

# HOW TO BUILD YOUR ADU

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Building an Accessory Dwelling Unit (ADU) involves translating your housing goals into a new home that is legal, safe, beautiful, and functional. Property owners will go through a five-step process to **learn** about ADUs, **plan** their unique design, **permit** the project through City processes, **build** the new structure or renovation, and **move** themselves or others into their ADU. Along the way, property owners should expect to work with architects, engineers, and contractors to bring a project from idea to execution.

STEP 1:  
LEARN

STEP 2:  
PLAN

STEP 3:  
PERMIT

STEP 4:  
BUILD

STEP 5:  
MOVE IN

## STEP 1: LEARN

### A. Determine your ADU goals.

Do you need to house an aging parent? Would you like to move into the ADU and rent out the rest of your home? Your goals for the ADU will help determine how large it should be. Before design starts, you will meet with your architect to discuss your space needs, sustainability and/or accessibility priorities, and goals for the look and feel of the project. You can start looking for an architect or designer by visiting the websites for the [Boston Society of Architects](#) and the [Boston Chapter of the National Organization of Minority Architects](#).

### B. Assess the regulations.

Review the zoning district regulations that apply to your property. An ADU may be allowed by zoning or may (until zoning is updated) require zoning relief from the Zoning Board of Appeal. Determine if your home is within a Historic District or in a flood-vulnerable area, which may further regulate ADU development on your property. Contact the Planning Department (<https://www.bostonplans.org/about-us/contact-us>) with any questions you have about the applicable regulations.

### C. Begin thinking about design.

Explore potential ADU designs through this Guidebook, especially those that pair well with your existing property. Start an ideas board with photos of homes you've visited or through a website with online photos. Having a sense of the look and feel that appeals to you will help guide the design process.

## STEP 2: PLAN

### A. Establish an ADU budget.

Meet with an architect or builder to get an initial sense of how much your project will cost. Work with a financial advisor to determine what funding options may be right for you. Engage with lenders to get pre-approval for a loan or line of credit if necessary. (See “Financing an ADU” on page 161 for more information.) Work with an advisor to understand when different sums of money will be needed (such as money that will

be needed for design versus that needed for each phase of construction). Contact the [Mayor's Office of Housing](#) via email ([ADU@boston.gov](mailto:ADU@boston.gov)) with any questions or concerns you have at this stage or any other stage of the process.

### B. Meet with a design professional.

If your project is small, you can likely work with either an interior designer or an architect. Depending on the scale and complexity of the project, you will need a licensed architect who can officially stamp the construction documents. Your design professional will help you determine the overall design team, which could include a structural engineer, landscape architect, or civil engineer. Your design professional will also recommend site testing, surveying, and existing conditions drawings if necessary.

### C. Start designing!

We support using the designs given in this guidebook as much as possible, but we cannot pre-approve plans, since your property's ADU design will depend on your specific lot and structure. If you know exactly what you want for your ADU, your architect may only draw one design. Typically, an architect will start a “Schematic Design” process by developing two to three designs based on your program needs and design priorities. Once you have selected a preferred design, the architect will develop a Schematic Design drawing set that can be used for preliminary competitive bidding by builders. After receiving an initial bid, there may be adjustments to the design to meet your budget. You may also select a builder at this time so they can give feedback during the remainder of the design process.

### STEP 3: PERMIT

#### A. Initiate the approvals processes.

Your project will need zoning approval to proceed. Depending on your property, you may also need review by the Boston Landmarks Commission, Conservation Commission, or Parks and Recreation Commission. Learn more about applicable regulations in “ADU Regulations and Guidelines” on page 149. Your architect will likely start these approval processes with the Schematic Design. If you think you will need a zoning variance from the Zoning Board of Appeal, which, as of 2024, is the case for most attached and detached ADU designs in most areas of Boston), you should meet with the Planning Department to confirm. You can contact us through our website (<https://www.bostonplans.org/about-us/contact-us>). If you think you will need to go through a Landmarks Commission ([BLC@boston.gov](mailto:BLC@boston.gov)), Conservation Commission ([CC@boston.gov](mailto:CC@boston.gov)), or Parks and Recreation Commission ([prc@boston.gov](mailto:prc@boston.gov)) review, you will also want to start those processes early.

