

# Pre-Reviewed Plan Programs: Essential Elements

A guidance memo for homeowners,  
jurisdictions and ADU practitioners

While progress has been made to improve ADU permitting and implementation, it remains an expensive, complex, and time-consuming process that can be daunting for homeowners and ADU professionals alike. More and more cities and counties have established pre-reviewed ADU plans programs as one tool to address some of these barriers and help more homeowners benefit from an ADU.

A well-designed pre-reviewed ADU plans program has the potential to raise community awareness of what's possible for homeowners, reduce staff time for jurisdictions, improve the process for repeatability of plans used before, shorten the design phase and lower associated costs, and assist local builders/designers in connecting with interested homeowners. We have color-coded this guidebook for easy navigation:

## Homeowners

- Homeowners—how selecting a pre-reviewed ADU plan can save time and money; advantages and limitations

## Jurisdictions

- Jurisdictions—recommendations for those developing a pre-reviewed plans program; components to include

## ADU Pros

- ADU builders/designers—some things to consider for those thinking of submitting plans to a pre-reviewed plans program

While pre-reviewed plans programs offer many benefits (which we explore in this guidebook), to achieve consistently shorter overall permit timelines and reduce other implementation barriers, a thorough assessment of all steps of the homeowner's ADU journey is well worth undertaking to find efficiencies and reduce costs. The Casita Coalition's ADU Best Practices guidebook takes a detailed look at the full process, highlighting cities and counties pushing forward with incentives and streamlining at every stage in the permitting process. It's available on our website on the [Guidebooks and Resources page](#).

Casita Coalition is a cross-sector statewide nonprofit formed to remove barriers to small homes and improve housing choice, sustainability and resilience in our communities. We invite you to learn more about us, donate or join on our website at [casitacoalition.org](http://casitacoalition.org).




**Note:** The ADU field is a young, dynamic industry and conditions can change rapidly. Casita Coalition guidelines are updated regularly or when state law changes. Please email us if you have suggestions or program updates.

This document was prepared in collaboration with **Office of: Office**, who conducted interviews with a variety of stakeholders, including building officials and ADU professionals, to inform their recommendations. We're grateful for their collaboration on this project. <https://officeofoffice.com/>



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## Main Benefits of Pre-Reviewed Plans Programs

As noted in the introduction, these programs are just one tool used by jurisdictions to address the challenges of ADU permitting. They may be especially helpful in these key areas:

- **Repeatability**- When ADU plans are used by multiple applicants, efficiencies of review can result in much improved turnaround times. While repeat plans happen as part of a formal program, establishing a process for all submissions of repeat ADU plans to benefit from expedited processing is a simple and powerful tool for permit streamlining
- **Compressed Design Phase** - A fully custom ADU can take months of collaboration and iterations between homeowner and architect/designer. Selecting existing plans cuts short this phase significantly
- **Faster Permitting Process** - In some jurisdictions, pre-reviewed plans can move through certain phases of the process at a greatly expedited pace, particularly when paired with concurrent review
- **Total Project Cost** - Selecting an existing set of plans for a flat fee can significantly reduce costs for homeowners vs. custom plans. Savings estimates range from \$6,000-\$10,000

## Definitions

### What are pre-reviewed ADU plans?

ADU plans created for a pre-reviewed program are reviewed for zoning and/or building code compliance by the city or county. Once a homeowner or their ADU professional representative prepares and submits an application for a specific site, the application is reviewed for relevant lot-specific requirements by other agencies (e.g. fire, health & safety, public works, utility agencies etc.)

Pre-reviewed plan sets typically include, at minimum, architectural drawings, structural drawings, and approved energy code calculations. **While these plans are referred to as 'pre-approved' by some cities, this label can be misleading.** The plans still need to be checked by other agencies with their own individual review timelines before a building permit can be issued.

### Types of programs

- **City-owned:** With a city-owned plans program, the city or county hires selected vendors to produce a suite of ADU plans, generally in a variety of unit size and architectural style. Clients, homeowners and users then download the plans directly from the city website, usually for free or at low cost. This approach is usually paired with reduced or waived permit fees, as the city has already paid upfront for the cost of the plans. **Note: Downloading the plan set does not mean construction can begin.** The applicant still needs to complete a site plan with their permit submission and go through multiple stages of the permit approval process with all authorizing agencies. Unless the homeowner has experience as a contractor or architect, it's highly recommended to have professional help.
- **Marketplace-style:** A vendor-licensed plans program, sometimes called marketplace-style, offers a collection of plans for homeowners to browse, with a wide variety of sizes, styles and budgets. The vendors (typically architects, design/build firms and prefab companies) themselves retain ownership of their plans and set the fees and services directly with the client. Vendors submit the plan set (before it is selected by clients) and pay for plan check fees as they typically would for any project in order to have their plans registered and listed in the marketplace-style database. This type of program offers more choice for homeowners and is currently more common in California.

**Before you fall in love with a pre-reviewed ADU design**

There's no doubt that browsing the photos of beautiful ADUs, touring them in person, and imagining them in your backyard is the really fun part of the process. But before you get your heart set on a certain model, it makes sense to take a close look at your budget, financing options and your goals for the ADU. This preparation phase is what Napa Sonoma ADU Center calls the 'pre-work.' From their website:

The pre-work includes everything you need to do to set yourself up for success, assessing items including:

- Whether your property is eligible to build an ADU (most will be)
- Your goals for building an ADU (understanding that most owners prize the flexibility of an ADU and how it can meet multiple goals over time as needs shift)
- The best type of ADU for you
- Whether you can reasonably finance your desired ADU

Casita Coalition's [ADU Finance guidebook](#) and webinar can be found on our website and [YouTube channel](#), along with lots of resources that may be helpful in this preparation phase.

Allowing plenty of time to think about your goals is very important before you make the decision to go with a custom or pre-reviewed ADU design.

