



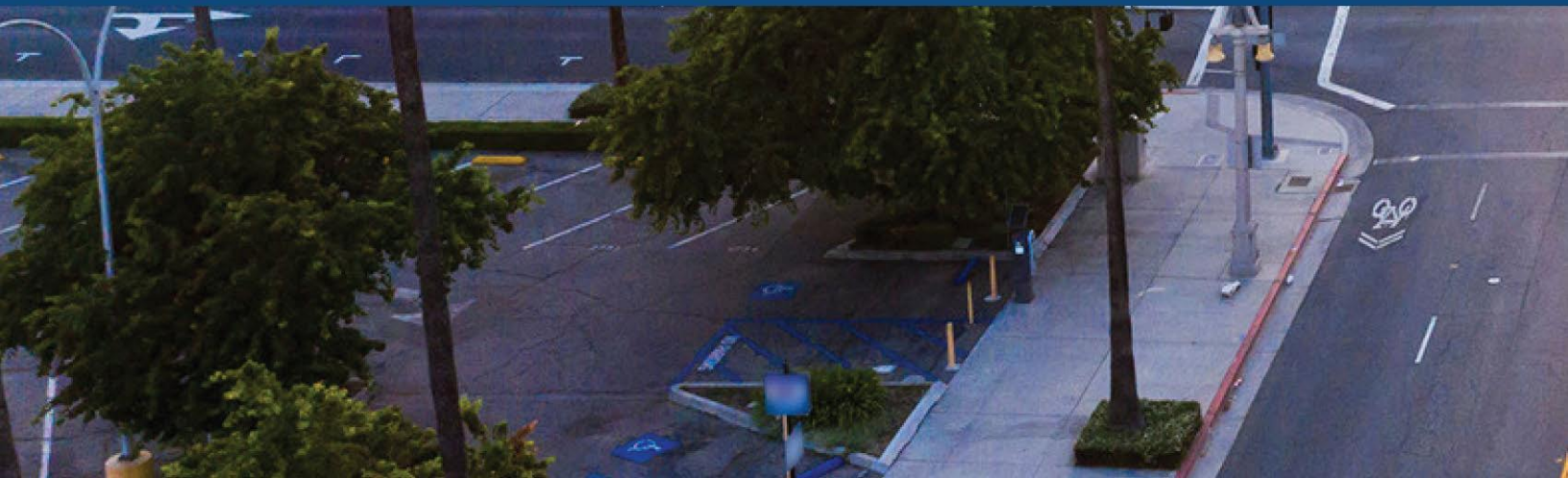
ADAPTIVE REUSE TECHNICAL MANUAL

CITY OF RIVERSIDE

MAY 2026



CITY OF
RIVERSIDE



The Adaptive Reuse Ordinance is intended to help developers convert existing nonresidential buildings into housing within defined areas of the City. It provides a set of incentives and a streamlined, predictable review process so that qualified buildings can transition to residential use without needing full redevelopment.

The Ordinance is designed to lower entitlement risk, reduce time and cost compared to ground-up projects, and support the delivery of new infill housing options.

This Guide acts as a support document to the ordinance, offering an overview of common adaptive reuse challenges to consider and a description of the application process for projects in the City of Riverside.



RIVERSIDE ADAPTIVE REUSE ORDINANCE SUPPORT GUIDE

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ADAPTIVE REUSE OVERVIEW

Adaptive reuse, the practice of repurposing existing buildings for new uses, delivers significant value for a city and its community. It shifts growth away from “tear down and rebuild” toward conserving what already exists, while meeting today’s needs for homes and services. Key benefits include reducing climate and environmental impacts, strengthening community fabric and local economies, and creating new housing and infill development opportunities.

Background

The Riverside adaptive re-use ordinance was adopted by the City Council on June 23, 2026. A REAP funded effort, the ordinance intended to create new opportunities for infill housing within key areas of the city.

CLIMATE AND ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

Reusing buildings reduces construction-related carbon emissions because much of the embodied energy in foundations, structure, and envelope is preserved rather than discarded. It also cuts demolition waste and material demand, since adaptive projects can salvage a large share of existing materials instead of sending them to landfills. By supporting infill development and reinvestment in already urbanized areas, adaptive reuse can also reduce sprawl, vehicle miles traveled, and associated greenhouse gas emissions. Together, these effects make adaptive reuse a core strategy in reducing Riverside’s climate footprint while still accommodating growth.

