

## Citywide Adaptive Reuse Ordinance

The City of Los Angeles has been a national leader in facilitating the reuse of existing buildings, sparking the revitalization of Downtown Los Angeles, Hollywood, and other historic neighborhoods. These successes have been made possible through the City's 1999 Adaptive Reuse Ordinance (ARO), which enabled the creation of more than 12,000 housing units in Downtown alone. This has led to economic regeneration, housing opportunities, and preserving and reinvigorating the City's architectural legacy.

Nearly a quarter-century later, with a different set of challenges now facing Los Angeles, including its housing emergency and post-pandemic economic recovery, Los Angeles City Planning is proposing an expansion and reimagining of the City's adaptive reuse policies for a new era – a Citywide Adaptive Reuse Ordinance. Proposed revisions to the Adaptive Reuse Ordinance, would make it easier to convert vacant office and commercial spaces impacted by the pandemic into much needed housing.

Expanding the Adaptive Reuse Program is one of six key strategies of the [Citywide Housing Incentive Program](#). The Citywide Housing Incentive Program aims to address Los Angeles' significant housing needs, for the City to expand housing availability and meet its state Housing Element obligations. The draft Adaptive Reuse Ordinance is the first of the six strategies to be released for public feedback and input. To provide comments please email [housingelement@lacity.org](mailto:housingelement@lacity.org). Outreach activities are planned in June and opportunities to provide feedback will continue throughout the development and adoption process.

The proposed Adaptive Reuse Ordinance will expand the existing incentives to encourage converting underutilized buildings into new housing. Currently, only buildings constructed before July 1, 1974 are eligible. This updated ordinance establishes a faster approval process for the conversion of existing buildings and structures that are at least 15 years old to housing and expands the adaptive reuse incentive area citywide. Buildings between five and 15 years old or projects requesting additional relief from development standards will need approval from a Zoning Administrator through a Conditional Use Permit.

## About the Citywide Housing Incentive Program

Following the 2022 certification of the 2021-2029 Housing Element, City Planning staff has been working to develop and implement the ambitious programs identified in the Plan to House LA. The Plan identified that there is a significant housing need in Los Angeles, reflected by high rents, overcrowded conditions, and increasing housing instability. The [Citywide Housing Incentive Program](#) aims to address Los Angeles' significant housing needs, for the City to provide greater housing access and meet its state housing obligations. The Citywide Housing Incentive Program will be implemented through one or more zoning code amendments developed simultaneously over a two-year period (2023-2025). To learn more visit the [program website](#).

## Why is the current Adaptive Reuse Ordinance being updated?

The pandemic has changed the use of retail and office spaces, leaving many buildings vacant or partly occupied, causing the office vacancy rate in Los Angeles to climb to over 26% – the highest ever reported – comprising a total of about 44 million square feet of office uses. This presents an opportunity to address the city's need for new housing and implement the Plan to House LA, the City's 2021-2029 Housing Element. The new Zoning Code supports the expansion of Adaptive Reuse incentives, and the proposed Citywide Adaptive Reuse Ordinance will make housing opportunities available throughout Los Angeles.

## What are the benefits of converting existing buildings to housing?

Repurposing buildings is an effective way to create new housing opportunities while maintaining the existing sense of place. With shifting demands for office and retail space, there is an opportunity to reactivate vacant space and revitalize commercial corridors.

Encouraging the reuse of buildings is a sustainable practice to extend the life of buildings and retain much of the resources that went into their initial construction. Even with the most energy-efficient new construction, it can take up to 80 years to recover the energy that went into the demolition, production, manufacture, and transportation of new building materials.

## In what ways is the conversion of existing buildings to housing units being encouraged?

Generally, in an adaptive reuse project, conversion to housing units is contained within the existing volume. Existing building conditions, including the present height, floor area, any yards or setbacks, parking and loading spaces, and open space will be considered as meeting Zoning Code requirements. Any configuration of units and unit sizes, new mezzanine or loft spaces, and shared amenities for residents may be created. In addition, new one-story structures to provide fitness rooms, lounges, shade for roof terraces, or other similar features may be built on the roof and not be counted as new floor area if these are accessible to all residents or guests.

Instead of tying Adaptive Reuse eligibility to a fixed date – buildings built before July 1, 1974-- a rolling clock of 15 years after original Certificate of Occupancy issuance is proposed to make a larger pool of buildings eligible for a faster, by-right approval process. Applications seeking reuse of younger buildings are subject to approval by a Zoning Administrator, as are those projects seeking additional relief from development standards or floor area averaging as part of a larger project site incorporating new construction.