ADU Goal	Floor Plan	Considerations
Long term rental income	Studio-2 bdrm	Keeping costs low with careful design choices will help ensure a good return on investment and healthy monthly income. Keep in mind that rents are partly based on bedroom count
Home for family member	1-2 bdrm	Consider ADUs with age-friendly design features. Two bedrooms may be helpful for a caregiver or when adult children start a family
Downsize into ADU-rent main home	1-2 bdrm	If this will be your retirement home, both age-friendly design and livability features are important--lots of light, office or project space--and storage



## Getting the project help you need

As much as we're in favor of saving money and tackling projects ourselves when we can, there are definitely times when discretion is the better part of valor and it makes sense to get professional help. Building an ADU is just like building a house—most homeowners won't have the background to prepare them for the many challenges involved. Even if you have expertise in one phase of the building process, working with an experienced professional, preferably one with experience building multiple ADUs in your specific city or county, is strongly encouraged. In the partial table of ADU development tasks below, see the red circles on the elements that selecting a pre-reviewed plan set takes care of.

Pre-Application	Permitting	Construction
Site feasibility assessment	Prepare site plan & permit application	Hire & manage sub-contractors
Surveying/soils reports	Work with all authorizing agencies (fire, public health, utilities, etc)	Purchase materials; arrange deliveries
Design services	Prepare full set of plans	Order inspections; make requested changes
Financing	Make required changes to plans	After certificate of occupancy is received, screen tenants, set rent & write lease agreement

# Definitions, cont'd

## Types of ADU Professionals

Below are descriptions of some categories of ADU professionals and the services they may provide. Note: It's important to clarify which services they offer and what they don't cover. Some may have partnerships with affiliated professionals to offer further services, such as an architectural firm that works closely with a general contractor that offers project management. Selecting a professional with specific experience with ADUs in your city or county can be a time saver.

- **Architects** - The services that an architect typically provides include concept design development, preparation of construction documents, and sometimes construction administration. Architects also provide a wide variety of additional services including feasibility studies, architectural programming and project management.
- **Design/Build firms** - These firms often provide services that can take your project from conception, including space planning, design, interior design, architectural drafting, engineering, 3D walk through, obtaining permits, all the way through construction and completion.
- **Contractors** - General contractors typically obtain permits, buy materials, hire, manage and pay construction professionals, and secure inspections. Expect to respond to questions during the construction process as unexpected turns in the road are common.
- **Consultants** - Consultants are independent contractors that have the expertise to guide clients through one or all aspects of their ADU projects; including zoning, permitting, design parameters, construction methods, estimated costs, financing options, property management, long-term maintenance, leasing, and more. Some cities and nonprofit ADU programs provide project management through consultants.

## Why hire a professional?

**Building an ADU is complicated, but with good planning and/or help, you can do it!**

**Although not required, it's advisable to hire a designer, licensed architect, or engineer to design the ADU, and a licensed contractor to build it. While it might seem like building an ADU is essentially a slightly larger home improvement project similar to a kitchen remodel, in practice it is not much different than building an entire new home—perhaps even more complicated. Unless the homeowner is a contractor or architect themselves, it's most likely they will have to engage an experienced project manager to guide the many phases of the work. Having an expert who assists with contract negotiation, payment schedules, quality checks, project timing, working with the city and other regulatory agencies, and more, can be valuable to a homeowner who is unfamiliar with these processes.**

**Though it may cost more up front, some homeowners will come out ahead because their project was better managed and/or because of the rental income they would have lost to a delayed project.**

**From the City of Oakland ADU website.**

### Types of ADU Construction

Homeowners reviewing a selection of pre-reviewed ADU plans will see different construction types. Below are the most common construction methods for building an ADU.

- **Traditional stick-built on site** - A stick-built home is constructed entirely or largely on-site; that is, built on the site which it is intended to occupy upon its completion rather than in a factory or similar facility.

**Prefab or prefabricated homes of the categories below involve the planning, designing, fabrication, and transportation of fabricated building items assembled on the site.**

- **Manufactured** Manufactured housing is certified and regulated at the federal level by HUD. Cost may be lower as these homes don't have to be built to Title 24 requirements. The State of CA requires companies selling manufactured homes to have them inspected by third-party state-approved inspectors. Generally delivered as a completed home or in two sections.
- **Factory-built, modular** Factory built housing is also certified at the state level by HCD and must be built to state building code standards. Cost may be higher than manufactured ADUs.
- **Panelized** A panelized house kit is a prefab home that typically includes a roof, wall panels, and floor systems that are all first assembled in a factory, then delivered to the construction site. When building a panelized house kit, the foundation is laid first. Afterwards, the panelized walls, floors, and roof that were manufactured off-site are put into place. Local inspections are required, though some components may be state-certified.
- **Hybrid** Hybrid construction uses modular, panelized and site-built approaches in combination in order to develop a single building. For example, serviced areas with plumbing and water pipes, like bathrooms and kitchens, are initially constructed as 'pods'--modular units--where the rest of the dwelling is constructed with traditional framing or panels.

Pre-reviewed plans programs won't work for all homeowners on all parcels. It's helpful to understand some of these factors before you decide whether to go custom, use an off-the-shelf design or select a pre-reviewed plan for your new ADU.

- **Limited customization options.** The streamlining benefits of choosing a pre-reviewed plan are based on using the plans as-is. If your site layout, special use needs or design preferences dictate changes from the existing plans, this choice probably isn't for you. **Note:** Some companies have limited alternative options for their ADU designs that they have also submitted for pre-review, so a version with a different front door or window placement, for one example, may be available.
- **Delivery limitations for prefab ADUs.** Not all sites are suitable for manufactured and factory-built ADUs. While cranes can help where backyard access is limited, overhead power lines, trees and other obstructions can limit use of cranes. Also, narrow or winding streets in some neighborhoods can prevent delivery of complete units. Homeowners with these site conditions should consider site-built or panelized pre-reviewed plans.
- **Lot constraints.** Irregular-shaped lots, L-shaped lots, lots with slopes, size-constrained lots—all these may pose challenges for utilizing pre-existing ADU plans and may require custom plans to make best use of available space.