#### B. Update cost estimates.

Your builder will update their estimate with the drawing set that will be used for permitting. You will typically sign a contract with the builder at this point and switch from working primarily with your architect to working primarily with your builder. The builder will provide the estimated cost of the project when paying permit fees to the city. The final estimate is also what you should use to determine total requests for construction loans or other financing.

#### C. Submit an application to ISD.

Your builder will submit a set of permit drawings and application materials to the City of Boston’s Inspectional Services Department (ISD). ISD will review the proposal for conformance to the Building Code, the Zoning Ordinance, and other regulations. Depending on the

details of the project, ISD may respond with a refusal letter, due to noncompliance with the building code or zoning nonconformity. ISD may also approve the project if it conforms to the Zoning Ordinance, Building Code, and other regulations.

#### D. Seek a zoning variance if needed.

If the proposal is refused due to zoning, your architect or builder can assist in submitting an appeal to the City of Boston Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA). The ZBA inspects and reviews buildings for zoning compliance. The Office of Neighborhood Services will host an abutter’s meeting. The ZBA will hold one or more public hearings on the appeal and vote to approve the project (with or without conditions) or to deny the project. If everything checks out, your builder will be issued a Building Permit after a final code compliance review by ISD.

### STEP 4: BUILD

#### A. Access construction funds.

Based on your financial planning undertaken in *Step 2: Plan*, pull funds together (whether cash on hand or debt) to pay for construction of the ADU.

#### B. Monitor construction.

The builder will manage the construction process. The architect will observe construction and meet with the builder. Meet regularly with both to review progress, monitor the budget, and approve changes as needed.

### STEP 5: MOVE IN

- A. After a final construction inspection, the occupants of your ADU can move in. If you plan to rent your ADU, you will now be a landlord. As a housing provider, you should become familiar with your responsibilities and with Boston’s rental regulations, including [rental registration](#) with ISD.

# ADU REGULATIONS AND GUIDELINES

Building an Accessory Dwelling Unit (ADU) — like with any building — requires consideration of several regulations before the project is approved. This section provides a brief overview of some major and minor regulations that property owners must follow, as well as other considerations for ADU design.

## BUILDING CODE, FIRE CODE, AND RELATED LAWS

The safety of Boston's buildings and people within them is regulated by a group of state and local laws implemented. These codes sometimes overlap and regulate the same ideas. In those cases, the strictest regulation will apply. As a homeowner pursuing an ADU, you will rely on an architect (and consultants they may hire) to understand these laws and design within them. Most decisions related to the Building Code, Fire Code, and related laws will not be noticeable to people not professionally involved in development. However, these codes can mandate certain high-cost building systems, like sprinkler systems or additional exit routes, that are a major financial consideration for homeowners.

### Building Code

The [Massachusetts State Building Code](#) is an implementation of international building safety standards, amended to meet the needs of the Commonwealth.

These codes cover a great deal of building issues, such as materials, construction techniques, room size requirements, egress (exit) standards, and much more. The Building Code is codified as 780 CMR (Code of Massachusetts Regulations), and comes in two variants. The International Residential Code (IRC, or Residential Volume) applies to single-unit structures, two-unit structures, townhouses with three stories or less, and accessory structures. The International Building Code (IBC, or Base Volume) applies to all buildings not covered by the IRC, including three- and four-unit structures. Depending on your existing building, the ADU configuration you want to build, and other factors, your ADU will either need to follow the IRC or the IBC. In general, IRC regulations are easier and less expensive to achieve than IBC regulations. The City of Boston's [Inspection Services Department](#) enforces the Building Code at the local level through permit application review and construction inspections.



An aerial view of Jamaica Plain.

