



ADAPTIVE REUSE PROJECTS

INFORMATION & CHECKLIST

WHAT IS ADAPTIVE REUSE?

Adaptive reuse is the process of converting an existing nonresidential building into housing units. The City of Santa Barbara adopted the **Adaptive Reuse Projects** ordinance (SBMC §30.185.045) to encourage housing development within existing buildings by offering flexible standards and development incentives.

WHERE DOES THE ORDINANCE APPLY?

Adaptive reuse projects can occur in inland zones that allow multi-unit housing and mixed-use, including R-M, R-MH, O-R, O-M, C-R, C-G, and M-C Zones. The ordinance is part of Title 30 (Inland Zoning Ordinance) and does not apply in the Coastal Zone (Title 28).

How to check your zone: Use the City's [MAPS](#) tool, under the Planning layer turn on the Zoning layer.

IS MY BUILDING ELIGIBLE?

- The building must be at least 5 years old (final inspection or certificate of occupancy).
- You can convert from nonresidential to residential, mixed-use, or live-work if your zone allows it.
- No industrial uses are allowed as part of an adaptive reuse project.
- No new hotel or similar uses can be created in an adaptive reuse project, but an existing hotel can convert to residential.
- No demolition or substantial redevelopment of the existing building.

HOW MANY UNITS CAN I ADD?

There's no density limit. The number of units is limited by your existing building envelope and building codes. Average unit size limits apply: Rental \leq 1,200 sq ft; Ownership \leq 2,000 sq ft. The Community Development Director can approve a larger average if needed to fit the building. The entire building does not need to be converted, but at least one new housing unit is required.

CAN I BUILD ADDITIONS?

Yes, with limits:

- **Outside the existing building envelope:** Up to 600 sq ft or 10% of existing floor area (whichever is greater) for shared residential amenities (laundry, bike room, recreation room).
- **Inside the building envelope:** Interior additions like mezzanines and lofts are allowed.
- Code-required additions for safety/accessibility/egress are allowed either inside or outside the building envelope to the minimum size the building code requires.

WHICH BUILDING CODES APPLY?

You will use the California Building Code. Depending on your building, you may also use the California Existing Building Code or the California Historic Building Code to keep work safe while preserving older features.

WHAT ARE THE DEVELOPMENT INCENTIVES?

- **Density:** No density limits for new residential units.
- **Open Yard:** No open yard requirement for residential use.
- **Setbacks:** Existing setbacks can remain; allowed additions may continue those setbacks.
- **Parking:** No additional automobile parking is required if you provide bicycle parking (per Chapter 30.175)

ARE THERE SPECIAL RULES ON STATE STREET?

Yes. From Montecito Street to Sola Street, ground-floor space along the State Street frontage must stay nonresidential (minimum 35-ft depth) to keep State Street active and pedestrian friendly. Common lobbies are allowed there, but no dwelling units, parking, or storage is allowed in that required frontage space.

DO I NEED INCLUSIONARY (AFFORDABLE) HOUSING UNITS?

Yes, although requirements depend on project type, size, and location:

- **Rental projects:** If you have 10 or more units, the inclusionary set aside is at least 10% for moderate-income households. Smaller rental projects may pay an in-lieu fee.
- **Ownership projects:** If you have 10 or more units, the inclusionary set aside is at least 15% for middle-income households. Smaller ownership projects may pay an in-lieu fee.
- **Exception:** In the Central Business District, rental adaptive reuse projects with fewer than 40 units are exempt from the rental inclusionary housing requirement.

Review the inclusionary housing ordinances: Chapter 30.160 (ownership) and Section 30.150.110 (rental). Staff can help confirm which option—onsite units or in-lieu fee—applies to your project.

WHAT IF MY BUILDING IS HISTORIC?

If your building is a designated historic resource or in a historic district, you must follow the City's Historic Resources rules (SBMC Chapter 30.157). That means checking your property's status, designing to the City's Historic Resource Design Guidelines (based on the Secretary of the Interior's Standards), and getting Historic Landmarks Commission (HLC) design review approval for exterior changes. You can also use the California Historic Building Code to meet safety and accessibility while keeping historic features.

