

CALIFORNIA COASTAL COMMISSION

455 MARKET STREET, SUITE 300
SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94105-2421
VOICE (415) 904-5200
FAX (415) 904-5400



To: Planning Directors of Coastal Cities and Counties
From: John Ainsworth, Executive Director, California Coastal Commission
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RE: Updates Regarding the Implementation of New ADU Laws

I. Introduction

California's ongoing housing crisis continues to exacerbate housing inequity and affordability, especially in the coastal zone. To address this critical issue, the state Legislature has enacted a number of laws in the last several years that are designed to reduce barriers to providing housing and to encourage construction of additional housing units in appropriate locations. To this end, the 2019 legislative session resulted in a series of changes to state housing laws that facilitate the development of Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs) and Junior Accessory Dwelling Units (JADUs), which can help provide additional housing units that can be more affordable than other forms of market rate housing. Importantly, the changes did not modify existing provisions of state housing law that explicitly recognize that local governments must still abide by the requirements of the Coastal Act, and by extension, Local Coastal Programs (LCPs). Thus, provisions on coastal resource protection must be incorporated into the planning and development process, and into updated LCP J/ADU requirements, when considering J/ADUs in the coastal zone.

The Coastal Commission strongly encourages local governments to update their LCPs with J/ADU provisions in a manner that harmonizes the State's housing laws with the Coastal Act. Doing so would protect the State's coastal resources while also reducing barriers to constructing J/ADUs and helping to promote more affordable coastal housing.

The Coastal Commission has previously circulated three memos to assist local governments with understanding how to carry out their Coastal Act obligations while also implementing state requirements regarding the regulation of J/ADUs. These memos have raised some questions for local governments, including the manner in which they are to be understood together. In order to address this issue, and to reflect lessons learned regarding J/ADU regulation in the coastal zone in the past few years, this updated memo supersedes and replaces these prior memos. This updated memo also elaborates on the changes to state housing laws that went into effect on January 1, 2020 and provides further information to help local governments harmonize these laws with the Coastal Act. This memo will briefly discuss the authority that the Coastal Act grants the Commission and local governments over housing in the coastal zone, new legislation regarding J/ADUs, how local governments can streamline J/ADU applications under the Coastal Act, and some key issues that should be considered when LCP amendments for J/ADU

provisions are undertaken. This memo is intended to provide general guidance for local governments with fully certified LCPs. The Coastal Commission is responsible for Coastal Act review of J/ADUs in most areas that are not subject to a fully certified LCP. Local governments that have questions about specific circumstances not addressed in this memo should contact the appropriate district office of the Commission.

II. Coastal Act Authority Regarding Housing in the Coastal Zone

The Coastal Act has a variety of provisions directly related to housing. Relevant here, the Coastal Act does not negate local government compliance with state and federal law “with respect to providing low- and moderate-income housing, replacement housing, relocation benefits, or any other obligation related to housing imposed by existing law or any other law hereafter enacted.” (Pub. Res. Code § 30007.) The Coastal Act also requires the Coastal Commission to encourage housing opportunities for low- and moderate-income households (Pub. Res. Code § 30604(f)) but states that “[n]o local coastal program shall be required to include housing policies and programs. (Pub. Res. Code § 30500.1.) Finally, new residential development must be “located within, contiguous with, or in close proximity to, existing developed areas able to accommodate it” or in other areas where development will not have significant adverse effects on coastal resources. (Pub. Res. Code § 30250.)

While the Commission does not currently have the explicit authority to provide or protect affordable housing in the coastal zone, the Commission has continued to preserve existing density and affordable housing whenever possible, including by supporting and encouraging the creation of J/ADUs. The creation of new J/ADUs in existing residential areas is one of many strategies that aims to increase the housing stock, including creating additional housing units of a type and size that can be more affordable than other forms of housing in the coastal zone, in a way that may be able to avoid significant adverse impacts on coastal resources.

III. Overview of New Legislation

As of January 1, 2020, [AB 68](#), [AB 587](#), [AB 881](#), [AB 670](#), [AB 671](#), and [SB 13](#) collectively updated existing Government Code Sections 65852.2 and 65852.22 concerning local government review and approval of J/ADUs, and as of January 1, 2021, AB 3182 further updated the same laws, with the goal of increasing statewide availability of smaller, and potentially more affordable, housing units. Importantly, some of the changes affect local governments in the coastal zone and are summarized below.