*“I would love to see clear guidelines I can follow so I can convert my garage to a dwelling for my elderly father on a predictable budget and timeline — and before he is too frail to move him here.”*

**STEPHANIE** • JAMAICA PLAIN

### Fire Code

The [Massachusetts Comprehensive Fire Safety Code](#), codified as 527 CMR, specifies statewide requirements for buildings and infrastructure related to fire prevention and mitigation. In the case of ADUs, some of the most relevant provisions in these laws include distance of each residential structure to the street, the width and configuration of fire access, and sprinkler system requirements. The Boston Fire Department's [Bureau of Fire Prevention](#) enforces the Fire Code locally through permit application review and construction inspections. See the City of Boston's [Guidance on ADUs and Fire Safety](#) document for more information.

### Other Regulations

Beyond the Building and Fire Codes, there are other laws and regulations related to life safety in residential construction. For instance, sprinkler systems are also regulated by state-level statute, and the absolute minimum standards for health and safety in human habitation are covered by the sanitary code.



A home in Jamaica Plain.

*“I have a big attic and a two-car garage that I would love to turn into a unit for my son and his family.”*

**BLANCA** • WEST ROXBURY



An aerial view of Roslindale and the Arnold Arboretum.

*“I would love to see more multigenerational homes. My heart broke when my 90-plus-year-old neighbors had to move from their home of 55+ years to Natick. If they had made an ADU in the cellar, they could have lived comfortably with one of their kids living upstairs. I would like to build an ADU for my adult children now, and then switch spots when stairs aren't feasible for me.”*

**ELAINE** • BRIGHTON

## ZONING

Zoning is a set of laws that dictates what can or can't be built in a city and where. In Boston, zoning controls things like the types of activities allowed on a lot (uses), how many units a building can have (density), dimensional factors like the required distance between the building and the lot lines, building height, off-street parking, and other design elements. Right now, 98% of small-scale residential properties in Boston have zoning that will prohibit them from building an ADU (or even from building the current house). Many of the designs in this guidebook will require homeowners to seek zoning relief from the Board of Appeal to build them. The City of Boston is working to create new residential zoning that matches the City's small-scale residential fabric and allows ADUs. Refer to Boston's [zoning viewer](#) for an interactive map of zoning districts. For more information on zoning boundaries and requirements, contact the [Planning and Zoning Division](#) of the Planning Department ([planningzoningqs@boston.gov](mailto:planningzoningqs@boston.gov)).

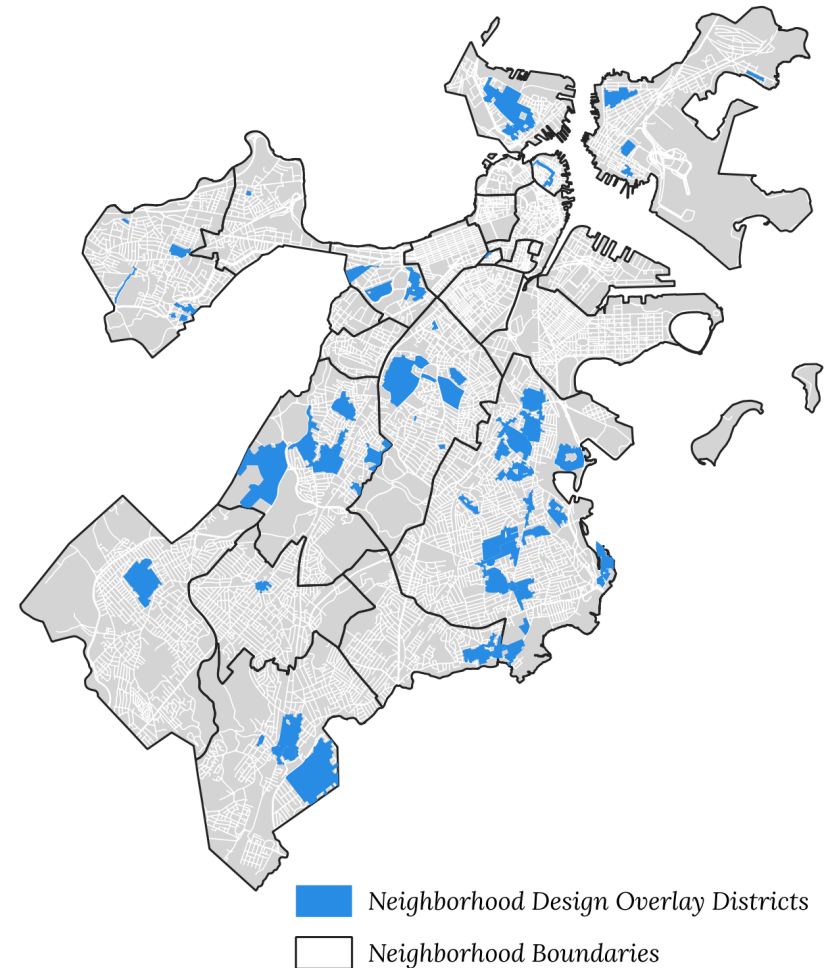
### Neighborhood Design Overlay Districts

