
DATE: 10/27/2025

MEMORANDUM

TO: PlaceWorks
FROM: Studio One Eleven

PROJECT: 25140 Repurpose Riverside ARO (WRCOG)

SUBJECT: Comparative Analysis and Takeaways from Regional Adaptive Reuse Programs (San Diego, Long Beach, Los Angeles, Santa Ana, Pasadena)

SUMMARY

Adaptive reuse ordinances and incentive programs in California cities have repeatedly shown they can unlock housing and economic revitalization in downtowns and commercial corridors when they (1) provide clear, by-right pathways, (2) reduce regulatory uncertainty (parking/density/FAR relief), and (3) include tailored alternative building-code standards and technical guidance. Los Angeles' 1999 Adaptive Reuse Ordinance produced the largest measurable result (>12,000 housing units); Long Beach and Santa Ana each implemented local programs (effective around 2014) and have several successful projects; Pasadena and San Diego have pursued policy packages and targeted reuse efforts more recently with fewer citywide ARO outcomes to date.

ANALYSIS: Regional best practices & key characteristics for success

Drawing from the five municipal examples above and analyses of adaptive reuse programs in California, the following program elements repeatedly show up as effective best practices. Each practice is paired with the rationale and examples from the cities that use it.

1. By-right/streamlined eligibility for qualifying buildings

- a. Rationale: Reduces discretionary delays and CEQA triggers for eligible conversions, lowering time and entitlement risk.
- b. Example: Los Angeles' 1999 ARO allowed by-right conversions for eligible buildings and is credited with large-scale housing creation.

2. Parking and density relief (or exemptions) for conversions

- a. Rationale: Parking and density requirements can quickly make conversions infeasible; targeted relief improves financial viability.
- b. Examples: LA ARO (parking relief), Long Beach and recent Long Beach ordinances explicitly exempt adaptive reuse from some density/FAR constraints.

3. Alternative / clarified building-code provisions tailored to reuse

- a. Rationale: Building codes written for new construction can be ambiguous for conversions; tailored alternative standards reduce project uncertainty and avoid overly conservative

retrofit requirements. Early technical assistance also shortens the approval timeline and reduces rework.

- b. Examples: Long Beach's Adaptive Reuse Technical Manual and Long Beach code clarifications; LA's ARO included specific reuse code guidance. Turner Center research highlights this as a core success factor.

4. Clear mapping of eligible buildings/overlay zones and a published technical manual

- a. Rationale: Making clear which buildings/areas are eligible reduces early-stage uncertainty for owners and lenders. Manuals provide step-by-step technical and permitting expectations.
- b. Examples: Santa Ana's eligible locations map and Long Beach's Adaptive Reuse Technical Manual.

5. Financial and procedural incentives (fee waivers, prioritized reviews, density/FAR exceptions)

- a. Rationale: Incentives and fee/processing relief can bridge the gap between retrofit costs and market returns, especially for affordable units or public-benefit projects.
- b. Examples: Santa Ana and Long Beach include incentive mechanisms; LA's ordinance indirectly produced market incentives by removing barriers.

6. Integrate historic-preservation standards where appropriate

- a. Rationale: When reuse affects historic resources, codifying how to meet preservation standards while enabling reuse avoids conflict and fosters support.
- b. Example: San Diego's preservation framework and Liberty Station reuse are examples.

7. Housing affordability linkage for public benefit

- a. Rationale: Many reuse projects can include or be incentivized to include affordable or supportive housing, advancing multiple policy goals. Santa Ana examples show workforce/affordable outcomes from reuse.
- b. Example: Santa Ana Arts Collective located at 1666 N Main Street is a 58 unit affordable apartment community for working artists and their families.

8. Allow modest rooftop/addition capacity where feasible

- a. Rationale: A modest rooftop addition can improve project viability (adds units without major new footprint) — often explicitly allowed in successful AROs (e.g., LA).
- b. Example: 200 W Ocean Apartments in Long Beach added two extra floors to the existing roof as part of the conversion from office to housing.

9. Regularly monitor & publish program outcomes

- a. Rationale: Tracking units, jobs, economic impacts and permit timelines helps refine incentives and demonstrate success for political support.
- b. Example: LA's published fact sheets are a good model.

NOTES ON DATA

Some jurisdictions (notably San Diego and Pasadena) rely more on targeted reuse plans, preservation policies, or have only recently adopted/revised AROs; there is thus no single consolidated citywide count of projects directly attributable to a single ARO in every city. For example, Los Angeles publishes a citywide figure (>12,000 units) tied to its 1999 ordinance, but Long Beach and Santa Ana counts are typically reported as project-by-project in local reporting.