How to check your parcel: Use the City's [MAPS](#) tool, under the Planning layer turn on historic layers (Historic and Landmark Districts, Historic Sites Structures). Check the [Historic Resources](#) maps.

HOW DO CONTAMINATED-FILL AREAS AFFECT MY PROJECT?

If your site is in the City's Area of Potential Contaminated Fill and you plan ground disturbance or foundation work, you'll need a determination that the site is suitable for residential use (HSC §25296.10(c)).

How to check your parcel: Use the City's [MAPS](#) tool, under the Environmental Hazards layer turn on the Area of Potential Contaminated Fill layer.

WHAT IS THE REVIEW PROCESS?

If your adaptive reuse project meets the ordinance, stays within the existing building envelope, and has no or only minor exterior changes, you can skip planning approvals and go straight to building permits. If you need a subdivision or another discretionary approval (like a zoning modification), those items go to the Planning Commission or Staff Hearing Officer. For exterior work, some projects still need design review; minor changes can be approved administratively. Staff can help confirm which review process applies to your project.

HOW DO I APPLY?

Apply online through [Accela Citizen Access Portal \(ACA\)](#)—create an account, upload plans, track reviews, and pay fees.

WHO CAN I CONTACT FOR MORE INFORMATION?

The [Planning Counter](#) is available for questions about planning and zoning requirements in the City.

APPLICANT CHECKLIST

REQUIREMENTS & INCENTIVES

Eligibility Criteria

- Building Age:** Building was constructed at least 5 years before application
- Zoning:** Located in an inland zone that allows multi-unit residential or mixed-use (R-M, R-MH, O-R, O-M, C-R, C-G, or M-C Zones). Not applicable in the Coastal Zone
- Use Conversion:**
 - From nonresidential to residential
 - From nonresidential to mixed-use or live-work (if allowed by zone)
 - Not converting to hotel use
 - Not converting from or to industrial use
- Demolition:** No substantial redevelopment or demolition of the existing building (see §30.140.200)

Design & Development Standards

- Project is within the **existing building envelope**, except:
 - Up to 600 sq ft or 10% of floor area is allowed for shared amenities
 - Additions for egress, accessibility, or code compliance are allowed
 - Mezzanines or lofts within the envelope are allowed
- Average Unit Size:**
 - Rental Units: ≤ 1,200 sq ft
 - Ownership Units: ≤ 2,000 sq ft
 - Exceptions may be requested (if needed) from Community Development Director
- State Street Projects** (Montecito to Sola Streets):
 - Ground floor includes occupiable nonresidential space (≥ 35 ft deep) across full frontage
 - Common lobby allowed in frontage space
 - No residential units, parking, or storage in required frontage space

Development Incentives

- Density:** Units added under adaptive reuse are not counted toward max density
- Open Yard:** Not required
- Setbacks:** Existing setbacks may remain; additions may continue nonconforming setbacks
- Parking:** No additional automobile parking is required if:
 - Bicycle parking is provided per §30.175 (Parking Regulations)
 - EV and ADA parking requirements are met
 - Existing parking may be reduced or increased per §30.175 (Parking Regulations)

APPLICATION MATERIALS

- Project Plans**
 - Site plan, floor plans, elevations/sections (if exterior changes/mezzanines), structural, mechanical, electrical, plumbing, accessibility & energy, fire/life safety (as applicable)
 - See [Project Plan Submittal Guide](#) for complete plan submittal checklist
- Building (BLD) Permit**

Submit directly to Building & Safety if no exterior changes or land use permit required
- Planning (PLN) Application**

Only required for:

 - Design Review** if exterior alterations to building or site
 - Minor alterations may be approved administratively by staff
 - Land use permits** if requested (e.g., subdivision, modifications)
 - No mandatory pre-application or concept review required

ADDITIONAL REQUIREMENTS

- Inclusionary Housing**
 - Required per Chapter 30.160 (ownership) or §30.150.110 (rental)
 - Exempt if < 40 rental units in Central Business District
- Contaminated Fill Area**
 - Site suitability determination required if ground disturbance or foundation work proposed