Several areas of Boston have areas called Neighborhood Design Overlay Districts (NDODs) that require a notification process and design review for projects that involve exterior alterations such as changes to the roof shape, cornice line, building height, or height of the street-facing wall, building massing, size and location of doors and windows, buildings or additions of 300 square feet or more in gross floor area. There are 53 NDODs across the city, covering significant portions of neighborhoods like Charlestown, Dorchester, East Boston, Fenway, Hyde Park, Jamaica Plain, and Roxbury. Refer to Boston's [zoning viewer](#) for an interactive map of NDOD areas.

Certain types of ADU projects within NDODs may trigger this design review process, subject to the specific language for the zoning code for the NDOD it is located in. You can consult the [Boston Zoning Code](#) for detailed information or contact the [Planning and Zoning Division](#) ([planningzoningqs@boston.gov](mailto:planningzoningqs@boston.gov)).

## HISTORIC DISTRICTS

The City of Boston has 10 historic districts designated by the Boston Landmarks Commission. Within these areas, additional regulations control how property owners design new buildings or major renovations, especially those that impact the exterior of buildings. In each Historic District,



a commission specific to that district reviews proposals and can approve or deny projects. The districts (which have specific boundaries mapped by the City) include the following:

- Aberdeen, Brighton
- Back Bay
- Bay State Road/Back Bay West
- Bay Village
- Beacon Hill
- Fort Point Channel, South Boston
- Mission Hill Triangle
- South End
- St. Botolph Area, East Fenway
- Highland Park, Roxbury

Contact the [Boston Landmarks Commission](#) ([BLC@boston.gov](mailto:BLC@boston.gov)) for questions about the historic districts.



Top: An aerial view of the South End.

## PARKS COMMISSION REVIEW

Under City of Boston Ordinance 7-4.11, the construction or alteration of a building within 100 feet of a park or parkway requires the approval of the Boston Parks and Recreation Commission prior to the issuance of building permits. Contact the [Parks and Recreation Commission](#) ([prc@boston.gov](mailto:prc@boston.gov)) for more information.



Left: A rowhome in Mission Hill.

## BUILDING ENERGY CODE

Boston has recently opted into Massachusetts' "Specialized Energy Code" for new construction and major renovations, such as the development of ADUs. This Specialized Code implements the policy of net zero greenhouse gas emissions from building operations, by requiring high levels of energy efficiency and using clean energy.

ADU developments can meet the specialized code requirements by using (1) net zero energy and pre-wiring all appliances for electrification, (2) using all-electric energy sources (i.e., avoiding fossil fuels altogether), or (3) using a mix of electric and fossil fuel sources, but pre-wiring for electrification and installing solar panels where feasible. The new energy code is both an important step forward for Boston and a potential driver of costs that must be considered in ADU projects.

## ACCESSIBILITY

Accessibility for people with disabilities is a driving factor among many people interested in ADUs. Often, property owners considering ADUs may be owner-occupants looking for an accessible apartment to age within, or they are people looking to house aging relatives. ADUs may also be used to provide housing for live-in homecare providers, such as nurses, health care aides, PCAs, physical therapists, and others. When thinking of building an ADU, homeowners should consider that accessibility is a spectrum.