### FAQs for Homeowners

**I have questions about the city-owned ADU plans? Who do I ask?** City planners may be able to answer general questions, however, for technical questions or alterations, the licensed architect that drew the plans will need to be contacted. Keep in mind that if you want to make any modifications to your plans, you'll need to go back to the original architect—and such changes may bump you out of the streamlining benefits of the pre-reviewed process. Also, many designers and architects won't modify another professional's plan sets due to liability issues.

**How much will it cost to build the ADU using pre-reviewed plans?** With marketplace style plans, you will contact the designer/builder directly to talk about your project and get an estimate of the cost to build. Keep in mind that these estimates are time-sensitive, and will need to be updated if too much time passes before your start date. Labor and materials costs may fluctuate, and permitting fees as well may change over time.



**Can I make changes to my pre-reviewed ADU plans?** Depending on the jurisdiction, some minor changes may be able to be made. The ADU architect also may have versions of your selected plans with a mirrored layout that they have also submitted for pre-review, or versions designed with different window configurations for north or south-facing positions. It's good to remember that the intent of the program is for the plans to be as standardized as possible. In some cities, any changes at all with bump you out of the streamlined pre-reviewed process and take away any fee incentives.

**If I use a pre-reviewed ADU plan, do I still need an architect?** It is advised that if you are not an experienced builder or designer, consulting a professional to guide and advise you through the process is strongly recommended. See page 6 for more on the services offered by different types of professionals.

**How do I find a pre-reviewed program in my local jurisdiction?** To find the pre-reviewed program in your jurisdiction, visit your city or county planning department or building department website and search for ADU. This will bring up their ADU-related material, including any pre-reviewed or pre-approved plans programs. Additionally you can call the number of your local planning / community development office and inquire.

**Can I start building after I get my pre-reviewed plans?** No, pre-reviewed plans are only reviewed at the planning level for consistency and compliance with the local zoning code and site development standards. Applicants will need a building permit and approval from any other authorizing agencies, such as fire, public works, and utilities.

**How much money will it save?** The savings in time may be more significant than the savings in dollars, but you could save as much as \$6000-\$10K in design fees if you use the plan exactly as is, without any modifications. If you're building a \$200,000 ADU, the design fee is only 3-5% percent of your budget--a very small overall percentage. Keep it in perspective: for a few thousand dollars, you're trading the chance to have a completely custom design for a design where you can't change anything. Now if your ADU will be a rental, the additional cost of a custom design may not be necessary. The off-the shelf and pre-reviewed ADU plans are tried and tested to be comfortable and functional.

**What's the difference between 'off-the-shelf' plans and pre-reviewed plans?** Existing ADU plans that the architect/designer has ready to go but that haven't been officially pre-reviewed as part of a city or county program are sometimes called 'off-the-shelf'. Often they are a stock plan and have been built multiple times. Choosing this type of ADU plan set can have important benefits, particularly if your project is in a jurisdiction where this exact ADU plan has been permitted and built before. While it's not guaranteed, using a stock or off-the-shelf plan without changes can potentially save on design fees and weeks of time in the permit phase.

## Example of Pre-Reviewed Plans Website: Napa Sonoma ADU Center

**HOW THIS WORKS**

**PRE-WORK**  
**Determine What's Possible**

Get help from the Napa Sonoma ADU Center with:

- ADU feasibility consult
- Help understanding costs, financing options, and return on investment
- Info on your local ADU rules & permit process

**STEP 1**  
**Pick Your Plan**

Filter the gallery of plans to find which ones you like.

↓

**STEP 2**  
**Contact Your Designer**

Use the contact information on your chosen plan to get in touch with the designer, license the plan, and learn next steps.

**STEP 3**  
**From Plan to Permit**

Contact your jurisdiction's building department and develop your full ADU permit application.

**OPTION A**  
**"PRE-REVIEWED" PLANS**

Ⓞ What does "pre-reviewed" mean?  
If you're looking for "pre-reviewed" plans, start by choosing a jurisdiction, then continue filtering below. Skip to the filters below to search all plans.

Search...



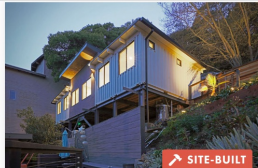



- American Canyon
- Calistoga
- Cloverdale
- Cotati
- Healdsburg
- Napa City
- Napa County
- Patavuma

**OPTION B**  
**ALL PLANS**

Use the options below to filter for plans that fit your goals and preferences. Note: Not all plans in this gallery will necessarily work for your property or jurisdiction.

**PLAN TYPE** ⓘ +

**SIZE CATEGORY** +

 <p><b>Napa ADU</b> NAPA DESIGN PARTNERS</p> <p>480 SF (SMALL) 1, STUDIO 1</p> <p>LICENSE FEE: \$500</p> <p><a href="#">VIEW LISTING</a> <a href="#">ADD FAVORITE</a></p>	 <p><b>Villa 550</b> VILLA</p> <p>569 SF (MEDIUM) 1 1</p> <p>LICENSE FEE: \$0 See listing details</p> <p><a href="#">VIEW LISTING</a> <a href="#">ADD FAVORITE</a></p>	 <p><b>Life Box</b> BRAYER CONSTRUCTION &amp; DESIGN</p> <p>990 SF (LARGE) 2 1</p> <p>LICENSE FEE: \$0 See listing details</p> <p><a href="#">VIEW LISTING</a> <a href="#">ADD FAVORITE</a></p>
 <p><b>Connect 4.1</b> CONNECT HOMES</p> <p>1200 SF (EXTRA-LARGE) 2 2</p> <p>LICENSE FEE: \$0 See listing details</p> <p><a href="#">VIEW LISTING</a> <a href="#">ADD FAVORITE</a></p>	 <p><b>03 - ADU - 3-bed</b> LICENSED ARCHITECT</p> <p>1131 SF (EXTRA-LARGE) 3+ 2</p> <p>LICENSE FEE: \$1,400</p> <p><a href="#">VIEW LISTING</a> <a href="#">ADD FAVORITE</a></p>	 <p><b>Modern 650 SF ADU</b> URBAN BUILDING WORKSHOP</p> <p>650 SF (MEDIUM) 1 1</p> <p>LICENSE FEE: \$850</p> <p><a href="#">VIEW LISTING</a> <a href="#">ADD FAVORITE</a></p>

# Considerations for Jurisdictions

Casita Coalition and Office of Office interviewed jurisdictions, nonprofits and ADU practitioners to learn what kinds of program components were working in these programs and in ADU programs in general to save staff time and move applications more quickly through the permit process.