- Local governments continue to have the discretion to adopt J/ADU provisions that are consistent with state law, and they may include specific requirements for protecting coastal resources and addressing issues such as design guidelines and protection of historic structures.
- Outside of an LCP context, existing or new J/ADU provisions that do not meet the requirements of the new legislation are null and void and will be substituted with the

provisions of Section 65852.2(a) until the local government comes into compliance with new provisions. (Gov. Code § 65852.2(a)(4).) However, existing J/ADU provisions contained in certified LCPs are not superseded by Government Code Section 65852.2 and continue to apply to Coastal Development Permit (CDP) applications for J/ADUs until the LCP is modified. Coastal jurisdictions without any J/ADU provisions or with existing J/ADU provisions that were adopted prior to January 1, 2020 are encouraged to update their LCPs to comply with the State's new laws. Such new or updated LCP provisions need to ensure that new J/ADUs will protect coastal resources in the manner required by the Coastal Act and LCP, including, for example, by ensuring that new J/ADUs are not constructed in locations where they would require the construction of shoreline protective devices, in environmentally sensitive habitat areas and wetlands, or in areas where the J/ADU's structural stability may be compromised by bluff erosion, flooding, or wave uprush over the structure's lifetime.

- A major change to Section 65852.2 is that the California Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD) now has an oversight role to ensure that local J/ADU provisions are consistent with state law. If a local government adopts an ordinance that HCD deems to be non-compliant with state law, HCD can notify the Office of the Attorney General. (Gov. Code § 65852.2(h)(3).) To ensure a smooth process, local governments should submit their draft J/ADU provisions to HCD and Coastal Commission staff to review for housing law and Coastal Act consistency before they are adopted locally and should continue to foster a three-way dialogue regarding any potential issues identified. Additionally, Coastal Commission and HCD staff meet regularly to discuss and resolve any issues that arise in the development of J/ADU provisions in the coastal zone. The Commission continues to prioritize J/ADU LCP amendments, and some may qualify for streamlined review as minor or de minimis amendments. (Pub. Res. Code § 30514(d); 14 Cal. Code Regs. § 13554.)
- In non-coastal zone areas, local governments are required to provide rapid, ministerial approval or disapproval of applications for permits to create J/ADUs, regardless of whether the local government has adopted updated J/ADU provisions. (Gov. Code § 65852.2(a)(3).) In the coastal zone, CDPs are still necessary in most cases to comply with LCP requirements (see below); however, a local public hearing is not required, and local governments are encouraged to streamline J/ADU processes as much as feasible.

Other recent legislative changes clarify that local J/ADU provisions may not require a minimum lot size; owner occupancy of an ADU (though if there is an ADU and a JADU, one of them must be owner-occupied); fire sprinklers if such sprinklers are not required in the primary dwelling; a maximum square footage of less than 850 square feet for an ADU (or 1,000 square feet if the ADU contains more than one bedroom); and in some cases, off-street parking. Section 65852.2(a) lists additional mandates for local governments that choose to adopt a J/ADU

ordinance, all of which set the “maximum standards that local agencies shall use to evaluate a proposed [ADU] on a lot that includes a proposed or existing single-family dwelling.” (Gov. Code § 65852.2(a)(6).) As indicated above, in specific cases coastal resource considerations may negate some such requirements, but only when tied to a coastal resource impact that would not be allowed under the Coastal Act and/or the LCP. In recent LCP amendments, these types of considerations have most often arisen in terms of the off-street parking provisions (see below).

IV. General Guidance for Reviewing J/ADU Applications

The following section lays out the general permitting pathway in which local governments can process J/ADU applications in a manner that is consistent with Coastal Act requirements and LCP provisions.

1) Check prior CDP history for the site.

Determine whether a CDP or other form of Coastal Act/LCP authorization was previously issued for development of the site and whether that CDP and/or authorization limits, or requires a CDP or CDP amendment for, changes to the approved development or for future development or uses of the site. The applicant should contact the appropriate Coastal Commission district office if a Commission-issued CDP and/or authorization affects the applicant’s ability to apply for a J/ADU.

2) Determine whether the proposed J/ADU constitutes “development.”

As defined by the Coastal Act, development refers to both “the placement or erection of any solid material or structure” on land as well as any “change[s] in the density or intensity of use of land[.]” (Pub. Res. Code § 30106.) **Most J/ADUs constitute development** if they include, for example, new construction of a detached ADU, new construction of an attached J/ADU, or conversion of an existing, uninhabitable, attached or detached space to a J/ADU (such as a garage, storage area, basement, or mechanical room). The construction of new structures constitutes the “placement or erection of solid material,” and the conversion of existing, uninhabitable space would generally constitute a “change in the density or intensity of use.” Therefore, these activities would generally constitute development in the coastal zone that requires a CDP or other authorization. (Pub. Res. Code § 30600.)

