

Guidelines for Garage

Conversion ADUs

on Single Family Properties



Prepared by members of the Casita Coalition, 03/2021

California State Law regarding Garage Conversion ADUs

CA Govt. Code Sections 658.2 and 65852.22

	Existing Attached Garage	Existing Detached Garage
Types	ADU or JADU	ADU <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conversion • Teardown & Rebuild
Setbacks	No setback requirements from the side and rear property lines if the footprint doesn't change. Any additions to the garage will need to meet setback requirements, which local jurisdictions cannot require to exceed 4' from the rear and side property lines.	No setback requirements from the side and rear property lines if the footprint doesn't change. Any additions to the garage will need to meet setback requirements, which local jurisdictions cannot require to exceed 4' from the rear and side property lines.
Parking	No replacement parking is required for an ADU. However, a local government may require replacement parking for a JADU garage conversion.	No replacement parking is required.
Fire Safety	Fire sprinklers are not required if the primary dwelling does not have sprinklers.	Fire sprinklers are not required if the primary dwelling does not have sprinklers. Local government may require sprinklers if ADU does not meet local fire access requirements (i.e. less than 150-200 feet from curb). Building code may require a fire-rated wall if the ADU wall(s) is/are within a certain distance from: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) the main house and/or b) the side or rear property lines

California State Law regarding Garage Conversion ADUs *Continued...*

	Existing Attached Garage	Existing Detached Garage
Footprint	N/A	If the existing garage is demolished, an ADU with the same dimensions, including height, can be built on the footprint of the existing garage.
Size	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> JADU — 500 sq. ft. ADU — same as the size of the garage being converted. 	<p>Same as the size of the accessory structure being converted.</p> <p>The size may be increased by 150 square feet to accommodate entering and exiting the ADU.</p>
Access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Must have an exterior entrance separate from the main house. ADU may have—but is not required to have—a doorway between it and the main dwelling (subject to local rules). 	Must have an exterior entrance separate from the main house.
Bathroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> JADU - a bathroom is not required. The main dwelling may share a bathroom with the JADU. ADU - a bathroom is required. 	A bathroom is required.
Owner Occupancy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> JADU - the owner must occupy the main dwelling or the JADU. ADU - Owner occupancy may not be required if the ADU is permitted before the end of 2024. After that point, some jurisdictions may require owner occupancy and others may not. 	Owner occupancy may not be required if the ADU is permitted before the end of 2024. After that point, some jurisdictions may require owner occupancy and others may not.



Photo credit: Denise Pinkston

Permitted and Unpermitted Accessory Structures

In addition to garages, a property may have other types of detached accessory structures - storage rooms, barns, guest houses, and recreation rooms. The process for converting them to an ADU depends on whether the structure is permitted or unpermitted:

A PERMITTED ACCESSORY STRUCTURE

was previously permitted to be built.

These buildings had to meet certain zoning and building codes for their specified uses (e.g. recreation room, garage, storage) and pass inspection in order to obtain their original permit.

To convert a permitted accessory structure to an ADU, the owner/contractor must obtain local permits to change from the previous usage

(e.g. recreation room) to the new usage as an ADU. This permit will require plans to be drawn up, the local jurisdiction to approve them, the structure to be brought up to building code for the new use, and a local inspector to approve the building.

The rules in the column “Existing Detached Garage” in the above table apply to this type of structure.

AN UNPERMITTED ACCESSORY STRUCTURE

was built without permits.

A building permit was never submitted to the local jurisdiction to confirm it would meet zoning and building requirements for its intended use (e.g. guest house), it was never inspected by the local building department to ensure it complied with local codes, and it was never issued a permit.

Local jurisdictions have the authority to direct a property owner to permit the structure or remove it entirely from the property. Getting a ADU permit for this type of structure will probably require plans to be drawn up, the local jurisdiction to approve them, the structure to be brought up to building code for the new use, and a local

inspector to approve the building. The local jurisdiction will often treat this as a “new build” rather than a “conversion of existing space,” because it does not have permit records for the structure.

When converting an unpermitted accessory structure to an ADU, the local jurisdiction determines whether the project must comply with state and local standards for a new ADU rather than the standards allowed for a conversion. More information can be found in the upcoming document “Creating an ADU from an Unpermitted Accessory Structure.”

