

November 10, 2025



Dear Mayor and Council Members,

As Building Official for the City of Oelwein, I want to address growing interest and discussion around alternative housing types—specifically, “tiny homes” and manufactured housing—as solutions to rising construction costs and housing shortages.

While affordability and housing variety are valid community goals, I want to offer some technical context on the current code environment and recommend caution when considering amendments to minimum dwelling standards.

Oelwein’s Minimum Dwelling Code: A Practical Baseline

Section 12-4 of the Oelwein City Code establishes three foundational standards for residential dwellings:

1. **Minimum 20 feet in both width and length** of living space, not including garages, decks, or porches.
2. **A complete, permanent foundation with frost footing.**
3. **Full compliance with local and state zoning and building regulations.**
(*Ord. No. 744, §1, 6-25-84; Ord. No. 1010, 2-10-2003*)

These requirements serve as basic structural, safety, and livability benchmarks. They are modest when compared to national building standards, and are necessary to maintain long-term housing quality in Oelwein.

Notably, this section does **not outright prohibit tiny homes** or manufactured homes. Rather, it ensures that **any residential unit installed—regardless of size or type—meets a minimum standard of construction and permanence.** The **20' x 20' living space minimum** effectively discourages the proliferation of **single-wide units** (typically 14–16 feet wide), which historically present challenges in terms of durability, energy efficiency, and long-term neighborhood character.

If this standard were removed or relaxed, the city could quickly see an influx of **non-permanent, substandard dwellings**, leading to undesirable density and diminished housing quality—what some have fairly described as “trailer town” conditions.

Manufactured Housing vs. Tiny Homes: Critical Differences

It's important to distinguish between several types of alternative housing:



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- **Manufactured homes:** Built to HUD standards, inspected at the factory, and labeled for transport. These are valid housing solutions when installed on **permanent foundations** and connected to city infrastructure.
- **Modular homes:** Built to **IRC standards**, typically indistinguishable from site-built homes once installed.
- **Tiny homes:** Often misunderstood. While the **2021 IRC Appendix AQ** provides guidance for “tiny houses,” it does not override Oelwein’s **Sec. 12-4** requirements. Moreover, tiny homes still need to comply with **IRC Chapter 3** (building planning), which includes essential requirements for stairs, egress, ceiling height, ventilation, insulation, and more. “Tiny home” has no specific definition.
- **Non-code-compliant units:** This includes repurposed sheds, shipping containers, or online prefab kits not constructed to any recognized residential code (e.g., Amazon fold-out homes). These pose substantial risks and are generally **not eligible for legal occupancy** in Oelwein.
- **State definitions:**
 - **“Manufactured home”** means a factory-built structure built under authority of 42U.S.C. §5403, that is required by federal law to display a seal from the United States department of housing and urban development, and was constructed on or after June 15, 1976.
 - **“Mobile home”** means any vehicle without motive power used or so manufactured or constructed as to permit its being used as a conveyance upon the public streets and highways and so designed, constructed, or reconstructed as will permit the vehicle to be used as a place for human habitation by one or more persons; but shall also include any such vehicle with motive power not registered as a motor vehicle in Iowa. A “mobile home” is not built to a mandatory building code, contains no state or federal seals, and was built before June 15, 1976
 - **“Modular home”** means a factory-built structure which is manufactured to be used as a place of human habitation, is constructed to comply with the Iowa state building code for modular factory-built structures, as adopted pursuant to section 103A.7, and must display the seal issued by the state building code commissioner.





50' Wide Lots

-The primary concern brought up on these lots is setbacks leading to a lack of buildable space. Current R-1 setbacks for any lot less than 60' in width are:

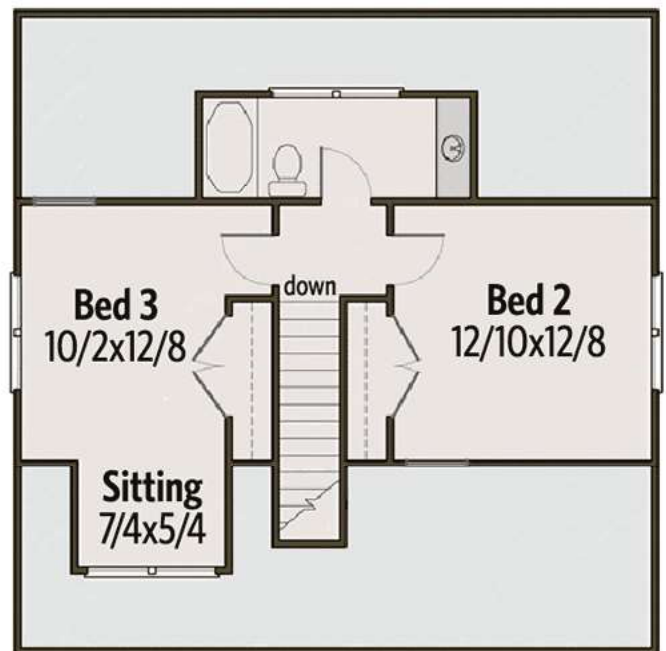
- Front 25'
- Rear 25'
- Side 5'

-Therefore: On a 50' x 100' lot there is 40'W x 50'L of buildable space for a primary structure. This is 2000' sq ft of buildable space. This is more than enough space to build a substantial structure.