## Pre-reviewed ADU plans program components to consider

1. Wide variety of ADU plans--size, style, budget, construction type, bedroom count
2. Robust marketing and community outreach
3. Established repeatability process for all ADU plans
4. Marketplace-style approved list of vendors with rolling applications
5. Regional partnerships with neighboring jurisdictions
6. Tangible incentives
7. Interdepartmental coordination
8. Existing website templates
9. Collaborations for full slate of services

## Component benefits & implementation examples

### 1. Wide variety of ADU plans

**Benefits:** Increased ADU production; more equitable uptake

Including site plans with a wide range of construction types, size, orientation, bedroom count and cost increases the likelihood that homeowners, even those with unusual lot configurations, challenging backyard access or constrained budgets, will find a pre-reviewed ADU design that could work for them. Community workshops to gather feedback can be helpful to inform the scope of city-owned ADU plan programs and find out how homeowners intend to use their ADUs, so locally relevant options can be provided by the architects.

The City of Eugene Oregon offers both types of program--they commissioned ADU plan sets they can offer applicants at no cost, and also have a small marketplace-style list of vendors with pre-reviewed plans.

The City of San Luis Obispo commissioned a plan set that includes floor plans from studio to 4 bedroom ADU in 1200 sf, designed for student, sharing or family use.

Napa Sonoma ADU Center's ADU plan gallery is an example of maximum choice for homeowners. It features stock plans, pre-reviewed on-site and off-site built options.

## 2. Robust marketing and outreach

**Benefits:** Community awareness; increased ADU production

A user-friendly ADU website page and supporting materials is an important resource to help homeowners get started on their ADU journey. But getting the word out in the community to drive traffic to the ADU page is the next step. It will take large numbers of ADU-curious homeowners at the big end of the funnel to result in significant production numbers of ADUs, so casting a wide net with marketing outreach is critical--both for equity and inclusion and for program success. Some cities are partnering with nonprofits to help with outreach and providing grant funding for the work.

Depending on budget and capacity, jurisdictions may want to consider:

- Press releases
- Presentations to community groups
- Social media presence
- Homeowner ADU videos
- Workshops, webinars, homeowner fairs, ADU tours
- Messages on property tax mailings
- Downtown banners
- Endorsements from local elected officials

The County of San Mateo held a series of informational webinars for homeowners interested in building ADUs. Workshops where homeowners can hear presentations on ADU basics and get their general questions answered can save staff time vs. dealing with the ADU-curious on an individual basis. A relatively low-cost option is to present at gatherings as often as you can--with a goal of speaking at least once in every community in the jurisdiction. The City of San Diego regularly sends planning officials out to make presentations in webinars and in-person gatherings of community groups. Realtor associations, faith-based groups, service organizations--all these are great partners for community outreach. Napa Sonoma ADU Center holds regular outreach events that often include an ADU tour to boost attendee numbers.

Elected officials can help garner press attention for a new pre-reviewed plans program. In Los Angeles, Mayor Eric Garcetti held a press conference to announce the launch of their Standard Plans program and the story was carried by multiple news sites.

A big benefit of these programs is their educational and promotional value. Take advantage of this at the time of launch to let residents know that their city or county encourages ADUs and is there to help. If your city has a dedicated ADU Ally, giving her a public face with informational videos, permit application video tours, and in-person workshops can go a long way in building trust with the community.

Providing workshop facilitators and outreach materials in multiple languages is an important consideration to ensure your ADU outreach program is as inclusive as possible.

### 3. Established repeatability process for all ADU plans

**Benefits:** Shorter permit timelines; staff time savings; equitable promotion for small, local ADU builders/designers

For jurisdictions who don't have a pre-reviewed plans program, or for those who are developing one, the main benefit of these programs can be quickly established without the expense or delay by simply creating expedited processing for ADU plans that have previously been issued permits and certificates of occupancy in the city or county before. Expedited repeatability can work for both off-site construction ADUs and site-built ADUs.

As participation in a pre-reviewed plans program requires an investment of cost and time from ADU professionals, it tends to privilege larger companies. Offering the same benefits of repeatability for any ADU plan that has successfully been permitted and constructed in a jurisdiction creates opportunity for local ADU professionals who may not have the resources to participate in an official program, but whose projects often support local jobs and assist homeowners at lower income levels in adding much-needed additional living space for income or family.

Note: Existing rules also enable repeatability of approved plans between jurisdictions, offering further savings in staff time.

### 4. Marketplace-style approved list with rolling application of vendors

**Benefits:** More options for homeowners, fresh listings for return viewers

If your jurisdiction used an RFP process to hire a contractor to create its pre-reviewed program in a set time period, be aware that your list of vendors will need maintenance and updating--so either build that into the request for proposals, or include training for city staff to take on the task of keeping listings current and links functional.

Choosing a rolling application option instead of a one-time window has benefits for homeowners and for new ADU vendors or existing vendors with new ADU designs, but it does come at some cost of staff time to maintain.

Keep in mind that templates exist for marketplace-style pre-reviewed web pages--you don't need to reinvent this wheel. Companies such as the Community Planning Collaborative will work with cities to customize one of their existing templates for specific department structures and permit processes , with potential savings in staff time and public funds.

