

**Date:** November 12, 2025

**To:** Inyo County Planning Department

**From:** Precision Civil Engineering, Inc.

**Subject:** Program Options for Addressing Abandoned Buildings and Encouraging Adaptive Reuse for Infill Housing

## Introduction

---

This memo summarizes the initial research findings and outlines potential program options to support Inyo County’s goal of encouraging the reuse of underutilized or abandoned buildings for infill housing, while discouraging prolonged vacancy. These recommendations build upon successful approaches implemented by other agencies. This memo is organized into two sections as follows:

- **Program Options** – Summarizes potential strategies the County could consider.
  - *Vacant Building Inventory*
  - *Adaptive Reuse Incentive Program*
  - *Abandon Building Registration and Maintenance Ordinance*
  - *Vacancy Tax or Fee Program*
- **Preliminary Recommendations** – Actionable recommendations the County could take to implement.
  - *Vacant Building Inventory*
  - *Adaptive Resue Incentives*
  - *Other Options*

## Program Options

---

### 1. Vacant Building Inventory

A Vacant Building Inventory is a tool created specifically for the purpose of facilitating reuse and revitalization, rather than just punitive measures. The inventory helps identify underutilized or abandoned properties and can be used to inform potential investors, developers, non-profits, and community groups about opportunities for redevelopment.

#### ***City of Baltimore, MD – “Vacants to Value” Program***

The City of Baltimore launched the Vacants to Value (V2V) program to address the issues of vacant properties in Baltimore. The initiative focuses on revitalizing neighborhoods through homeownership and property rehabilitation. The program utilizes a GIS-based property inventory and interactive map to identify clusters of vacant properties, helping the City target reinvestment efforts and connect potential homebuyers with available homes. By combining data-driven tracking with financial incentives, the V2V program has helped Baltimore promote reuse and stabilize communities affected by long-term vacancy.

### ***City of Detroit, MI – Motor City Match Program***

The City of Detroit’s Motor City Match program was created to revitalize businesses in the commercial corridors by connecting entrepreneurs with vacant or underutilized properties and providing funding for building rehabilitation and business development. Following a block-by-block survey to assess the scope of vacancy, the City developed an extensive property inventory that identifies available buildings for reuse. The program offers grants, loans, and technical assistance to both property owners and business tenants, facilitating the adaptive reuse of vacant storefronts. The program serves as a model of how data-driven inventories and targeted incentives can work together to restore economic vitality in areas facing high vacancy rates.

### ***2. [Adaptive Reuse Ordinance](#)***

An Adaptive Reuse Ordinance (ARO) is legislative tool designed to simplify the approval process for developers seeking to convert older buildings into new housing without undergoing a lengthy entitlement process. The ordinance can establish flexible development standards, such as the removal of minimum unit size requirements, parking mandates, and other barriers that often discourage development. By streamlining approvals and reducing regulatory constraints, an ARO can incentivize redevelopment, preserve historic structures, and promote infill housing opportunities in underutilized commercial or industrial areas.

### ***City of Los Angeles, CA – Adaptive Reuse Ordinance***

The City of Los Angeles’s Adaptive Reuse Ordinance (ARO) adopted in 1999 has been successful in facilitating the reuse of existing building in the Downtown Los Angeles area. The ARO promotes conversion of vacant or underutilized buildings into housing. The City is now expanding the ARO to address vacant retail and office spaces that are vacant or partially occupied, recognizing the need for more flexible reuse in response to changing market conditions.

The updated ordinance applies to buildings that are at least between 5 to 15 years old are eligible for a faster, by-right approval process. The expanded ARO also supports historic preservation, as buildings identified as Eligible Historic Resources to use the California Historic Building Code, providing additional flexibility in the conversion of buildings that are included within the City’s inventory of historic resources.

By simplifying code requirements and removing unnecessary barriers, Los Angeles’s ARO demonstrates how regulatory flexibility can revitalize vacant structures, and align adaptive reuse projects with broader General Plan goals.