-This also can be increased via setback relaxations, through an application to the ZBA, to a 15' front and rear setback to a maximum of 40'W x 70'L of total buildable space for a primary structure. This is 2800 sq ft total.

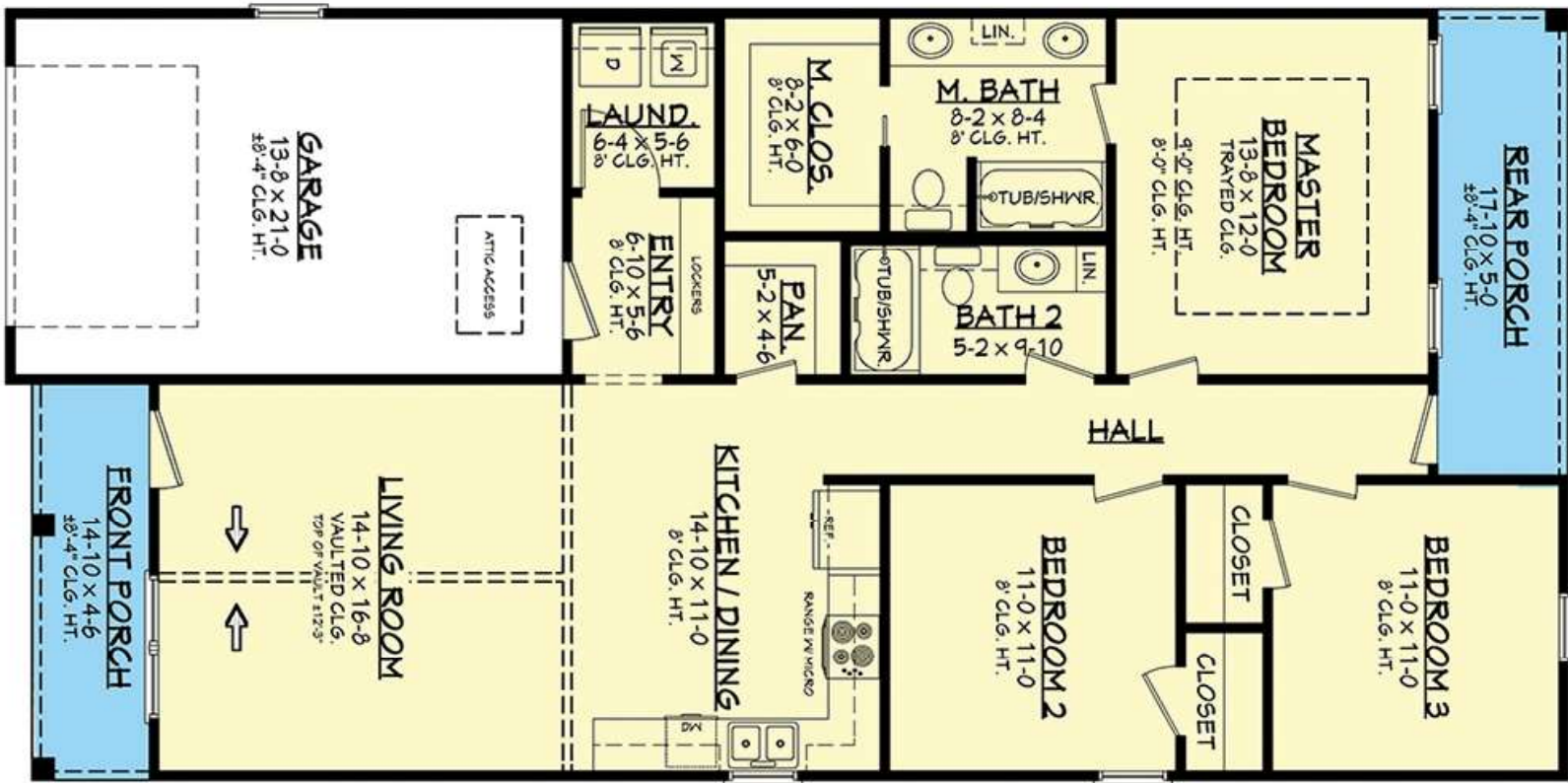






**Bungalow - Sample Floor Plan
Main Floor (left) and Upper Floor**





Ranch - Sample Floor Plan





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