## 5. Partnerships of neighboring jurisdictions with similar characteristics

**Benefits:** Shared resources developed in partnership save time and public funds

Some jurisdictions have made the choice to partner and join forces with neighboring municipalities on their ADU and other housing programs. Collaborations of this type across city limits and county boundaries have the potential for multiple benefits, including:

- Consistency of local ADU ordinances
- Time and public funds saved on website development
- Partnership on community outreach events and ADU tours
- Shared resources, such as homeowner video stories, templates for checklists, outreach marketing materials
- Regular meetings to share challenges, solutions and best practices
- Creating a regional market to attract ADU professionals. ADU companies are more likely to provide services in areas with predictable permit processing and broader community awareness of ADU benefits.

Regional planning grant funds have been used by some regional collaborations to establish and maintain these partnerships.

An early adopter of this concept, called 21 Elements, can be found in San Mateo County. They describe the partnership on their website as 'a multi-year, multi-phase collaboration of all twenty-one San Mateo County jurisdictions, along with partner agencies and stakeholder organizations. The project aims to support jurisdictions in developing, adopting, and implementing local housing policies and programs. It is a forum for sharing resources, successful strategies and best practices.' Their ADU page can be found here: <http://www.21elements.com/second-units>

Napa Sonoma ADU Center shares tips on developing regional partnerships between cities and counties.

### Tips for coordination between 16 jurisdictions

- Manage expectations: the process will be time consuming with multiple meetings with staff and building departments
- Build in other methods of correspondence and communication so all can be included, with a 'no agency left behind' policy to keep all parties up to date
- Establish an agreed-upon single list of building code requirements that all building officials are okay with
- Have a third-party consultant plan check the pre-reviewed plans against the selected building code requirements
- Have some incentive for use of pre-reviewed plans by all jurisdictions, such as expedited permit approval or capped or waived fees

## 6. Tangible Incentives

**Benefits:** More equitable distribution of completed ADUs; more likelihood of meeting RHNA goals; more affordable rentals in high barrier and amenity-rich neighborhoods

While a pre-reviewed plans program qualifies as a state-required ADU program, in the absence of additional tangible incentives built-in or paired with the program, it's less likely to successfully increase ADU numbers.

Priority processing with reduced timelines and permit review fee waivers are two popular incentives getting traction across the state. The City of Los Angeles offers several incentives as part of its ADU Accelerator program for homeowners with completed ADUs willing to house an older low-income adult, including tenant screening and landlord support with a dedicated case manager. Best practices for affordability tied to incentives is to keep the term as short as possible, preferably no more than 5-7 years, with longer terms reserved for high value grants and loans.

Pre-reviewed plans offer other opportunities to reduce non-permit soft costs, such as standard foundation plans that remove the need for a soils report, or bundled Title 24 energy calculations that work in most if not all locations within a jurisdiction.

One example of a fee cap program is structured as percentages: permit, utility, & public improvement fees shall not be more than 30% of fees for 2,000 sf home, or greater than 10% of ADU construction cost, whichever is less.

Napa County's Affordable ADU Loan Program includes an extra \$2500 for homeowners selecting a pre-reviewed plan.

The screenshot shows the City of San Jose website's navigation bar with links for RESIDENTS, BUSINESS, JOBS, YOUR GOVERNMENT, and NEWS & STORIES. The main content area is titled 'PREAPPROVED ADUS' and includes a sidebar with 'Preapproved ADUs' highlighted. The main text discusses standardized construction plans and includes a section on 'Same-day permit issuance!' circled in red. A 'GO, SAN JOSE!' graphic is overlaid on the right side of the page.

**Development Services Permit Center**

**Business » Development Services Permit Center » Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs) »**

**PREAPPROVED ADUS**

**Are you looking for a faster, lower-cost way to build an accessory dwelling unit (ADU)?**

Standardized construction plans that are preapproved by the City enable the fastest, lowest-cost permit process.

This webpage lists the ADU builders who have secured preapproved plans. There is still a need to submit a site-specific plan that shows the location of the preapproved ADU, which is something the ADU builder/contractor usually handles.

**Same-day permit issuance!** If the site-specific plan and related documents are accurate and complete, permits may be issued on the same day of the scheduled plan review meeting (see submittal process at bottom of page). Exception: For projects with a deferred site-specific structural submittal, same-day approval and permit issuance may not be possible.

**A preapproved ADU project must meet all of the following criteria:**

- Lot must be zoned residential with an existing single-family home or duplex.
- Lot must not be located in a geohazard zone, landslide zone, flood zone or Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI) area; see the [ADU Universal Checklist](#) to determine these designations.
- The project must not require a Fire Variance.

**How may I help you?**

## 7. Interdepartmental Coordination

**Benefits:** More equitable distribution of completed ADUs; more likelihood of meeting RHNA goals; more affordable rentals

Interdepartmental coordination may be the most important component to consider including in an ADU program of any kind. Navigating multiple departments and agencies exponentially increases the difficulty level for homeowners and ADU professionals--so simplifying or eliminating as many steps as possible is proving to yield significant benefits in successful ADU projects that reach completion.

At minimum, it might include a universal permit application checklist that includes requirements and contact info for all authorizing agencies. No cost, no disclosure pre-application meetings (can be brief and virtual) with representatives from all agencies/departments can be a wise investment resulting in more complete applications that save staff time.

Regular interagency or interdepartmental roundtable meetings for real-time coordinated review of ADU applications can result in same-day permit approvals, vastly speeding timelines for all involved. The City of San Jose is a state leader with their innovations in this area. See Appendix A for more on their process.

Some examples of interdepartmental coordination:

- Universal application checklists
- Pre-application appointments
- ADU Ally--point person for all ADU-related inquiries
- Dedicated weekly interdepartmental reviews of ADU applications
- Planning & building department coordination on repeat plans
- Workshops and homeowner resource fairs with representatives from all departments and authorizing agencies

## 8. Existing Website Templates

**Benefit:** Shorter program development timeline; possible cost savings

With so many cities and counties adding pre-reviewed ADU plans programs, the array of existing templates greatly reduces the need for anyone to start from scratch and bid out an RFP for a web developer to create a new product. The examples in this guidebook of excellent existing ADU galleries of plans should provide a starting point for jurisdictions to reach out to companies who can provide a turnkey solution, tailored as needed. For even more savings, consider a regional partnership to share a web platform.



