



Single Room Occupancy Program

Program Goal

To encourage the development of Single Room Occupancy (SRO) residences that meet the needs of persons with disabilities and of the homeless population, an update to the zoning ordinance is required in order to facilitate permitting of SRO units that may include kitchens and private baths.

Background Information

Santa Barbara County's Housing and Community Development Department estimates that approximately 7,000 persons without homes live in the County; the 2000 U.S. Census approximated the persons with disabilities population at about 15,000. Both of these groups often have low or very low incomes. SROs provide a viable housing alternative for individuals and couples in these special needs groups. Both the homeless population and persons with disabilities qualify as "special needs" groups under California State Housing law. The County has a legal obligation to address the housing needs of these groups as part of its Housing Element update.

Need Addressed

Persons unable to live in traditional households face specific challenges that may affect their ability to secure decent, affordable housing. For instance, persons with disabilities may require their residences to include special modified amenities and/or services such as proximity to transit and building entrance and egress wheelchair access. Homeless individuals may be without housing for any number of complex and diverse reasons. SROs offer one opportunity for low-cost housing that is specifically designed to meet some of the varying needs of several special needs groups.

The Housing Element changes the definition of an SRO to allow private bathrooms and kitchens within each unit; this change may make future SRO developments more appealing, particularly for those who could be more self-sufficient with private facilities. Developers may be more likely to build SRO facilities if they believe a strong demand exists for efficiency units.

Program Highlights

The Housing Element EIR Project Description contains a number of potential modifications to the County's current SRO program. Each of those potential modifications will be evaluated and analyzed during the environmental review process now underway. Specific details are listed below.



- Proposed changes to the zoning ordinances that define the parameters of SRO residences apply only within areas of the unincorporated County that currently permit SROs.
- The proposed zoning ordinance amendments include three changes designed to encourage development of SROs in the County:
 1. The definition of SROs is clarified to include efficiency units of up to 500 square feet that may contain shared or private kitchen and bathroom facilities.
 2. A definition of an SRO facility was added to specify that it consists of a building that includes multiple SRO units.
 3. Incentives to encourage the construction of SRO facilities include fast-track permit processing; design standard modifications for facilities that are designed to serve persons with disabilities, including discretionary reduction in open space requirements for projects in the Design Residential (DR) zone, parking requirement modifications based on the type of disability in the population served, and discretionary reduction in front and side yard setbacks; and an Inclusionary Housing Program (IHP) exemption for facilities designed to serve the homeless population.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

Question: How does California law define “special needs” groups?

Answer: A special needs group is a group whose needs or circumstances have more difficulty finding decent, affordable housing opportunities than other segments. In Santa Barbara County, these groups include elderly persons, persons with disabilities, large households, female-headed single-parent households, the homeless population, farm workers, military personnel, and college and university students. The changes to the SRO ordinances are designed to address two of these special-needs groups: the homeless population and persons with disabilities who reside in the County.

Question: How would the proposed changes to zoning ordinances that define SROs affect areas covered by Community Plans that make explicit statements disallowing the development of SRO facilities?

Answer: Areas of the County covered by Community Plans that are silent on the issue of SROs would be subject to any SRO-related ordinance changes that result from the Housing Element update. Community Plans (or, in the case of Montecito, Article IV of the zoning ordinances) that explicitly prevent the development of SRO facilities would remain unchanged by the proposed zoning ordinance amendments that address SROs.

Question: Is there a limit to the number of SROs that can be included in any given residential development project?

Answer: SRO projects must follow the same development standards as other residential projects in the zones where they are allowed.



Question: In which zones would SRO facilities be allowed under the updated zoning ordinances?

Answer: SRO facilities are allowed in specific Commercial Zones (C-2 and C-3 in the Coastal Zone and C-2, C-3 and CH in the Inland Zone) and in Mixed Use areas in the Inland Zone. The proposed ordinance changes will not expand SROs beyond the areas where they are current allowed.