Unlike new construction, the conversion of an existing, legally established habitable space to a J/ADU within an existing residence, without removal or replacement of major structural components (e.g., roofs, exterior walls, foundations, etc.), and which does not change the intensity of use of the structure, may not constitute development within the definition in the Coastal Act. An example of a repurposed, habitable space that may not constitute new development (and thus does not require Coastal Act or LCP authorization) is the conversion of an existing bedroom within a primary structure.

Previously circulated Commission J/ADU memos (being superseded and replaced by this memo) indicated that construction or conversion of a J/ADU contained within or directly attached to an existing single-family residence (SFR) may qualify as development that was exempt from the requirement to obtain a CDP. Specifically, the Coastal Act and the Commission’s implementing regulations identify certain improvements to existing SFRs that are allowed to be exempted from CDP requirements (Pub. Res. Code § 30610(a); 14 Cal. Code Regs § 13250.) Although the Commission has previously certified some LCP amendments that permitted certain exemptions for such ADU development, in a recent action, the Commission reevaluated its position and found that “the creation of a self-contained living unit, in the form of an ADU, is not an ‘improvement’ to an existing SFR. Rather, it is the creation of a new residence. This is true regardless of whether the new ADU is attached to the existing SFR or is in a detached structure on the same property.”¹ On this basis, and based on the finding that a variety of types of J/ADUs—including both attached and detached J/ADUs—could have coastal resource impacts that make exemptions inappropriate, it rejected the local government’s proposed exemptions for certain J/ADUs. Local governments considering updating LCP J/ADU provisions should consider the Commission’s recent stance regarding exemptions for ADUs and may work with Commission staff to determine the best way to proceed on this issue.

3) **If the proposed J/ADU constitutes development, determine whether a CDP waiver or other type of expedited processing is appropriate.**

If a local government’s LCP includes a waiver provision, and the proposed J/ADU meets the criteria for a CDP waiver, the local government may issue a CDP waiver for the proposed J/ADU. The Commission has generally allowed a CDP waiver for proposed J/ADUs if the Executive Director determines that the proposed development is de minimis (i.e., it is development that has no potential for any individual or cumulative adverse effect on coastal resources and is consistent with all Chapter 3 policies of the Coastal Act). Such a finding can typically be made when the proposed J/ADU project has been sited, designed, and limited in such a way as to ensure any potential impacts to coastal resources are avoided (such as through habitat and/or hazards setbacks, provision of adequate off-street parking to ensure that public access to the coast is not impacted, etc.). (See Pub. Res. Code § 30624.7.) Projects that qualify for a CDP waiver typically allow for a reduced evaluation framework and streamlined approval.

Most, if not all, LCPs with CDP waiver provisions do not allow for waivers in areas where local CDP decisions are appealable to the Coastal Commission. There have been a variety of reasons for this in the past, including that the Commission’s regulations require that local governments hold a public hearing for all applications for appealable development (14 Cal. Code Regs § 13566), and also that development in such areas tends to raise more coastal resource concerns and that waivers may therefore not be appropriate. However, under the state’s J/ADU provisions, public hearings are not required for qualifying development.

¹ See Coastal Commission [staff report](#), pp. 16-17 (Commission acted on this item on December 17, 2021).

Because of this, the above-described public hearing issue would not be a concern, so it could be appropriate for LCPs to allow CDP waivers in both appealable and non-appealable areas at least related to this criterion. Local governments should consult with Commission staff should they consider proposing CDP waiver provisions in their LCP. Any LCP amendment applications that propose to allow waivers in appealable areas should ensure that there are appropriate procedures for notifying the public and the Commission regarding approvals of individual, appealable waivers (such as Final Local Action Notices) so that the proper appeal period can be set, and any appeals received are properly considered.

The Coastal Act also provides for other streamlined processing for certain types of development, including for minor development. (Pub. Res. Code § 30624.9.) In certain cases, categories of development can also be excluded from CDP requirements if certain criteria are met (see box). In any case, local governments without such CDP waiver and other processing and streamlining tools are encouraged to work with Commission staff to amend their LCP to include such measures.

Coastal Act section 30610(e) allows certain categories of development that are specified in Commission-approved Categorical Exclusion (Cat Ex) Orders to be excluded from CDP requirements, provided that the category of development has no potential for any significant adverse effect, either individually or cumulatively, on coastal resources. (See also 14 Cal. Code Regs §§ 13240 et seq.)