- A "visitable" unit can be easily visited by someone using a wheelchair. As defined by the Fair Housing Act Design Manual, a visitable home would feature a zero-step entrance, door widths with sufficient wheelchair clearance, and a wheelchair-accessible ground floor bathroom.
- "Adaptable" units are built to easily transition to accessible units if needed. They may have removable base cabinets and reinforced walls at key locations for the installation of grab bars.



An aerial view of Roslindale.

- More accessibility features include turning space that accommodates wheelchairs, accessible room thresholds, lower cabinets and shelving, wheelchair-aligned outlets, etc.
- There are also features for sensory disabilities such as auxiliary visual alarms, which provide a visual alert for fire alarms, visual notification devices for doorbells, adjustable lighting, etc.
- Because there are many uses for ADUs, using Universal Design principles when constructing ADUs can ensure the unit is usable to the greatest extent possible by all users regardless of their age, size, or disability. "Universal Design" is an accessibility paradigm that promotes designing for all potential users. This approach has been described in guides like the [Standards for Universally Accessible Homes](#).

Fair Housing laws at the federal, state, and local levels make discrimination on the basis of disability illegal. This includes making reasonable modifications so that people with disabilities have full enjoyment of the unit. Even if a property owner does not need to make an accessible unit, it would be wise for ADU designs to be easily adaptable to meet this reasonable modification requirement.



State building code (521 CMR) has specific accessibility requirements for buildings and facilities with three or more units. If the building already has three or more units, or constructing the ADU adds a third unit, these requirements may be applicable.

Accessibility features, like home elevators and lifts, may be eligible for the [Home Modification Loan Program](#). Veterans may also be eligible for grants to fund accessibility features. Other nonprofit and for-profit lenders offer grants or loans for accessibility features, independent of financing strategies for an ADU generally, which could also cover installation of accessibility features.

For more information on accessibility in ADUs, contact the [Mayor's Office of Housing \(housing@boston.gov\)](#) and/or the [City of Boston Disabilities Commission \(disability@boston.gov\)](#).



A triple-decker in Allston.

## FAIR HOUSING LAWS

Beyond accessibility and accommodation, Fair Housing laws at the federal, state, and local levels prohibit discrimination based on listed characteristics of a person or household engaging in the following activities: renting or buying a home, getting a mortgage, and seeking housing assistance. It is illegal to discriminate on demographic factors or household characteristics including, but are not limited to race, religion, age, national origin, sex, sexual orientation, family status, the presence of children, and military status. In most cases, these laws do not affect the design of the unit itself. However, property owners looking to add an ADU should be aware that building a unit for a specific demographic and attempting to select occupants based on their demographic characteristics is illegal. Contact the [Office of Fair Housing and Equity \(fairhousing@boston.gov\)](#) for more information.

## FLOODING

Flooding from extreme weather and storm surges are a serious concern as coastal cities like Boston deal with climate change. ADU projects within a FEMA flood zone, which are vulnerable to flooding today, will need to follow all rules for flood hazard zones. Properties in the Coastal Flood Resiliency Overlay District, which will be vulnerable in the future under conditions of sea level rise, will need to ensure the ADU is above the base flood elevation or sea level rise design flood elevation. As flooding becomes less predictable in climate change, ADU projects should take into account the potential impacts of stormwater flooding to an ADU, particularly to any areas below grade. Contact the Planning Department's [Planning and Zoning Division \(planningzoningqs@boston.gov\)](#) for more information on the Coastal Flood Resiliency Overlay District.

# FINANCING AN ADU

Despite their small size, ADU construction can be expensive, especially for owner-occupants on a tight budget. Few property owners can pay entirely out-of-pocket for ADU design and construction. Most will need to get some sort of financing from a bank or other financial institution in order to build an ADU. Most likely, property owners will need a mix of cash and one or more financing sources to complete their ADU project. For ongoing updates on ADU financing, see Boston's [general ADU web page](#).

Each property is different and each owner has a unique financial situation. Homeowners should consider their own financial position and unique circumstances before proceeding, and may benefit from using financial advisory services. Nothing in this guidebook is intended as financial advice.

Some typical ADU financing strategies include the following. Each of these options has pros and cons, and each carries risks.

