

Important ADU Vocabulary

Building code: Standards that ensure buildings are built safely. Building codes are made up of various sections (plumbing, electrical, etc.) These are established by the State of California and are often amended by cities.

Deed restrictions: Conditions or rules that are added to a deed for a house. For example, some cities require homeowners to add language specifying that both the main house and the second unit will not both be rented at the same time.

Discretionary permit: Permission to build a second unit or take other action that requires a public hearing. Generally, second units do not need discretionary permits. The opposite of a discretionary permit is a use that is allowed by right, meaning a homeowner can build their second unit as long as it meets all the standards.

Ministerial review: Review by the city to make sure an application meets all requirements. There is no discretion or judgment involved on the reviewer's part and no public hearings. Under California state law, ADUs and Junior ADUs should be approved via ministerial review by your local jurisdiction.

Floor Area Ratio (FAR): FAR is the number of built square feet divided by the size of a lot. FAR includes built area on all floors. The zoning code will specify the maximum FAR for your property if this applies.

Lot coverage: The area of a property that is allowed to have buildings on it in relation to the total lot area, generally expressed as a percentage. Zoning code will specify the maximum lot coverage for your lot.

Open space requirements: Rules that require a certain amount of yard area to be suitable for active or passive recreation (e.g., kids playing ball or a family having dinner). This requirement is identified in the zoning code.

Setbacks: The minimum distance a building must be located from front, side, or back property lines. A four-foot side setback means any building must be at least four feet from the side property line. This requirement is identified in the zoning code.

Single-family/multi-family: Single-family zoning refers to one home on a property. Multi-family zoning refers to more than one home located on a property (e.g., apartments).

Zoning/zoning code: City standards that determine what can be built on a site. All lots in the city will be assigned a zone (e.g., R-1, a typical single-family zone), and each zone has different regulations. The zoning code governs many aspects of development, including how tall buildings can be, where buildings can be located on a lot, etc. Most cities only allow second units in certain zoning areas.