Frequently Asked Questions

1 What is required to convert a garage into a residential dwelling unit?

The garage needs to comply with the Building Code and Fire Code, including:

- Walls and foundation with structural integrity
- Utilities (electricity, water, sewage)
- HVAC - A common solution is to use a ductless heat pump (mini-split system) that is separate from the existing HVAC system of the main residence.
- Insulation

An individual project's compliance with the local energy and building code will determine whether the garage door must be replaced.

2 What are common issues when converting a garage?

Complying with the Building Code

Additions or alterations to existing structures, and changes from non-residential to residential use must comply with Building Code requirements for new construction.

Common upgrades or required changes may include:

- Altering the existing roof structure.
- Performing structural upgrades when replacing a garage door and/or adding window and door openings.
- Creating a moisture barrier between the slab and the flooring.
- Underpinning the foundation and/or upgrading the existing slab.
- Ensuring adequate insulation and meeting CA Title 24 energy code.

Determining whether the existing garage has structural integrity

A structural engineer may be required to examine the garage. If the foundation and walls of the structure need to be replaced or repaired, the cost of the project will increase significantly. In some cases, it may make sense to tear down the structure and rebuild a new one with the same dimensions on the same footprint.

Meeting fire safety requirements

- Between the garage and the property line.
- Between the garage and a nearby dwelling.

Creating a sound barrier between the main house and the ADU if they share a wall

Determining a solution for the relocation of the water heater, washer/dryer, and storage in an attached garage

Possible solutions include:

- Creating a small utility room.
- Using a tankless water heater; some models can be installed outdoors.
- Using a stacked washer/dryer or all-in-one unit.
- Building a backyard shed for additional storage.

Frequently Asked Questions *Continued...*

Meeting the increased electricity requirements. Load calculations need to be performed to determine if the existing electrical service is sufficient. Frequently, a new main electrical service with greater capacity is required. In addition, it is common to add a subpanel for the ADU.

Meeting increased requirements for other utilities. The property's main water, sewer and gas lines might need to be upgraded to a larger diameter line to accommodate the additional demand and meet current building code requirements. Water and Sewer Districts may not require a separate service connection (consistent with CA Govt Code section 65852.2(f)(4)). Electric and Gas corporations may require a separate service for garages.

3 How much do garage conversions cost in comparison to other ADU types?

If the garage is in sound condition, a garage conversion ADU typically costs less than a new detached or extension ADUs. However, the cost of a garage conversion varies greatly depending on following factors:

- Size of the ADU.
- Cost of construction in the geographic location.
- Upgrading the garage to meet the current building code.
- Structural improvements to the garage.
- Cost to upgrade utilities (water, electricity, sewer line) in the garage.
- Cost of compliance with the local Fire Access Requirement (distance from the face of the curb to the back of a freestanding ADU).
- Type of ceiling (vaulted or flat).

While the answer widely depends on a home's location, geographic topography, and existing conditions, the starting price will probably to be upwards of \$100,000 for a garage conversion. Local jurisdictions have begun developing their own ADU calculators. We suggest using these (if prepared by nearby jurisdictions) to help estimate the costs. Examples can be found here for [Napa Sonoma ADU Center](#) and the [County of San Mateo](#).

4 How do I choose a reputable ADU contractor?

There are ways to vet teams to design and build an ADU, including understanding their costs, determining their track record, and sensing whether you feel you can trust them. If they have built ADUs in your area, you may want to request from them 1-2 referrals so you can speak with past clients and or see the homes they have built in their neighborhood.



Photo credit: Dan McDunn, McDunn ADUs

Best Practices

The City of Los Angeles Department of Building Department has a useful document titled, “Accessory Dwelling Unit Conversion of Existing Detached Structure.” The document provides building guidelines when converting a detached structure into an ADU.

- ladbs.org/docs/accessory-dwelling-unit-conversion-of-existing-detached-structure.pdf

Additional Resources

- Guide from Maxable: <https://maxablespace.com/how-to-convert-your-garage-to-an-adu/>
- HCD ADU Handbook: https://www.hcd.ca.gov/policy-research/docs/adu_december_2020_handbook.pdf

Contributors:



Reviewed by Greg Nickless, Housing and Community Development, for consistency with State ADU law, Govt. Code Section 65852.2.