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## Sustainable trailers have many uses

- *Designed for camping, the trailers also have potential as affordable urban housing.*

By SAM BENNETT  
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When Corey Weathers unveiled his concept for a sustainable camping trailer at the Build Small Live Large Summit last year, he said the reaction was from onlookers “overwhelmingly positive.”

It stood to reason that an environmentally friendly camper would attract attention and support at a sustainable living conference.

But, what many people at the conference wanted to know was: could Homegrown Trailers realize their potential without even leaving the city?

Because the trailers have roof-mounted solar arrays and composting toilets, Weathers said conference attendees wanted to know if Homegrown Trailers could help chronic housing shortages in cities such as Seattle and Portland by serving as accessory dwelling units.

Homegrown Trailers, Weathers said, could be an off-the-grid alternative for single-family home owners looking to generate revenue from an ADU or an Airbnb rental.

The trailers, he said, could also work as tiny homes in areas where cities permit clusters of such homes on a single property for commercial purposes – such as the Caravan tiny-home development in Northeast Portland.

“A lot of people said they have a need for an ADU,” Weathers said, referring to feedback at the Build Small Live Large conference in Portland last year, as well as last year’s Northwest Folklife Festival in Seattle. “People were quite intrigued.”

Though Weathers and his team of engineers and designers created the trailers with camping in mind, their usefulness in urban environments is an idea he and other sustainability experts said could gain traction.

Eric Gertsman, who co-founded the Woodinville-based Homegrown Trailers, said the trailers are flexible enough to be used in a variety of ways – from vacation homes to backyard mother-in-law units.

“Since they are very mobile, many people will use them for on-grid campsites, off-grid adventures, road trips and festivals,” said Gertsman. “However, we’re learning that many customers also want to use them for ADUs on their home properties or even as temporary residences on undeveloped properties that they own. The trailers are extremely flexible in that way and, thus, we are pursuing both markets.”

Under current codes, Homegrown Trailers would not conform to ADU standards in Seattle or Portland because they are essentially homes on wheels, and ADUs must have their own



Images courtesy of Homegrown Trailers [\[enlarge\]](#)  
**Corey Weathers (left) and Eric Gertsman co-founded Woodinville-based Homegrown Trailers.**

foundations or be attached to a structure with a foundation, such as a garage.

Rick Mohler, an associate professor at the University of Washington Department of Architecture, said Homegrown Trailers would have to jump through complicated city land-use hoops.

But he said at a time when home and rental prices keep going up, when renters are feeling squeezed by high rents and affordable housing is in short supply, Homegrown Trailers might be an option if the city modified its code to allow portable ADUs.

“It’s an intriguing idea, even as a stop-gap measure for additional housing,” said Mohler, who is a principal with Seattle’s Mohler + Ghillino Architects. “If you had a parcel with an alley and could pull the Homegrown Trailer off the alley and use it as a secondary unit, that would be very interesting because you don’t have to hook it up to utilities, and utility hook-ups are the real killer for building ADUs.”

Even with Seattle’s housing shortage, Mohler said the ADU issue remains a political hot potato at the city level.

As part of the city’s 2015 Housing Affordability and Livability Agenda, O’Brien is spearheading an effort to loosen Seattle’s ADU rules by removing the parking requirement, removing the owner-occupancy requirement and allowing a single lot to have both an attached and detached accessory dwelling unit.

That legislation most likely won’t likely come before the council for consideration until late 2016, Mohler said.

“A lot of younger renters are getting squeezed by high cost of rent, but there is lot of opposition from older single-family homeowners in the city concerned about increased density and parking,” Mohler said.

In addition Homegrown Trailers, Mohler said, could be used as temporary vacation homes on rural lots.

### **Thinking small**

The idea of Homegrown Trailers being used as ADUs is a far cry from what Weathers first envisioned for the trailers 2 ½ years ago, he said.

Working as a sustainability consultant at the time, Weathers said the concept came to him when he was tent camping with his daughters, then 5 and 7 years old.