## 9. Collaborations for full slate of services

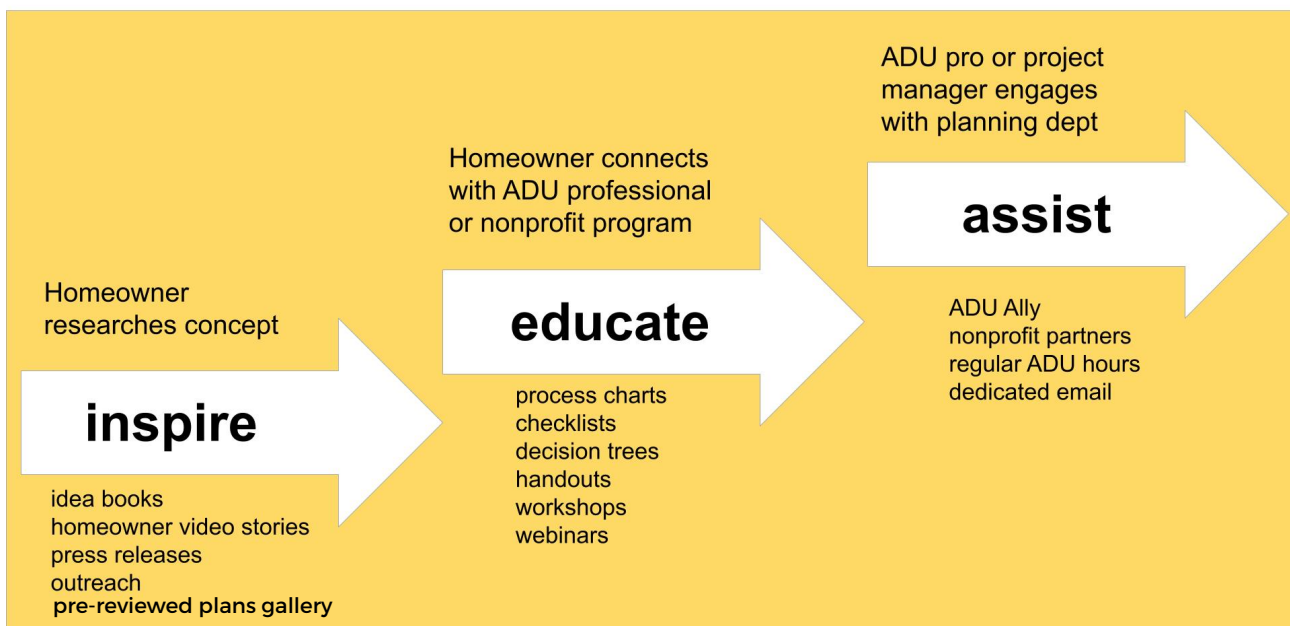
**Benefit:** Addresses all phases of homeowner ADU journey; leverages existing organizations with homeowner networks; improves equitable ADU adoption

Studies of homeowner barriers to building ADUs by the Turner Center for Housing Innovation and others show that the obstacles begin with simply not knowing that building an ADU is possible, and continue to the end of the process with anxiety about being a landlord. Homeowners need guidance and encouragement at every phase of the process. Pre-reviewed plans programs assist with another frequently cited barrier: uncertainty about how to choose a contractor or other ADU professional. To meet this significant array of homeowner needs, cities such as Oakland and San Diego and others are partnering with nonprofits, lenders, community groups, councils of government and service organizations to create incentive programs that meet the full spectrum of needs of lower-resourced homeowners in their communities.

Determining the specific local barriers and obstacles of homeowners that keep them from building ADUs is a key step before embarking on the expense of creating programs and partnerships. Working with potential partners on listening sessions can be a good way to begin collaborations.

Credit unions are stepping into the ADU space with tailored loan products that can help broaden access to financing. As the cost of construction and interest rates go up, cities may find that ADU loans, fee waivers, subsidies and other financial incentives are necessary to pair with a pre-reviewed plans program to get traction with moderate and lower-income homeowners.

### Stages of the ADU Journey



# Considerations for ADU Professionals & Practitioners

## Submitting to a pre-reviewed ADU plans program

ADU professionals will have to weigh the costs and benefits of participating in these programs. For companies working in multiple areas of the state, the expense of going through the permit process for their most popular plans in multiple cities and counties without a client to absorb the costs could be significant. Smaller ADU companies might find the time and cost commitment for even one jurisdiction to be a challenge.

### Advantages of participation:

- Exposure to many potential clients through marketing by the jurisdiction and/or nonprofit partner
- Program websites may have helpful information and resources for homeowners--potentially saving you staff time to get common questions answered
- Some programs offer feasibility studies, which could eliminate inquiries with low likelihood of follow-through
- Potential time and cost savings through expedited processing of plans--which could accelerate as plans are reused
- Applicants choosing your pre-reviewed plans benefit with waived or reduced fees and expedited timelines in some jurisdictions

### To consider:

- Investing in permit applications is a calculated risk and may not result in new clients
- Some participants report significant increases in calls from potential clients, requiring more staff to handle inquiries
- Any modifications to plans result in loss of expedited status or other incentives in many jurisdictions
- Pre-reviewed plans will still require additional information and tailoring before it can be submitted for ADU permit approval on a specific site
- Ongoing commitment needed to keep pre-reviewed plans current with changes to building code and other standards

With those factors in mind, ADU professionals will want to research further in their city or county to learn more. See page 21 for a sample checklist for pre-review plan submissions from the City of San Jose.