STRENGTHENING OUR COMMUNITIES

At the neighborhood scale, adaptive reuse can help restore aging or vacant properties into active, welcoming spaces that reinforce local identity and pride. Through adaptive re-use, historic or culturally significant buildings can be retained and reimaged, preserving the physical character of a place while updating it for contemporary uses. In many cases, the repurposing of existing buildings is a catalyst for broader revitalization, particularly in infill and urbanized areas. Infill adaptive reuse means that projects are in walkable, transit-served areas. Therefore, connecting communities to everyday access to services, culture, and public life for existing residents.

CREATING NEW HOUSING OPPORTUNITIES

Adaptive reuse offers a faster, more cost-effective pathway to deliver new homes by converting underutilized offices, retail, hotels, and even institutional buildings into residential or mixed-use projects. By utilizing existing infrastructure and zoning capacity, adaptive reuse allows jurisdictions to add units without consuming new greenfield land or waiting for large master-planned developments.

Adaptive Reuse Ordinance Purpose

The Riverside Adaptive Reuse Ordinance intends to facilitate the revitalization and preservation of Riverside by making it easier to turn unused or outdated buildings into residential uses including live-work spaces.

In addition to activating vacant properties, the ordinance encourages infill housing that complements existing neighborhoods, safeguards Riverside’s architectural and cultural legacy, and supports a healthier balance between where people live and work within the city’s core areas.

The Adaptive Reuse Ordinance is applicable for eligible buildings in the zoning districts shown in Figure 1, below.

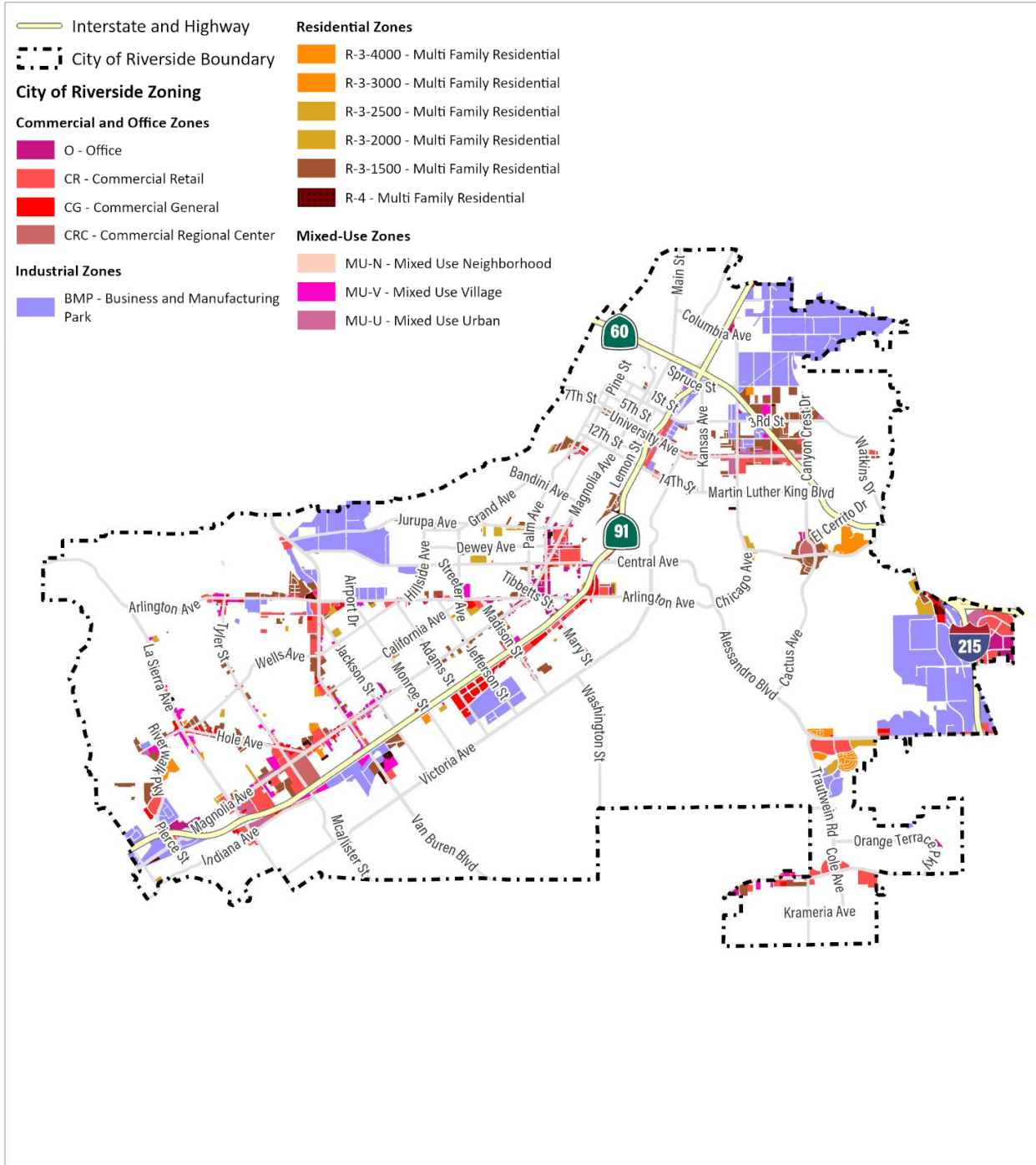
For building eligibility and available incentives for qualifying projects, please see the Adaptive Reuse Ordinance #XXX.