“I never thought of myself as an RV guy,” said Weathers. “But doing the tent thing is a lot more challenging than it used to be without kids.”

While the RV and camping trailer industry focuses on products that Weathers said “are just getting bigger,” he opted for a design that was more efficient and environmentally friendly.

“People want something that is smaller and compact and functional, that they can take pride in,” he said. “Our clients don’t want to show up in something that is contradictory to the natural world that they are trying to enjoy.”

Gertsman said the trailers are constructed of all renewable materials, are 100 percent solar powered, use only energy efficient lights and appliances and have composting toilets.

The trailers can collect solar power en route to camping sites, but do need solar exposure for at least a few hours a day to maintain indefinite batteries charge. Even without a charge, the batteries will power the campers for two to three days

And while the minimum six-cylinder cars and trucks needed to tow the 2,000-pound Homegrown Trailer are fossil-fuel burning, Gertsman said the new Subaru four-cylinder Outback has the power to tow the trailer and the upcoming electric-powered Tesla Model X will also be able to tow it.

“The next generation of hybrids (crossovers and SUVs) will include higher towing ratings, so the industry is catching up,” he said.

The base units begin at \$29,000, but Weathers said the prices should go down as production ramps-up and the company expands to another production facility.

Production of the trailers, which began this spring at the company's plant in Woodinville is expected to hit 20 to 30 trailers this year, about 50 trailers next year and more than 100 trailers in 2018.

“Over time, we are driving down the expenses for the materials that go into the trailers,” he said.

Homegrown Trailers has little, if any, competition for sustainable camping trailers. “There’s very few people doing what we’re doing,” Gertsman said.

The closest comparison is Indiana-based Evergreen Recreational Vehicles, with its Ever Lite trailers. However, the Ever Lite trailers main sustainable feature is the use of a lightweight composite wood called ComposiTek, rather than mahogany, according to the company's website.

According to news reports, Evergreen stopped production in June and has gone out of business due to a lack of funding.

### Changing lifestyle

Ross Chapin of Ross Chapin Architects said the contribution that Homegrown Trailers could make to the in-city ADU market is intriguing.

Chapin, whose Seattle firm specializes in small or micro houses that form “pocket neighborhoods,” such as Greenwood Avenue Cottages, said the Homegrown Trailer gives renters one more option.

“I think it's fantastic you've got people exploring these options, and the more options the better in terms of energy savings,” Chapin said. “The (Homegrown) trailers are relatively small and they're not going to be peering down on a neighbor because they're trailerable. It's a lifestyle question: they're not for everybody and that's fine.”

Homegrown Trailers could also pick up business among people who want to live small and sustainably on a lot they own or at an RV park.

Bryan Jennings of Rich's Portable Cabins in North Powder, Ore., said 100 percent of his company's cabins are pre-ordered, not spec-built. A majority of his clients are people wanting a low-cost vacation home.

“I think a lot of people are frustrated with the cost of living and the cost of homes,” Jennings said. “Our cabins can be towed around and are energy efficient and have a smaller footprint.”

Mohler said his firms has seen a lot of interest from Vancouver, Canada clients who are purchasing parcels of land in Washington and interested in homes on trailers to use as vacation homes.

The advantage of Homegrown Trailers, Gertsman said, is they can operate off the grid. Whether the trailers catch on as potential ADUs or as sustainable campers, Weathers said he's confident in the business model.

“We're not targeting people who want the traditional white fiberglass trailer box,” he said. “We're targeting the rugged outdoors person or adventurous family who wants to keep that connection with nature.”



[\[enlarge\]](#)

**The trailers are constructed of all renewable materials, are 100 percent solar powered, use only energy efficient lights and appliances and have composting toilets.**

The trailers, according to Gertsman, could be a hit in the city or the countryside.

“I think the benefit of our trailers is that it gives people flexibility to use for semi-permanent and travel usage,” he said.