## Elements of pre-reviewed plans submission

While there are some differences, plan submissions generally will include:

- Architectural information, plans, elevations, sections, and details
- Structural information, plans, elevations, sections, and details
- Structural calculations
- Title 24 energy documents, as applicable
- Truss plans and calculations, as applicable
- Indication of fire sprinklers
- Geotechnical investigation report, as applicable
- Code minimum soil valuation for foundation design, or pre-scripted footing sizes

(from City of San Jose forms)

Updates on plans will need to be done after:

- Building code updates
- Zoning changes
- Building policy changes

Issues that might delay approval of a pre-reviewed plan past the 60-day state law threshold:

- Incomplete application
- Staff shortages
- Other agencies--fire, public works, utilities
- Site-specific challenges

Note: New CA state law requires all authorizing agencies to approve or deny within the 60-day timeline or permit is deemed approved.

## Conclusion

We hope these guidelines have been a useful overview of pre-reviewed plans programs as one tool for jurisdictions to consider in their efforts to streamline the ADU permitting process and lower cost and time burdens for homeowners.

Casita Coalition's [ADU Best Practices Guidebook](#) lists many other approaches used in jurisdictions across the state that can be used instead of, or in addition to, a well-crafted pre-reviewed plans program. It may be worthwhile to reiterate that the main benefits of these programs--increasing community awareness of ADUs, expediting processing of repeat plans, fee waivers and caps--can be attained without investing in the development of a standard plans program.

A useful beginning can be to ask: what is the problem your jurisdiction's solving for? A process audit, preferably external, combined with applicant or community surveys, can be helpful to inform the choice of most effective process updates, ADU program components and incentives.

There is early data suggesting that the regions getting the most traction in building ADUs for moderate- and lower-income homeowners have a higher percentage of small, local ADU professionals who have established trust with their community through close network ties, renovation work, etc. Relying only on an official pre-reviewed plans program risks sidelining these lower-resource ADU builders and designers. Creating an expedited process for any repeat ADU plans may be one way to enhance equity outcomes in ADU production.

We are interested in your feedback and would appreciate hearing from you with your experience as homeowners using pre-reviewed plans, as ADU professionals participating (or not) in these programs, and as a city or county experiencing obstacles or success with this streamlining tool. Write to: [info@casitacoalition.org](mailto:info@casitacoalition.org). Thank you!



Photo courtesy of Smart Share Housing Solutions

## Program highlights

- Marketplace-style list of 18 vendors with 27 plans
- ADU sizes range from 330 sf to 966 sf, studio to 2 bedrooms
- To use preapproved plans, the project must meet be zoned residential; not in a geohazard, landslide or flood zone; not in a Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI) area; no Fire Variances
- Expedited timeline: If the site-specific plan and related documents are accurate and complete, permits may be issued on the same day of the scheduled plan review meeting

## Checklists

A pre-application checklist outlines all steps and requirements needed to submit an application. The checklist was made in collaboration with other departments so the documents entails ALL required materials for a complete application. They also provide an ADU inspection checklist of key building code and utility requirements for ADU projects--saving time and money on costly changes after construction begins.

## Virtual Website & Application Tours

Prerecorded videos can be very helpful to walk viewers through the steps of an application process or website. San Jose uses videos to assist homeowners in the first stages of their journey to get the most common questions answered and help homeowners determine what's possible on their lot. Presenting a positive approach that demonstrates the city's commitment to getting ADUs built can go a long way toward establishing trust and creating a culture of 'yes.'

## ADU Tuesdays

During express plan review meetings on ADU Tuesdays, staff members from all relevant departments including planning, building, public works and fire come together to review the ADU plans at the same time. If the plans have been prepared in accordance with city requirements, the staff review can be completed in ninety minutes and applicants can walk out with an approved permit.

## ADU Ally

The ADU Ally is a dedicated point of contact for ADU-related questions and guidance. The Ally also coordinates between departments when needed, and assists with community outreach and education. As the public face of the ADU program, this staffer demonstrates the city's commitment to helping applicants 'get to yes.'

## Results

Since 2019, about 80% of site-specific pre-reviewed ADU projects were reviewed and approved during a scheduled expedited review meeting.



## ADU & Single-Family Master Plan Program

**Streamlined plan review and permit issuance for projects using standardized plans that are pre-approved by the City of San José.**

Designers and builders who offer building plans that are pre-approved by the City of San José can offer their customers expedited plan review, subject to any site concerns. This applies to detached accessory dwelling units (ADUs), pre-manufactured homes, or wood-framed single-family homes.



Pre-approved “master plans” enable City staff to quickly review a proposed project’s standard construction plan layouts. The master plans may include associated configuration options. The plans must clearly identify the level of scope for the Master Plan.

Master Plans are allowed in residential zoning districts, specifically: R-1, R-2, R-M zones, and in PD (planned development) zones as allowed by the covenants of the PD zone.

ADU customers who use approved Master Plan designs have the benefit of using our streamlined, lowest-cost plan review services.

### HOW DO I OBTAIN A MASTER PLAN APPROVAL?

**Appointment required.** Call 408-793-5302 to schedule an appointment for a Master Plan submittal. Your submittal will be reviewed by staff in Building, Planning, Fire Prevention, and Public Works.

**Master plan submittal package.** An accurate, complete submittal package is required and must include:

1. Architectural information, plans, elevations, sections, and details
2. Structural information, plans, elevations, sections, and details
3. Structural calculations
4. Title 24 energy documents, as applicable
5. Truss plans and calculations, as applicable
6. Indication of Fire sprinklers: Provide a statement as to whether the standard construction plan layout proposes to be equipped with an automatic fire sprinkler system.
7. Geotechnical investigation report, as applicable
8. For ADUs, you may use code minimum soil valuation for foundation design, or pre-scripted footing sizes if conventional construction is used, or match existing foundation.
9. A standard site plan as reference is optional.

An incomplete package will not be accepted. If you must resubmit, another appointment will need to be scheduled.

**Building code updates affect master plans.** You will need to re-file a Master Plan when the City adopts new building codes, building policies, or zoning changes that are applicable to the Master Plan. The City will notify you if such changes take place.