- **Boston Home Center's ADU Loan Program.** The City offers gap funding to eligible Boston homeowners of one- to three-unit properties who wish to build an ADU. The loan can fund interior improvements, additions, or detached structures to create an ADU. The loans are interest-free and offer funding up to \$50,000, covering costs not covered by cash or other loans. The loan

amount is determined by the estimated cost of the project. Borrowers make no monthly payments, and the balance does not become due until the owner sells, transfers ownership, or undertakes a cash-out refinance of the home. Households are eligible for this program if they earn no more than 135% of Area Median Income (as of 2024, roughly \$154,000 for a single-person household or \$176,000 for a two-person household) and meet other financial criteria.



Triple-decker homes in Roxbury.

*“Affordability appears to be an after thought during the last discussion. Let’s have ADU policy prioritize it beyond offering loans. It should inform ADU policies.”*

**GOLDMAN** • JAMAICA PLAIN



A South Boston streetscape.

*“I could build an ADU for my lifelong South Boston elderly parents. My parents are financially squeezed to the limit. An ADU for them would ease their fears and anxiety.”*

**JASON** • SOUTH BOSTON

- **Home Equity Loan.** Property owners who have accrued significant equity in their home (i.e., the value of their home subtracting what is owed on a mortgage) can take out a loan on that equity. For instance, if a couple has owned a home for 20 years and has been paying a standard 30-year mortgage in that time, they have likely gained significant home equity, due to both their mortgage payments and the appreciation in home values over the last 20 years. A home equity loan is a loan on that value, and like a mortgage, the home is used as collateral. Typically, home equity loans have fixed-rate payments with long repayment periods, and both principal and interest are repaid throughout the loan term. This can mean that initial repayments may be larger than other financing options, but payment amounts will be predictable.

- **Home Equity Line of Credit (HELOC).** Property owners with significant home equity in their home can also consider HELOCs. Like home equity loans, HELOCs tap into the value of a home (subtracting what is owed on a mortgage), but they are structured differently. HELOC borrowers can draw down their borrowed funds as needed (like a credit card), without taking on a big repayment up front. Homeowners who want to build ADUs but are unsure if their ADU will be permitted may find this advantageous. However, HELOC interest rates typically adjust based on prevailing interest rates, so there is a risk that payments on borrowed funds can increase. HELOC repayments also typically jump up after a number of years, as principal repayment is often deferred.
- **Cash-Out Mortgage Refinancing.** Property owners with a mortgage and significant equity can also choose to refinance their mortgage to put that equity to work building an ADU. This option is similar to home equity loans and HELOCs, but instead of additional secondary debt, a refinancing wipes out the primary mortgage and creates a new one. Mortgage refinancings typically offer better interest rates than home equity loans, but loan closing costs may be greater than other options. Mortgage refinancing was a popular strategy to make home improvements in previous decades. As of 2024, mortgage interest rates are much higher than they were in previous decades, and the new interest rates will apply to the entire mortgage value, not just the new equity. This potentially makes refinancing more costly and less attractive than other options, depending on one’s unique circumstances.
- **Personal Loans.** Personal loans are loans based on a borrower’s income and credit history, but that which don’t use collateral to secure the loan. Compared to home equity loans or HELOCs, personal loans are usually smaller in size and have higher interest rates and fees. For these reasons, personal loans may be best suited to fill gaps in ADU funding if other options are not available.

# SPRINKLER AND FIRE ACCESS REQUIREMENT CHECKLISTS

Two important and intertwined considerations for ADU projects are sprinkler and fire access requirements. Sprinklers are a significant cost for some ADU projects, and improper planning for fire access or sprinklering can delay ADU development. This subsection provides a detailed overview of the building and fire code nuances that property owners and architects will need to consider for their ADU. We hope this provides guidance to you as you plan for your ADU, but these pages are not a regulatory determination or hard rule for sprinklers or fire access. Every project is unique. An architect working on your project is best positioned to determine what is necessary to get a project permitted and ensure life safety.

See the City of Boston's [Guidance on ADUs and Fire Safety](#) to access a visual guide to sprinkler requirements for ADUs in Boston.