### ***National Trust for Historic Preservation Model Adaptive Reuse Ordinance***

The National Trust for Historic Preservation’s (NTHP) Preservation Green Lab conducted a case study and provided strategies for revitalization and reuse. Those strategies range from zoning and parking leniency, financing strategies, and updating zoning ordinances for a clearer understanding of approval processes.

The NTHP provides a model Adaptive Reuse Ordinance (ARO) that cities and counties can amend to meet their standards. The model ARO utilizes a zoning overlay because it is the easiest to integrate into an existing zoning ordinance and does not require text amendments to an entire code. The overlay would be placed in areas or corridors that the County and/or residents would like to see revitalized. The ordinance provides eligibility requirements, incentives, alternative building and fire code regulations, and alternative public works standards for eligible projects. Development standards are left open to allow County-specific standards to be incorporated.

This model ordinance provides a clear, streamlined process for adaptive reuse projects while supporting historic preservation and economic development. The model ordinance is a standalone chapter that can be adopted into an existing code but should be considered in tandem with zoning map amendments to add the “Adaptive Reuse Overlay Zone” as an overlay on properties with existing structures.

### 3. Abandoned Building Registration and Maintenance Ordinance

An Abandoned Building Registration and Maintenance Ordinance is a tool that requires property owners to register vacant or abandoned buildings with the City or County, typically within 30 days of the building becoming vacant. This ordinance helps to track and manage vacant properties, ensuring they are maintained to minimum health and safety standards and do not contribute to neighborhood decline. Registration programs often include annual renewal requirements, inspection provisions, and fee structures. This approach allows local governments to better identify problem properties, support enforcement efforts, and promote long-term community reinvestment.

#### ***City of Taft, CA - Public Nuisances; Vacant Dwellings or Buildings***

- Requires property owners to register with the City an abandoned or vacant building within 30 days of the building becoming vacant.
- Allows lawful inspection and entry to enforce code.
- Vacant and abandoned buildings are classified as unoccupied, unsafe, boarded, or has been unoccupied/without a business license for 30 days. Exemptions to this are properties that are under active construction or those listed for sale/rent and code compliant.
- Property owners must:
  - Register the property within 30 days and pay a registration fee (renewed annually)
  - Post a visible sign with owner/lender contact info
  - Maintain exterior and interior to prevent blight, vandalism, fire, or pests
  - Maintain minimum fire and liability insurance
- Violations to this ordinance are a “public nuisance” and subject to additional enforcement and fees.
- If a property does not register, the Building Official or Code Enforcement issues a Notice of Violation (NOV).
- City can fine the owner if the NOV is not corrected

### **City of Dunsmuir, CA – Abandoned and Distressed Real Property Ordinance**

- Requires property owners to register with the City an abandoned or vacant building within 30 days of the building becoming vacant.
- After registering property, owner or authorized agent must provide City access to conduct an exterior and interior inspection to determine compliance with code
- Property owners must:
  - Secure building or structure against unauthorized access
  - Keep property free of blight (weeds, dry brush, dead vegetation, etc.)
  - Maintain yards to the “neighborhood standard” and defines the “neighborhood standard”
  - Cover windows with plain paper or display artwork, merchandise offered for sale by another business within the community, or materials provided by a Dunsmuir community non-profit organization
  - Remove signage for any previous tenant
  - Repair or rehabilitate property to meet all applicable codes adopted by the City for occupancy
- Initial registration fee is \$500 but can be reduced to \$100 if City Clerk receives evidence the property has been listed for sale or rent at a reasonable price with licensed real estate agent.
  - Clerk can waive the fee entirely if:
    - The property is utilized for a community benefit
    - A building permit has been issued for improvements/repairs that exceed 50% of property value and said improvements are actively being pursued
- Properties not in compliance with the ordinance are subject to penalties and fees

#### **4. Vacancy Tax or Fee Program**

A Vacancy Tax or Fee Program is a regulatory and financial tool designed to discourage prolonged vacancy and encourage the productive use of property. This program establishes an annual tax or fee on properties that remain vacant beyond a defined period, with rates scaled by property type. Property owners are notified of the vacancy determination and given the opportunity to appeal before the tax is imposed. By creating a direct financial incentive to occupy, lease, or sell unused buildings, vacancy taxes can help reduce blight, promote reinvestment, and support community revitalization efforts.