*Continued >*

## CUSTOMER USE OF AN APPROVED MASTER PLAN

Before undertaking an ADU project, all homeowners are encouraged to review the **ADU Universal Checklist** at [www.sanjoseca.gov/ADUs](http://www.sanjoseca.gov/ADUs) to make sure their project qualifies for an ADU, and they are aware if their project is subject to a planning permit, geohazard clearance, or fire mitigation measures, and related fees. These requirements may also affect projects using an approved Master Plan design.

### Customer Plan Submittal Requirements for a site-specific application:

See also **Bulletin #211-ADU Building Plans Submittal Checklist** for direction on format and content of the submittal package. A site-specific application must include:

1. Project site plan/plot plan that includes scope of work, parcel boundaries, dimensions, street name, and location of any utilities and easements
2. Location and dimensions of the primary dwelling unit and ADU, including distances from the main dwelling to the ADU and to parcel boundaries
3. Architectural information, plans, elevations, sections, and details
4. Structural information, plans, elevations, sections, and details
5. Structural calculations as reference (an updated calculation is needed for minor changes).
6. Title 24 energy documents as reference (an updated document is needed for minor changes).
7. Foundation information

## PLAN REVIEW PROCESS

**Master Plan Projects Without Changes.** For projects adhering to the approved Master Plan without any changes: Call 408-793-5302 to make an appointment for our lowest-cost Over-The-Counter service when ready to proceed.

**Master Plan Projects With Minor Changes.** Minor changes are limited to:

- One load-bearing beam or wall (shear wall); and
- No more than 25 percent of change to the Master Plan configuration.

Call 408-793-5302 to make an appointment for Express Service when ready to proceed.

Note: The plan review supervisor has discretion to direct that the plans be submitted for regular Plan Review Service if changes exceed what the City considers as minor.

## FEES

**Building fees.** Visit [www.sanjoseca.gov/buildingfees](http://www.sanjoseca.gov/buildingfees), open the Building Fee Schedule and look at the Single-Family Residential fee section. For ADUs, use the addition/alteration table to determine the fee.

**Other fees and taxes.** Other fees such as Public Works clearance fees, Parkland fees, and School fees, and all applicable taxes, must be paid prior to permit issuance. These fees have links on the Building Fee webpage: [www.sanjoseca.gov/buildingfees](http://www.sanjoseca.gov/buildingfees)

The building permit fee is due at the time of application. All fees must be paid before the City will issue a building permit.

## QUESTIONS?

Our ADU Ally provides assistance with the Master Plan Pilot Program:

Email: [adu.ally@sanjoseca.gov](mailto:adu.ally@sanjoseca.gov)

Phone: 408-793-5302

# Appendix B: Case Study - Napa Sonoma ADU Center

## Program highlights

- Marketplace-style list of 28 vendors with 51 plans
- ADU sizes from 150 sf to 1200 sf, studio to 3 bedrooms
- Multi-jurisdiction program includes 14 cities and 2 counties
- Includes ADU features, such as all-electric, universal design, solar-ready
- Sort listings by jurisdiction pre-reviewed status, size, builder, features
- Construction cost estimates, license fees, professional fees
- Includes stock plans outside of pre-reviewed program
- Many plans have \$0 license fees (included with cost of construction)
- New Napa County forgivable loan program and \$2500 incentive

The Napa Sonoma ADU Standard Plans Program provides property owners with easy access to dozens of “off the shelf” ADU plans that can be purchased at low cost, saving thousands of dollars and months of time over a custom design. Plan options include site-built and off-site construction designs of various sizes, including plans that have been pre-reviewed by specific jurisdictions.

What makes this program ground-breaking? "This is one of the first comprehensive, multi-jurisdiction programs of its type in the country. Each jurisdiction decides which plans they will accept as “pre-reviewed, with a third-party reviewer conducting code reviews for the selected site-built plans." Homeowners in Napa can also take advantage of a partnership with Napa County's new Affordable ADU Loan Program, which provides loans up to \$105,000 that are forgivable in exchange for the ADU being rented to tenant or family member affordably (under 80% AMI) for 5 years. This program includes up to \$2,500 incentive for use of a pre-reviewed plan from the program, and applies to all cities in Napa plus unincorporated county.

## Additional program features and resources:

- Feasibility consultations
- Help understanding costs, financing options, and return on investment
- Info on local ADU rules & permit process
- Process workflow charts
- Guided website video tours
- ADU homeowner success stories
- ADU calculator
- Address lookup tool
- Webinars
- Example floor plans
- Design, permitting and construction workbooks
- Policies and zoning requirements across all Napa and Sonoma county jurisdictions

FAQs for ADU professionals: <https://plans.napasonomaadu.org/designer-faqs/>

## Resources & Links

California Housing Finance Agency

<https://www.calhfa.ca.gov/>

California Department of Housing and Community Development

<https://www.hcd.ca.gov/policy-and-research/accessory-dwelling-units>

ADU Incentive Programs

<https://villahomes.com/blog/adu-aid-programs/>

HCD Handbook (updated July 2022)

<https://www.hcd.ca.gov/sites/default/files/2022-07/ADUHandbookUpdate.pdf>

Casita Coalition Guidebooks & Resources

<https://www.casitacoalition.org/guidebooks-and-resources>

UC Berkeley Turner Center for Housing Innovation Reports & Publications

<https://turnercenter.berkeley.edu/research-and-policy/>

Southern California Association of Governments ADU Planning & Development

<https://scag.ca.gov/adu-planning-and-development>

[AccessoryDwellings.org](https://www.accessorydwellings.org)

Casita Coalition Webinar Recordings

2021 ADU Best Practices Jurisdiction Spotlights, 2022 Hot Topics in Small Housing

<https://www.youtube.com/@casitacoalition>

[Napa Sonoma ADU Center Standard Plans Program](#)

[FAQs for ADU Professionals Interested in Submitting Plans for Pre-Review](#)

[City of San Jose Pre-Approved ADU Plans Program](#)



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Many thanks to our funders & premier members:



We invite you to add your voice to the Casita Coalition by joining as a business member or as a Friend of Casita. Learn more, donate or join at [casitacoalition.org](http://casitacoalition.org)