Cat Ex Orders apply to specific types of development within identified geographical locations. For example, the Commission may approve a Categorical Exclusion for J/ADUs that would normally require a CDP (i.e., it is defined as development) because that specific development type in that specific geographic area can be demonstrated to not result in individual and/or cumulative coastal resource impacts. Cat Ex Orders are prohibited from applying to: tide and submerged lands; beaches; lots immediately adjacent to the inland extent of any beach; lots immediately adjacent of the mean high tide line of the sea where there is no beach; and public trust lands.

Cat Ex Orders provide another potential means of streamlining J/ADU consideration, and interested local governments should consult with Commission staff if they intend to propose such an Order. Cat Ex Orders are processed separately from LCP amendments, require a 2/3 vote of the Commission to be approved, and are typically subject to conditions. Once approved, the local government is responsible for reviewing development that might be subject to the Cat Ex Order and is typically required to report any exclusions applied pursuant to the Order to the Commission for review by the Executive Director and for an appeal period before they can become effective. It is important to note that while Cat Ex Orders can be a powerful tool if approved, the Commission must be able to conclude that the specific category of development in a specific geographic area has no potential for any significant adverse coastal resources impacts in order to approve one. Thus, the local government pursuing a Cat Ex Order must provide supporting documentation and evidence that can conclusively show that to be the case.

4) If a full CDP is required, review CDP application for consistency with certified LCP requirements.

If a proposed J/ADU constitutes development and cannot be processed as a waiver or similar expedited Coastal Act approval authorized in the certified LCP, it requires a CDP. The CDP must be consistent with the requirements of the certified LCP and, where applicable, the public access and recreation policies of the Coastal Act. The local government must then provide the required public notice for any CDP applications for J/ADUs and process the application pursuant to LCP requirements, but should process it within the time limits contained in the ADU law, if feasible. However, local governments are not required to hold a public hearing on CDPs for ADUs. (Gov. Code § 65852.2(l).) Once the local government has issued a decision, it must send the required final local action notice to the appropriate district office of the Commission. If the CDP is appealable, a local government action to approve a CDP for the ADU may be appealed to the Coastal Commission. (Pub. Res. Code § 30603.)

V. Key Considerations

Per Government Code Section 65852.2, subd. (l), known as the Coastal Act Savings Clause, the State's new ADU requirements shall not be "construed to supersede or in any way alter or lessen the effect or application of the California Coastal Act of 1976." There are a number of key issues that local governments should account for in order to ensure their LCP J/ADU provisions are consistent with the requirements in the Coastal Act. This section addresses some of the key issues that the Commission has dealt with recently, including public coastal access parking requirements and protection of sensitive habitats and visual qualities. Local governments are encouraged to contact their local Coastal Commission district office for further assistance.

Protection of public recreational access in relation to parking requirements

Government Code Section 65852.2 requirements regarding parking for J/ADUs are as follows:

- a. One parking space is required per unit or per bedroom, whichever is less. The parking space can be a tandem space in an existing driveway.
- b. When a garage, carport, or covered parking structure is demolished in conjunction with the construction of an ADU, no replacement parking space(s) are required.

However, Section 65852.2 further stipulates that the parking requirements listed above do not apply to ADUs constructed:

- a. Within ½ mile walking distance of public transportation stops/routes;
- b. Within a historic district;
- c. Within a primary residence or accessory structure;
- d. When on-street parking permits are required but not offered to the occupant of the ADU;

- e. And where a car-share vehicle is located within one block of the ADU.

Thus, the Government Code limits the circumstances when a local government can require a J/ADU project to address its parking needs onsite. This is a departure from most local government parking requirements which often explicitly specify the number of off-street parking spaces that must be provided onsite in any particular development, including residential development. The potential outcome is that private residential J/ADU parking needs can be shifted onto adjacent public streets. At the same time, the Coastal Act contains objectives and policies designed to protect and provide for maximum coastal access opportunities, which includes maintaining sufficient public coastal parking, including as implemented through LCP off-street parking provisions. The addition of J/ADUs may interfere with coastal public street parking availability if, for example, a garage is converted to a J/ADU and parking is not replaced onsite, in addition to the J/ADU parking demand itself. The Commission has often found that when private residential parking needs are not accommodated onsite, it can lead to increased use of on-street parking to address such needs, thereby reducing the availability of on-street parking to the general public. This may adversely affect public coastal access if it occurs in high visitor-serving areas and/or areas with significant public recreational access opportunities, and where on-street parking is heavily used. The result will be that the general public could be displaced from on-street parking by J/ADU parking needs, which may violate the Coastal Act's requirements to protect, provide, and maximize public coastal access and recreational opportunities. In many impacted coastal neighborhoods, development patterns over the years have not adequately accounted for off-street parking needs, and adding J/ADU parking to the mix will only exacerbate such public parking difficulties. Additionally, because general on-street parking is typically free or lower cost compared to other public parking facilities, J/ADU construction may also interfere with maintaining lower cost coastal access for all.

