

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

Keith Fisher

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September 20, 2024

Bluffton Town Counsel

Bluffton Town Hall
Bluffton, SC 29910

Dear Members of the Bluffton Town Counsel,

Re: Request for Inclusion of Carports in the Unified Development Ordinance (UDO)

I am writing to formally request that Bluffton Town Counsel consider amending the current Unified Development Ordinance (UDO) to include regulations and guidelines for the construction of the carports within the town limits. As it stands, carports are explicitly addressed in the UDO, creating uncertainty for residents who may wish to construct such structures on their property.

Carports provide an affordable and practical solution for protecting vehicles from weather-related damage while preserving the open aesthetic of a property. I believe that allowing carports with clearly defined guidelines would benefit homeowners, enhance property value and maintain the community's visual appeal.

Key Reason for the Requested Change:

1. **Protection for Property:** Carports provide essential coverage for vehicles, reducing the impact of sun, rain and other elements. This can extend the lifespan of vehicles and reduce maintenance costs for residents.
2. **Affordability:** Compared to enclosed garages, carports are a cost-effective option for homeowners seeking vehicle protection without the expense or space required for a traditional garage.
3. **Aesthetic and Community Impact:** Thoughtful guidelines regarding size, material, and placement can ensure that carports are built in harmony with existing community standards, preserving Bluffton's visual character.

ATTACHMENT 1

I respectfully ask that the Town Counsel review this proposal and consider drafting provisions within the UDO that would allow the construction of carports under appropriate regulations. I am happy to provide further input, participate in discussions, or attend hearings to support the consideration of this request

Thank you for your time and attention to this matter. I look forward to the opportunity to collaborate in improving the UDO for the benefits of our community. Please feel free to contact me at your earliest convenience if additional information is needed.

Sincerely,

Keith Fisher

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Bluffton, SC 29910

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ATTACHMENT 2

Subject Property



ATTACHMENT 2





ATTACHMENT 2







ATTACHMENT 2











ATTACHMENT 2



Workshop Regarding Accessory Structures (Carports) in Old Town Bluffton Historic District

April 8, 2025

Department of Growth Management

Kevin Icard, AICP



Issue

An Old Town Bluffton Historic District resident requested a text amendment to the Unified Development Ordinance (UDO) to allow an existing stand-alone metal canopy/carport that was erected without an approved Certificate of Appropriateness-Historic District (COFA-HD) or an approved building permit. The resident did not provide proposed text but asks that the UDO “include regulations and guidelines.”

Since adoption of the UDO in 2011, carports that are at least 121 square feet are classified as Carriage Houses and must comply with the requirements of the Carriage House Building Type, including not exceeding the maximum size (1200 sf) and footprint (800 sf), as well as design requirements, which includes being smaller than the main structure.



Carports Prior to UDO Adoption in 2011

- Typical carports were used to cover passenger vehicles and small boats, and often pre-fabricated.
- Size-wise, carports are typically smaller than the main residence, lower in height, and unenclosed.
- Most carports (now referred to as Carriage Houses) existing prior to the UDO adoption are nonconforming as to the design requirements of the UDO.
- The UDO does not provide relief to allow in-kind replacement of pre-2011 carports due to damage or deterioration.



Carports Post UDO Adoption

- Carports referenced as a Carriage House building type (emphasis on design rather than use)
- In all zoning districts except the Riverfront Edge-HD, only one (1) Carriage House is permitted per lot.

The subject property is zoned Neighborhood General-HD.

- The subject property already had an existing approved Carriage House (garage and accessory dwelling unit) before the carport was erected.
- A UDO amendment to allow the below scenario would affect the entirety of Old Town and implications must be considered.



Subject Property



Historic Preservation Commission Workshop

November 6, 2024

- Concerns regarding pre-fabricated carports not meeting UDO regulations.
- Discussed that restrictions should be in place for size and materials used.
- Consideration for based details for columns and pitch of roof.
- Consideration is needed to differentiate Carriage House and Carports.
- Unintended consequence, commercial properties creating additional square footage.
- Concerns that the mass and scale will overpower the carriage house.



Planning Commission Workshop

October 23, 2024

- Need to define what is a Carport and clearly state how it's designed.
 - Unenclosed Structure & Canopy Metal
 - Consider restricting the maximum height (single story?), structure must be secondary in nature.
 - Consideration of the location on the lot.
 - Square Footage – less than the footprint of Carriage House, no more than 400 SF
- Concern that we are being overly restrictive.
- Need to limit the number to one, if enclosed, it's a violation.
- Consider regulations that don't allow power or plumbing.



Considerations

1. Compliance with the Carriage House requirements has been achieved by other property owners for over 13 years, should the existing standards be retained?
2. Should unenclosed carports be classified as a separate building type and no longer subject to the Carriage House requirements?
3. How many structures are appropriate per lot? If carports are a separate building type, should it remain acceptable to have a Carriage House on the same lot (in addition to the main structure and up to three buildings (“garden sheds”) that are less than 121 square feet? Could this affect Old Town’s tree canopy?



Considerations

4. Should carports be allowed only in certain zoning districts and on lots of a minimum size?
5. Would pre-fabricated carports be acceptable, or should there be some minimal design requirements?
6. If pre-fabricated carports are to be allowed, should they be permitted for any property owner, or only for those who had an existing, legally non-conforming prefabricated that may need replacement due to deterioration or damage?
7. Any other concerns of Town Council?



Source: architecturaldesigns.com



QUESTIONS & DISCUSSION