### **City of Oakland, CA – Vacant Property Tax**

The City of Oakland approved a Vacant Property Tax (VPT) Act which establishes an annual tax of \$3,000 to \$6,000 on vacant property, depending on the type of property (e.g. residential, condominium, duplex, townhome, or non-residential, etc.).<sup>1</sup> A property is considered “vacant” if it is

---

<sup>1</sup> City of Oakland. Vacant Property Tax (VPT). Accessed October 28, 2025.  
<https://www.oaklandca.gov/Business/For-Landlords/Vacant-Property-Tax-VPT>

“in use less than 50 days in a calendar year”. There are several exemptions to this Act including the following:

- Very low income
- Financial hardship
- Demonstrable hardship unrelated to personal finances
- Exceptional specific circumstances
- Active construction
- Building permit application
- Low income senior
- Disabled owner
- Non-profit organization
- Substantially complete application for Planning

Property owners who believe they qualify for an exemption or that their property was not vacant may file a petition within 20 days of receiving the initial determination, accompanied by documentation supporting their claim. The program provides a structured process for review and discourages vacant buildings.

## **Preliminary Recommendations**

---

### **1. Vacant Building Inventory**

To help identify the number and location of vacant buildings in Inyo County, the County can develop a Vacant Building Inventory to better inform potential investors, developers, nonprofits, and community groups about redevelopment opportunities for infill housing projects. Following the approaches used in Baltimore and Detroit, inventories can be developed through block-by-block windshield surveys, property owner outreach (mailers or direct contact), or a combination of both methods. Direct engagement with property owners can help identify barriers to reuse and track occupancy levels to assess where intervention is needed. Data collected through these efforts can be organized in spreadsheets and later transferred to GIS to enable spatial analysis and interactive mapping. Establishing this inventory provides a baseline understanding of vacant properties across the County, allowing staff to develop tailored strategies and target investment areas.

### **2. Adaptive Reuse Incentive Program**

An Adaptive Reuse Incentive Program can encourage the transformation of underutilized or vacant buildings into housing through a combination of financial assistance, regulatory flexibility, and targeted zoning tools. Financial incentives may include grants, subsidies, or direct assistance from government entities to offset project costs such as environmental remediation, structural improvements, or energy-efficient upgrades. Additional support could be provided through low-interest loans or loan guarantees to help finance adaptive reuse projects.

Regulatory incentives can streamline approvals by allowing by-right conversions that meet a specific criteria, such as compliance with health and safety codes and consistency with the General Plan,

without triggering CEQA or discretionary review. Projects may not need to follow certain parking requirements and are permitted to include one-story additions, or benefit from modified building code provisions specific to adaptive reuse.

To further facilitate reuse, Inyo County can establish an Adaptive Reuse Overlay Zone in key areas. Properties within this zone would be eligible for added incentives, such as increased density allowances, height exceptions, waived loading zone requirements, and no new parking mandates unless additional floor area is created. This overlay would apply to buildings undergoing a change of use (e.g., commercial to residential) and would allow Inyo County to take a targeted, place-based approach to promoting reuse in priority areas.

### 3. Other Options

Alternative options to facilitate reuse and discourage abandoned buildings include establishing an Abandoned Building Registration Program or a Vacancy Tax/Fee Program. Following the approaches implemented in the cities of Taft, Dunsmuir, and Oakley, these programs require property owners to register vacant or abandoned buildings, creating a clear record of such properties within the City. A Vacancy Tax or Fee Program can further incentivize property owners to keep their buildings occupied or actively maintained, as prolonged vacancy would result in financial penalties.

These tools are more regulatory in nature, leveraging the County's authority to reduce the number of abandoned structures while ensuring that registered properties are maintained to minimum health, safety, and aesthetic standards. This helps prevent deterioration, maintain neighborhood character, and avoid negative impacts on nearby property values. Additionally, revenues generated through registration fees or vacancy taxes can be reinvested into community improvement projects, such as new parks, sidewalk enhancements, or neighborhood beautification efforts, helping to strengthen overall community vitality while addressing vacancy issues.