Adaptive Reuse Guide Purpose and Applicability

This Adaptive Reuse Guide serves as a support document for applicants using the ordinance. The goal of the guide is to provide an overview of process for submitting a project. It is not intended to be an all-inclusive Handbook. Qualification for adaptive reuse is determined case by case, recognizing that each project is unique and requires tailored consideration.

The City reserves the right to update this Support Guide as deemed necessary.

Figure 1. Applicable Zoning Designations



0 2.5 5
Scale (Miles)

Source: ESRI, 2026; PlaceWorks, 2026; City of Riverside, 2026

COMMON ADAPTIVE REUSE CHALLENGES

Adaptive reuse projects face a distinct set of challenges, from navigating outdated building systems and hazardous materials to resolving conflicts between historic character and modern codes and accessibility standards. Developers must also contend with uncertain existing conditions when adapting buildings, the section below outlines common adaptive reuse challenges to be aware of and prepared to discuss with the city during review.

Structural and Seismic Retrofits

When conducting the feasibility study and assessment of existing building conditions, consideration should be given to existing structural building elements and the extent of changes needed for the proposed project. All new structural elements must meet the requirements for new construction.

Depending on the condition of the existing building, soft-story weaknesses, where a multi-story structure has a ground floor that is significantly less rigid or strong than the floors above, may require costly seismic upgrades.

Performance-based engineering methods may be used when approved by the Building Official.

Unreinforced Masonry

Unreinforced masonry bearing wall buildings must meet minimum seismic stabilization requirements if any structural modifications are made. Any future seismic or structural upgrades required by city or state laws will also apply.

Accessibility Requirements

As part of the due diligence phase, the existing building should be assessed for compliance with applicable accessibility requirements. There may be some flexibility in achieving solutions that meet the spirit of the accessibility requirements if the exact requirements are unable to be met.

Exterior Walls, Windows, And Envelope

EXTERIOR WALL CONSTRUCTION

Any new additions or alterations to those exterior walls must comply with new construction requirements.

EXTERIOR ENVELOPE UPGRADES

Any enclosure required repairs and upgrades, such as windows or insulation updates, must meet current energy and code requirements. Another example of envelope upgrades that may be coordinated is an underslab vapor barrier in new slab-on-grade or subterranean slab-on-grade construction.

EXTERIOR OPENING PROTECTION

Existing exterior wall openings that do not meet current fire-separation requirements must be updated to meet new-construction standards.

You may encounter openings that are too close to property lines and not allowed by code which would not typically count in new building codes.

Any new openings or changes to existing exterior wall openings must comply with new-construction requirements.

Exiting

EXIT

Each floor, where there is a proposed change of use or occupancy, needs access to a minimum number of exit stairways, in compliance with new construction standards.

CORRIDORS

New corridors must meet all current code requirements. Existing corridors may still be used as exit access components. In general, corridors are required to comply with all applicable code requirements unless an approved alternative means and methods (AMM) approach is proposed.

Here are a few examples of common adaptive reuse scenarios that may need to be addressed, especially if they have historic significance:

- Existing transoms or fixed glazed openings in good condition
- Existing openings and penetrations
- Existing doors

EXIT STAIRWAYS

Because floor heights are fixed, changing stair dimensions is often not practical. The Building Official and Fire Official may consider alternative solutions proposed by the design team for stair number, size, clearances, riser and tread dimensions, landings, loads, and other code issues. Any reasonable upgrades that can be made should be included.

FIRE ESCAPES

Fire escapes shall be maintained clear, accessible, and in good condition, with secure attachment to the building and fire-resistive opening protection as required by the applicable code provisions. An existing fire escape may be considered as part of the means of egress from upper floors where it is operational, structurally sound, and evaluated by a licensed engineer.

