Multi-Family Accessory Dwelling Unit (ADU) Standards and Requirements

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San Mateo Municipal Code Chapter 27.19 (*Accessory Dwelling Units and Junior Accessory Dwelling Units)* establishes the development standards and requirements for ADUs and JADUs. This Ordinance went into effect on April 22, 2022, and was updated effective March 4, 2026. The approval process for compliant ADUs and JADUs is ministerial, with only a building permit and related permits required; a planning application with public notification is not required.

General Requirements – Lots with an existing or proposed multifamily dwelling structure

ADUs Permitted - ADUs are permitted on residential zoned lots with existing single-family or proposed single-family or multi-family dwellings.

JADUs not Permitted - JADUs cannot be built on lots with multifamily residential structures. JADUs are only permitted within the walls of an existing or proposed single-family dwelling.

ADU Entrance - ADUs must provide a separate exterior entrance.

Rental Terms - ADUs are prohibited from being short-term rentals (less than 30 days) and cannot be sold separately from the primary dwelling(s). [1]

Permit Review Required - ADUs that meet all applicable standards only require a ministerial building permit.

- Discretionary Alternative - ADUs that do not meet all of these requirements can seek approval under an alternative discretionary review process. The Zoning Administrator is the decisionmaker for this discretionary review process and will take action based on the findings contained in SMMC Section 27.19.045. Public notification is required prior to final action and the Zoning Administrator's decision can be appealed to the City Manager or designee.

ADUs on Multi-Family Properties

Lots with existing or proposed multi-family dwellings (excluding individual ownership units, such as condominiums), pursuant to Government Code Section 66323, may develop ADUs as follows:

Number of ADUs Allowed:

- Up to eight detached ADUs[2] on a lot with an existing multi-family building of two or more attached units, provided that the number of ADUs does not exceed the number of units on the lot.
- Up to two detached ADUs on a lot with a proposed multi-family dwelling of two or more attached units.
- At least one ADU within an existing multi-family building, and up to 25 percent of the existing dwelling units, when converting existing area that is not used as livable space.
- Any additional ADUs as allowed pursuant to State law. This may include up to one new construction attached ADU on a lot with an existing or proposed multi-family dwelling structure.

[1] Unless developed by a qualified nonprofit in accordance with Government Code Section 66341.
[2] Multiple detached ADUs may be attached to each other, but must be detached from the primary dwelling unit(s).

Maximum Unit Size

- The ADU living area cannot be larger than the smallest primary residential dwelling unit (with the exception of a maximum of 800 square feet allowed for a State Exempt ADU).
- A conversion unit created within existing area not used as livable space does not have size requirements.
- ADU living area over 800 square feet. counts towards the total Floor Area Ratio (FAR) of the lot.

Maximum Height - For Detached Multifamily ADU – 18 feet to top plateline and 24 feet to roof peak as measured from existing grade.

Setbacks

- Front Yard
  - As required in the underlying zoning district for new construction ADUs over 800 square feet.
  - For ADUs 800 square feet or less that meet requirements of a "state exempt[3]" ADU, no front setback is required.

- Side and Rear Yards - 4 feet setback from side and rear property lines

Daylight Plane - All ADUs[4] shall be within a daylight plan, which starts at a height of 12 feet and extends into the parcel at a 45-degree angle, from the nearest side and rear property lines.

Parking Requirements

- No off-street parking is required for any ADU.
- No replacement parking is required when an existing garage, carport, covered parking structure, or uncovered parking space is converted to an ADU or demolished in conjunction with construction of an ADU.

Voluntary Parking for ADUs - While not required, providing off-street parking for ADUs is encouraged.

- Voluntary parking must be provided on the same lot, and may be located within setbacks
- ADU parking may be provided as tandem stalls
- If a garage or carport is converted or demolished, the existing driveway & curb cut may remain to provide parking area.
- A maximum of 2 parking stalls may be provided for each ADU.
- Maximum driveway width for single car garages may be extended up to 20 feet (typical maximum is 17 feet) to accommodate ADU parking.
- A garage or carport can be constructed in the same footprint & to the same setbacks as a second-story ADU above, outside of the front yard setback.

Architectural Standards[5]

- Second story windows up to 5 feet from finished floor must be obscured or glazed when within 5 feet of a lot line with an abutting residential lot.
- Any exterior staircase shall be setback 5 feet from nearest lot line and landing must be limited to minimum area to allow in/egress as specified by California Building Code.
- Balconies and Decks
  - Second story decks or balconies cannot be larger than 50 ft for two-story ADUs
  - No portion of the second story deck or balcony can be within the setback of the underlying zone, regardless of ADU setbacks
- Decks cannot face adjacent residential properties

[3] This includes conversion ADUs, or a new detached ADU up to 800 sq. ft. that meets 4-foot side and rear setbacks
[4] State Exempt ADUs are not subject to daylight plane requirements.
[5] For nonexempt ADUs

Floor Area Ratio - Maximum floor area is governed by the underlying zone. An exception of 800 square feet is applied individually to each new Detached ADU proposed on a lot with a Multi-family Dwelling Structure.

Other Standards and Considerations

Utility Connections - For detached ADUs, the City may require a new or separate utility connections. The new connection may be subject to a connection fee or capacity charges based on ADU size or number of fixtures.

Address Assignment - ADUs will be assigned separate addresses prior to permit issuance.

Fire Sprinklers – Verify requirements with the Fire Marshal.

- If the primary unit(s) have fire sprinklers, sprinklers may be required for the ADU.
- When there are no sprinklers in the primary unit(s), sprinklers are generally not required for an ADU. However, while ADU construction alone shall not be a trigger for requiring sprinklers in the primary unit(s), if additional work is proposed to the primary unit(s) this may trigger sprinkler requirements for both the primary unit(s) and proposed ADU.
- Where site specific conditions exist, (such as driveway length for fire access, insufficient hydrant coverage or water flow, etc.) additional mitigation may be required by the Fire Marshal to meet fire safety requirements. In this case, providing fire sprinklers in the ADU may be one option to meet requirements.

Solar - Newly constructed detached ADUs are subject to the Energy Code requirement to provide solar panels if the unit is newly constructed and non-manufactured. The panels can be installed on the ADU or on the primary dwelling unit(s).

Fees - Permitting fees are applied by the City's adopted fee schedule. Note that School District Developer Impact fees may also apply.