## WHAT CODE DOES MY ADU NEED TO ADHERE TO?

New construction and adaptive reuse projects are subject to many checks through municipal, state and nationally mandated laws that govern life safety in the built environment. As a homeowner pursuing an ADU, you will rely on your architect or builder (and consultants they may hire) to understand these laws and design within them. In some cases this will mean adding relatively high-cost building systems, like sprinkler systems or additional exit routes, that are an important financial consideration for homeowners. **The laws that relate to sprinkler requirements, emergency (fire) access to and egress from one- to four-unit buildings in Massachusetts include the following:**

- **The International Residential Code (IRC)** nationally administered regulations that apply to single-unit structures, two-unit structures, townhouses with three stories or less, and accessory structures.
- **The International Building Code (IBC)** nationally administered regulations that apply to all buildings not covered by the IRC, including three- and four-unit structures.
- **The International Existing Building Code (IEBC)** nationally administered regulations that apply to any existing building which is being renovated or added on to.
- **NFPA-1 Fire Code** a nationally administered code that advances fire and life safety for the public and first responders.
- **The Massachusetts Comprehensive Fire Safety Code (527 CMR)** a state issued version of NFPA-1, which is administered by Inspectional Services and the Authority having Jurisdiction (the AHJ).
- **The Massachusetts State Building Code (780 CMR)** a state administered building code based on IBC, IRC, IEBC, IMC, IECC, ISPSC, and IFC, among others.
- **The Massachusetts Architectural Access Board Code (521 CMR)** which are state administered laws related to accessibility in any projects that fall under IBC.

| FOR DETACHED ADUs   |  |
|---|--|
| Detached buildings with only one or two units (including detached ADUs) will need to adhere to the IRC, the International Residential Code. |  |

| FOR ATTACHED AND INTERNAL ADUs   |  |
|--|--|
| On the same property as a <b>one-unit home</b> :   | On the same property as a <b>home with two or more units</b> :   |
| Attached or internal ADUs added to a one-unit home will need to adhere to <b>IRC</b> , the International Residential Code. | Attached or internal ADUs added to a building with 2-unit or more principal units will need to adhere to <b>IBC</b> , the International Building Code. |

**DO I NEED TO INSTALL A SPRINKLER IN MY ADU?**

Sprinkler requirements can be triggered by the size of your home, the amount of work required, how many units are in the building, the nature of egress (building exit) design, distance from the street to the ADU, and the amount of frontage the overall building or ADU has. When a building changes from having two units to three, the change in occupancy type triggered by the building code change from IRC to IBC will trigger the need for sprinklers in any portion of the building in which 50% or more of the building is being renovated; a requirement specified in IEBC. In many cases, this can mean that only the ADU will need sprinklers. If more than 50% of the building is renovated along with the ADU when changing from IRC to IBC, then the whole building will need sprinklers.

**The requirements are derived from the Massachusetts Comprehensive Fire Safety Code, IRC, and IBC. If all of the below statements are true, your ADU will likely not require a sprinkler system.** Check with your architect to learn more.

| FOR DETACHED ADUs   |
|---|
| You have 20 feet of frontage between your primary building and side lot line. |
| Your ADU is not behind your building.   |
| Your ADU's entry door is within 25 feet of the fire access road (street).     |

| FOR ATTACHED ADUs  |
|--|
| Your building has two units maximum, including the ADU.  |
| If your ADU is behind your building, you have included a throughway (common use hallway), connecting from the front door of the main building to the front door of the unit that is the ADU. |
| If your ADU is attached and has its own entry door, it also has 20 feet of frontage between the primary building and side lot line.  |
| Your ADU's entry door is within 50 feet from the street, and any portion of the exterior wall is within 150 feet from the street.  |

| FOR INTERNAL ADUs   |
|---|
| Your building has two units maximum, including the ADU.   |
| Your ADU's entry door is within 50 feet from the street, and any portion of the exterior wall is within 150 feet from the street. |

**WILL MY ADU MEET FIRE ACCESS ROAD REQUIREMENTS?**

Below are the requirements for fire access roads. The fire access road can be a public or private street and does not include the sidewalk or other portions of public realm that are not the street. **If all of the below statements are true your ADU will likely meet fire access road requirements.** Check with your architect to learn more.