Any proposal to utilize an existing fire escape in lieu of full compliance with current code requirements shall include a code analysis identifying the specific code sections for which alternate compliance is requested. Such requests shall be processed through the Alternative Means and Methods (AMM) process and are subject to review and approval by the Building Official and Fire Official.

ROOFTOPS

If a rooftop is newly occupied or its occupant load increases, it must have exits that meet current code requirements. Any new assembly use with 50 or more occupants on an existing rooftop must typically provide at least two exits, and fire escapes cannot be used as those exits.

If the rooftop is 75 feet or more above the lowest level accessible to fire vehicles, additional high-rise code requirements may apply, as determined by the Fire Official.

Elevators

Elevator requirements vary between high-rise and low-rise buildings. Some limits on the number, size, capacity, and dimensions of elevators are allowed, but

elevator shafts must meet fire-resistance and smoke-protection requirements. Existing freight elevators cannot be used for passengers.

High-Rise Fire Life Safety Requirements

Coordination with Building and Fire Officials will be needed for high-rise buildings where new construction standards cannot be met. There may be flexibility with fire command, smoke removal, required additional stairs, existing stair widths, non-continuous stair enclosures, and handrails.

At-Grade Program Requirements

Existing building conditions may limit programmatic elements that are typically required to be located at grade on new construction. Spaces such as switchgear or transformer rooms, trash rooms, and mail rooms have historically presented challenges. Coordination with Building and Fire Officials will be needed if those requirements cannot be met.

Electrical Upgrades

Consider potential electrical upgrades required for increased load for things like required electric vehicle charging stations, heat pumps, etc.

Lid Requirements

Coordination with Building Officials may be needed for projects unable to meet new construction LID standards. There may be flexibility in the requirements if there is no increase in impermeable surfaces.

ADAPTIVE REUSE SUBMITTAL AND REVIEW PROCESS

The following steps have been designed to help applicants navigate through the adaptive reuse process:

1. Due Diligence and Feasibility Study

It is crucial to complete a comprehensive review before purchasing or making any modifications to an existing building when it pertains to an adaptive reuse project. This investigative phase is critical and typically requires a detailed inspection by trained and licensed professionals.

Property Ownership - Existing buildings sometimes demonstrate complicated issues such as addressing, property line, and ownership issues that have to be addressed prior to any new project permitting.

Utilities and Existing Building Infrastructure - Existing buildings may also be limited as far as the capacity of the electrical, water, gas, and sewer services. Upgrading of water, sewer, gas, and electrical services are normally costly items and can impact an adaptive reuse project.

Existing Building Conditions - Field survey of structure, construction type, year of construction, understanding of elements that are not in compliance with new construction standards.

Prior to developing conceptual design, the following due diligence is needed:

- Obtain Existing Building Survey
- Obtain Geotechnical Report
- Obtain structural materials testing

- Obtain report from Structural Engineer to identify any selective demo areas required to provide a comprehensive structural design
- Obtain Alta Survey with existing utility locations onsite
- Develop a soft demolition process:
 - Ask ownership for a soft demo to clear non-structural elements before documentation. This helps to avoid some of the unforeseen existing issues.
 - Conduct a site visit after soft demo with entire project team to be familiar with existing building conditions.

2. Conceptual Review

After the building has been thoroughly assessed, it is time to develop conceptual designs, narrative descriptions about the project, pro forma financial analysis, and other similar evaluations for the site. Looking at the project from various perspectives will eventually help shape the successful proposal.

While most of this effort will be undertaken by the developer, city staff are available to discuss options, identify possible concerns or limitations, and find the best solutions for the proposed project.

3. Plan Check

The primary purpose of this Support Guide is to provide guidance to architects, engineers and designers to aid in developing creative mitigation measures based on the building deficiencies and/or structural performance levels; therefore, it is to be expected that the plan check process will require more iterations of review than new construction projects. In addition, it is to be expected

that new or unusual issues might come up during the plan check process.

Throughout this Support Guide, examples are provided to clarify the intent of certain sections and to identify when a code modification is needed by the Building Official and/or Fire Official.

4. Construction and Inspection

Adaptive reuse projects are complex and challenging. Even if all the above steps are completed, given the nature of existing buildings, especially historic structures, unforeseen complexities are to be expected during construction. Because of this, a more involved and frequent inspection process, field changes, or modification to construction drawings are likely. Regular communication with the building inspector during construction will be vital to ensure that potential delays are minimized or reduced.

5. Certificate of Occupancy

At the completion of construction, the Building & Safety will issue a Certificate of Occupancy allowing the adaptively reused building to be used for its new purpose.



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