The proposed changes support the preservation of historic resources by clarifying that buildings identified as Eligible Historic Resources may utilize the California Historic Building Code (Section 18955 of the California Health and Safety Code) which allows more code flexibility in the conversion of buildings that are included within HistoricPlacesLA, the City's inventory of historic resources, and sets forth procedures for their rehabilitation consistent with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation.

## How is adaptive reuse project defined and what types of existing buildings will be eligible?

An adaptive reuse project is defined as any change of use to housing within an eligible building or structure. Eligible buildings are those that were constructed in accordance with building and zoning codes in effect at the time they were built and:

- At least 15 years have elapsed since the building permit was issued
- Any parking structure or parking area within an existing building may be converted if at least five years have elapsed since the building permit was issued
- At least five years have elapsed since the building permit was issued and the project is approved by a Zoning Administrator

## How is the current Adaptive Reuse Ordinance being reorganized?

The Citywide Adaptive Reuse ordinance aims to simplify the current code requirements and remove barriers to project approval, so that as many existing buildings as possible may be repurposed for housing.

- A new Procedures paragraph has been added to each code section to spell out the approval process more clearly and to align with the Processes and Procedures ordinance
- Minimum unit size requirements in the existing ARO have been deleted, to be consistent with the *DTLA 2040* Plan and the new Zoning Code.
- The existing ARO “exceptions” for existing floor area, height and yards have been renamed as “incentives.”
- Duplication of language within and between both sections has been reduced, to reduce both the length and complexity of the text.
- Zoning Administrator findings have been simplified to focus on consistency with the General Plan.

## Will there be affordability requirements for adaptive reuse projects?

The Linkage Fee ordinance applies to new construction as well as the conversion of existing buildings to residential uses. The Linkage Fee ordinance allows for the substitution of set-aside, deed-restricted housing units with an in-lieu fee. At this time City Planning is conducting an economic feasibility study to determine if additional affordability requirements may be economically feasible for adaptive reuse conversions from non-residential to residential uses.

## What is the application process for adaptive reuse projects?

In the proposed ordinance, there are two paths to project approval dependent upon the age of the structure and incentives requested. The Department of Building and Safety will review and approve adaptive reuse projects involving buildings that are at least 15 years old, or parking structures or parking areas within an existing building that are at least five years old. The only exception to this by-right process is for project sites with a historic resource included in *HistoricPlacesLA*, which will require approval by LA City Planning’s Office of Historic Resources and any alteration must be in compliance with The Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation. Adaptive reuse of buildings between five and 15 years old will follow a discretionary procedure and may be approved by a Zoning Administrator, as will projects seeking incentives not listed in the ordinance.

## What is the relationship between this draft ordinance and the new Zoning Code?

Building upon the new Zoning Code provisions for Adaptive Reuse intended to be rolled out with each new Community Plan update, this new ordinance includes amendments to Los Angeles Municipal Code (LAMC) Sections 12.22 A.26 and 12.24 X, that would effectively update the City's current ARO to apply citywide and better align current code procedures with the direction of the new Zoning Code (Chapter 1A) which was recently adopted by the City Council.

## What are the next steps in the adoption process?

The draft Adaptive Reuse ordinance has now been released, and public comments are welcomed and encouraged. Over the next several months, City Planning will take part in a comprehensive outreach approach offering multiple opportunities for stakeholders to learn more about the proposed Adaptive Reuse ordinance and share feedback.

On June 6, 7, and 8 City Planning will host webinars to give an overview of the changes being proposed and receive community input. Please visit the [Events page](#) on the Housing Element website to register for an upcoming webinar. Following the webinars, City staff will spend several months to evaluate the comments received, gather more feedback, and revise the ordinance, before holding a staff level public hearing this Fall. The public hearing will be another opportunity for the public to offer feedback and testimony on the proposed ordinance, which City Planning will again evaluate and use to make further revisions to the ordinance, if necessary. The ordinance will then be heard at the City Planning Commission (CPC) for recommendation to the City Council. The Ordinance will then proceed to the Planning and Land Use Management (PLUM) Committee of the City Council, and, finally, the full City Council for adoption.

## Who can I contact for additional information?

Please submit questions and comments on the proposed Adaptive Reuse Ordinance to [housingelement@lacity.org](mailto:housingelement@lacity.org). Additional information is available on City Planning's [Housing Element Rezoning Program website](#). Join the email list by using the form under [Sign Up for Email Updates](#) to receive updates about this effort and upcoming opportunities to provide feedback.