| FOR ALL ADUs  |  |  |
|---|--|--|
|   | Allowable distance from ADU entry door to street | Allowable distance from any portion of the exterior wall to the street |
| If no sprinklers in the building housing the ADU  | 25 feet  | 150 feet   |
| With sprinklers in the building housing the ADU   | 50 feet  | 250 feet   |
| If the building housing the ADU is behind another building and does not have adequate frontage of 20 feet | 25 feet  | no increase with addition of a sprinkler                               |

| FOR DETACHED ADUs   |   |
|---|---|
| You meet the criteria for EITHER option A OR option B           |   |
| Option A  | Option B  |
| Your ADU is not behind your building or has 20 feet of frontage | Your ADU is behind your building and does not have 20 feet of frontage, but you do have additional fire protection features including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Automatic Sprinkler</li> <li>• Firefighter access path (at least 10 feet wide, free of obstructions including cars and trees)</li> <li>• Wayfinding (lighted entryway and clear path to ADU)</li> </ul> |

| FOR ATTACHED ADUs  |  |
|--|--|
| You meet the criteria for EITHER option A OR option B  |  |
| Option A   | Option B   |
| Your ADU is not behind your building or has 20 feet of frontage between your primary building and side lot line. | Your ADU is behind your building and does not have adequate frontage but you have added a throughway connecting from the front door of the main building into the ADU. |

# HISTORY OF ADU ZONING IN BOSTON

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The City of Boston has been working to enable more construction of Accessory Dwelling Units (ADU) across Boston's neighborhoods.

Zoning has been one focus of the ADU program. Currently, the City's zoning law allows internal ADUs carved from the existing interior of a home. These are allowed "by-right" (i.e., without public hearings or discretionary approval by a public board or committee). ADUs built as an addition or as a detached structure are allowed only on a case-by-case basis for most neighborhoods, and they require public hearings and approval from the Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA). In Mattapan, zoning allows internal, attached, and detached ADUs by-right, provided they meet specific design criteria. The City of Boston is [seeking changes to these zoning regulations](#) to make ADUs by-right across the City, and not just in Mattapan, but these modifications are not yet codified.

As of 2024, approximately 180 ADUs have been permitted in the City through one of these approval mechanisms. The number of ADUs permitted annually has mostly increased over the years, but ADU approvals are not consistent across Boston. Dorchester, East Boston, and Mattapan have been the most popular sites for ADU development thus far.

In addition to zoning and permitting, the City's ADU program has spearheaded education about the process, technical assistance for homeowners, and low-cost ADU

financing for low-, moderate-, and middle-income homeowners.

## TIMELINE

### **ADU 1.0 Pilot (November 2017–May 2018)**

The City's first ADU Pilot allowed owner-occupants of 1-, 2-, and 3-unit homes in East Boston, Mattapan, and Jamaica Plain to carve out space within their home to build an ADU. The pilot program received 50 applicants. Of those, 12 applicants received permits, and two applicants completed construction.

### **Citywide zoning amendment (April 2019)**

A zoning amendment based on the ADU 1.0 pilot program was passed to allow ADUs citywide. In this legal framework, owners of 1-, 2-, and 3-unit homes are allowed by-right to build an ADU under certain conditions. Allowed ADUs must be carved from space within their existing building. Any additions, other changes to the building exterior, or new detached buildings are not allowed by-right, and must be considered on a case-by-case basis at the Zoning Board of Appeals. All ADUs, whether allowed by-right or through a special approval process, must still be approved for compliance with the building code and other life safety regulations. This framework remains in place for most Boston neighborhoods as of 2024.

### **ADU 2.0 Pilot (2021–2022)**

The City's second ADU Pilot provided technical assistance to convert existing exterior structures (carriage houses and garages) into ADUs. Sixteen residents were guided through the process of getting building permits and zoning relief.

### **Mattapan ADU Zoning (January 2024)**

New zoning in Mattapan allowed internal, attached, and external ADUs by-right. This reform provided new definitions and framework for citywide ADU reform to build from.