amendment application by the property owner. While specific text language was not proposed, the owner would like for Town Council to “...include regulations and guidelines...” to allow carports. The owner provided additional information in a written narrative to support an amendment (Attachment 2).

Photos of some existing metal canopies/carports located in Old Town are provided in Attachment 3. The first photo is the subject property and was provided by Town Staff. Without research on each canopy/carport, it is not possible to know their legal status, including those that are legally non-conforming (i.e., grandfathered). Grandfathered metal carports are those that existed before the UDO was adopted on August 10, 2011.

CARPORTS IN OLD TOWN PRIOR TO ADOPTION OF THE UDO: Throughout Old Town, carports exist that were erected prior to the adoption of the UDO. These carports typically cover passenger vehicles and small boats and size-wise, are small, low in height and unenclosed. They have been part of Old Town’s built environment for decades and are less expensive than stick-built fully enclosed structures to erect, especially prefabricated metal carports. The photos below are examples of long-time carports in Old Town provided by the property owner.

When the UDO was adopted in 2011, architectural requirements in Old Town no longer allowed prefabricated structures as shown in the left photo, but the example in the right photo would be allowed. As a building form-based code was adopted for Old Town, the intent was to elevate architectural requirements for Old Town. All buildings are classified as a “building type” and must comply with the related architectural requirements.



HOW THE UDO REGULATES “CARPORTS”: In Old Town Historic District, carports are regulated as a Carriage House building type. Within Old Town, a form-based code approach is used to regulate buildings by specified types that vary by zoning district (UDO Sec. 5.15.8). When located in an accessory structure that is 121 to 1,200 square feet, uses such as garages, carports, workshops, and accessory dwelling units (or some combination thereof) are classified as a Carriage House building type. Unenclosed carports with metal roofs would also be classified as a Carriage House and must comply with the design standards in UDO Sec. 5.15. Additionally, only one Carriage House is permitted on a lot that is not within the Riverfront Edge-Historic District zone (where two Carriage Houses are

allowed). The RV-HD zoning district includes most of the large, long, narrow properties on the May River.

Because the property subject to the requested amendment is in the NG-HD district and has an existing Carriage House, a second Carriage House (i.e., the metal carport) is not permitted even if it complies with the applicable design standards of UDO Sec. 5.15.

QUESTIONS FOR TOWN COUNCIL: For over 13 years, there have been established standards for Carriage Houses and compliance by property owners who have completed the application process. Amending the UDO to allow the property owner to maintain the unapproved carport (Carriage House) has policy implications that should be considered. Therefore, Town Staff seeks direction from Council to guide the preparation of possible UDO amendments. Among the questions to be considered:

- Should the existing Carriage House requirements be retained and no action taken by Town Staff?
- Should carports be classified as a separate building type (i.e., no longer subject to the Carriage House requirements)?
- If carports are a separate building type, is it still acceptable to have a Carriage House on the same lot? Presently, a lot may include the main building, a Carriage House, and three other accessory structures (classified as “Garden Sheds” that are less than 121 square feet) on the same lot.
- If carports are desired, are prefabricated structures permissible or must they be stick-built with some minimum design requirements (minimum roof pitch, specified roof materials and posts as shown in the below photo)? Should there be maximum footprint and height requirements?
- Should carports be allowed only in certain zoning districts? Should there be a minimum lot size?
- If prefabricated carports are to be allowed, should they be permitted for any property owner, or only for those who had an existing prefabricated structure that may have been damaged or destroyed or when an upgraded carport is desired?



Source: architecturaldesigns.com

NEXT STEPS: If Town Council desires to allow carports within Old Town, Town Staff will draft UDO based on the guidance received. The amendments will be presented to the HPC and Planning Commission at workshops before returning to Town Council for a first reading and public hearing/second reading. It is anticipated that the first reading would occur in July.

ATTACHMENTS:

1. Narrative from Property Owner Requesting Amendment
2. Photos