In order to avoid conflicts regarding parking requirements for J/ADUs as they may impact public access, local governments are encouraged to work with Commission staff to identify or map specific neighborhoods and locations where there is high visitor demand for public on-street parking needed for coastal access and to specify parking requirements for each such area that harmonizes Government Code requirements with the Coastal Act (and any applicable LCP policies). These maps can denote areas that supply important coastal public parking and access opportunities, and require that J/ADU development in these areas ensure that private residential parking needs are accommodated off-street. Importantly, such upfront LCP mapping and provisions allow the local government to address impacts to public access and parking supply without the need for a protracted, or even necessarily a discretionary, decision. The Commission has previously found that local governments may include specific off-street parking requirements for J/ADUs constructed in these locations and may also require maintenance of all off-street parking for the primary residence (see examples below). However, harmonizing the distinct priorities between the Coastal Act's protection of public coastal access and the J/ADU provisions on parking requirements will require a case-by-case consideration of the specific circumstances of each jurisdiction.

Protection of sensitive habitats and visual qualities; avoidance of hazards

While most J/ADU projects take place within established residential neighborhoods where potential coastal resource impacts are fairly limited, there can be cases where such projects may affect significant coastal resources, such as sensitive habitats and shorelines and beaches. As a general rule, LCPs include many provisions protecting such resources, and it is important that proposed J/ADU provisions are not structured to undo any such LCP protections that already apply. J/ADUs may need to be reviewed for specific siting and design standards, particularly in visually sensitive areas (such as the immediate shoreline, between the first public road and the sea, near LCP-designated scenic areas, etc.). Similarly, where sensitive habitat may be present, J/ADUs must be reviewed for impacts to such habitat, including with respect to fuel modification for defensible space. Additionally, local governments should include provisions for J/ADUs constructed in areas vulnerable to sea level rise and other coastal hazards which ensure not only that these structures will meet all LCP requirements for new development to be safe from such hazards, but that also addresses the need for future sea level rise adaptations (including future accommodation or removal, risk disclosure conditions on the J/ADU, and any other risk-related issues dealt with in the LCP).

VI. Examples of Recently Updated ADU Provisions in Certified LCPs

A number of local jurisdictions have recently updated their LCPs to include new J/ADU provisions. Coastal Commission staff reports are linked below, which summarize specific issues that arose between Coastal Act requirements and the new J/ADU provisions as well as the necessary changes that were made in order to harmonize each jurisdiction's LCP with the State's housing laws. The suggested modifications shown in the staff reports were all approved by the Coastal Commission.

[City of Santa Cruz \(approved May 2021\)](#). This LCP amendment included clarifying language to address which provisions of the new state housing laws applied to ADUs in the coastal zone of the City of Santa Cruz as well as ensuring that the coastal resource protection provisions of the City's current LCP are maintained. The amendment also addressed specific off-street parking requirements for ADUs sited near significant coastal visitor destinations. The City of Santa Cruz adopted the Commission's modifications in August 2021.

[City of Pacifica \(approved June 2021\)](#). This LCP amendment revised the City's Implementation Plan to incorporate J/ADU provisions that are in line with the updated state housing laws, including streamlined procedures for J/ADU review and permitting processing, providing J/ADU development standards, and crafting tailored modifications to address specific public access parking needs in key visitor destination areas. The City of Pacifica adopted the Commission's modifications in August 2021.

[County of San Mateo \(approved July 2021\)](#). This LCP amendment incorporated more specific ADU regulations relating to size limits, maximum number of J/ADUs permitted per lot, streamlined review and process of J/ADU permits, and parking availability in areas that are

significant coastal visitor destinations. The County of San Mateo adopted the Commission's modifications in September 2021.

City of Encinitas (approved August 2021). The Coastal Commission approved revisions to the City of Encinitas' Implementation Plan that updated existing definitions for ADUs and JADUs and clarified development standards for accessory units, including standards for size, height, and setbacks.

City of Santa Barbara (approved December 2021). The Coastal Commission approved Commission staff's revision of the City of Santa Barbara's LCP amendment submittal addressing updated ADU provisions to be consistent with state housing laws. The amendment revised J/ADU terms and definitions, building standards, parking requirements, and permitting review and processing procedures. The staff report included modifications that address the CDP exemption issue (discussed above).

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