

# BUYING PROPERTY?

*WHAT TO KNOW BEFORE YOU BUY*



**DEPARTMENT OF REGIONAL PLANNING  
COUNTY OF LOS ANGELES**



*"PLANNING FOR THE CHALLENGES AHEAD"*

Buying property can be both exciting and confusing, especially for first-time buyers. Being uninformed and not asking the right questions can lead to serious problems for buyers. This can include finding yourself in violation of existing land use laws or unable to establish the use you intended. To avoid these situations it is important to understand how property is regulated.

**How many units can I have?**

**Is my business allowed here?**

**How much can I build?**

**Is this structure legal?**

The answers depend on the policies and regulations established by the Department of Regional Planning (DRP). Each buyer must verify that the property they are buying can accommodate their needs.

This brochure summarizes the policies and regulations buyers should know when buying property in the unincorporated communities of Los Angeles County.



## KNOW YOUR JURISDICTION

In LA County there are 88 incorporated cities and numerous unincorporated communities outside the boundaries of these cities. Services for these unincorporated communities are provided by LA County departments and the Board of Supervisors.

- The Department of Regional Planning (DRP) is responsible for regulating land use in the unincorporated communities only. If you are buying property within an incorporated city, you will need to contact that city for information.
- Use “Z-NET” or contact DRP to verify the jurisdiction if you are unsure.
- Do not rely on a property’s mailing address to determine jurisdiction. For example, a “Los Angeles” mailing address can refer to properties in the City of Los Angeles or various unincorporated communities.

## KNOW YOUR ZONE

All land in the unincorporated areas is divided into different land use zones. Knowing the zoning of your property will help you determine what is permitted.

- The most common zoning types are Residential, Agricultural, Commercial, and Manufacturing/Industrial.
- Each parcel has a specific zone, such as R-1, R-2, or R-3 for residential uses. The higher number indicates that more intensive uses are permitted, such as single-family homes in R-1 versus multi-family homes in R-3.
- Knowing the specific zone is important. For example, auto repair shops are permitted in C-3 zones but prohibited in zones C-1 and C-2. Knowing a property is “zoned for commercial use” is not enough.
- Do not guess the zone based on what is on the property. Uses and structures may not conform to the current zoning.
- Use “Z-NET” or contact DRP to determine the zone of the property you are purchasing. Do not rely on other sources, only DRP can verify your zoning.

## KNOW THE ZONING CODE

Title 22 of the LA County Code, known as the Planning and Zoning Code, details the types of uses permitted in each zone and the requirements to establish those uses. An online version of the Zoning Code is available on our website: <http://planning.lacounty.gov>

Permitted uses are listed under each zone in Title 22. Uses are divided into four categories:

- Permitted Uses
- Accessory Uses
- Uses Subject to Director's Review
- Uses Subject to Permit

**If the use is not listed under these categories, the use is not permitted in that zone.**

- Title 22 sets general requirements and development standards you must meet to establish a use.
- Additional regulations are often adopted to address area-specific goals or issues. Community Standards Districts, for example, may add additional zoning requirements that must be met. Know what applies.
- There is a difference between how large a property is and how much may be built. For example, setbacks, parking requirements, and lot coverage restrictions will limit your buildable space.
- New uses, new construction, and expanding or changing existing uses and structures require approval from DRP.
- Administrative approval, such as a site plan review, is required for "Permitted Uses." Approval is based on whether you meet all the requirements set in Title 22 for the proposed use/structures.
- Discretionary approval, such as a Conditional Use Permit (CUP), is required for "Uses Subject to Permit." These include a public hearing, and DRP can recommend denial or approval based on a review of the compatibility of the proposed use with surrounding uses.
- A use may require a CUP in one zone and a site plan in another, so know what is required. The difference in cost and time to process a CUP is substantially higher, and approval is not guaranteed.

- Approval from DRP is often the first step. A use or structure is not legally established until you obtain finalized approvals from all required County departments.
- Zoning and requirements can change over time. Only legally established uses/structures are protected if they no longer conform to current standards. This status is called “legal non-conforming.” Know the restrictions for expanding and maintaining legal non-conforming uses/structures before you buy.

## KNOW IF IT IS LEGAL

One of the most unfortunate occurrences is when a buyer unknowingly purchases a property with an unpermitted use or structure. Buyers need to take steps to ensure the property they are purchasing is free of zoning violations.

- **The County does not inspect properties when they are sold.** Home inspections conducted as part of a sale are not done by County officials and often **do not** verify legality of existing structures or uses.
- Call our Zoning Enforcement Section and local Building and Safety (B&S) Office to see if there are open enforcement cases. If there are no open cases it does not guarantee your property is free of violations, but it is a good start to your research.
- Verify that existing structures have permits. You can obtain copies of building permits from the local B&S Office without being the current owner.
- Assessor records are not building permits. The Assessor’s Office does not verify the legality of structures or uses when a property is assessed. Do not use these records to verify legality.
- Once you purchase a property, you are responsible for correcting any existing violations, even if the violations existed before you bought the property.
- Failing to correct a violation after you are cited will result in a referral to the District Attorney’s Office. Most zoning violations are misdemeanors.
- Purchasing a property with violations is risky. There is no guarantee you will be able to legalize an unpermitted use or structure.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

### **Department of Regional Planning**

320 W. Temple Street, 13th floor  
Los Angeles, CA 90012  
<http://planning.lacounty.gov>

*For general information, contact:*

### **Land Development Coordinating Center (LDCC)**

(213) 974-6411

email: [zoningldcc@planning.lacounty.gov](mailto:zoningldcc@planning.lacounty.gov)

*For questions about zoning violations, contact:*

### **Zoning Enforcement Section**

(213) 974-6453

email: [zoningenforcement@planning.lacounty.gov](mailto:zoningenforcement@planning.lacounty.gov)

### **Z-NET (zoning and land use information)**

<http://planning.lacounty.gov/znet>

### **Planning and Zoning Code (Title 22)**

<http://planning.lacounty.gov/luz>

### **Frequently Asked Questions**

<http://planning.lacounty.gov/faq>

## REGIONAL PLANNING / BUILDING & SAFETY FIELD OFFICES

### **Antelope Valley**

335A E. Avenue K6 #A  
Lancaster, CA 93535  
(661) 524-2390

### **Calabasas/Malibu**

26600 Agoura Road #110  
Calabasas, CA 91302  
(818) 880-4150

### **East Los Angeles**

4801 E. Third Street  
Los Angeles, CA 90022  
(323) 881-7030

### **La Puente**

16005 E. Central Avenue  
La Puente, CA 91744  
(626) 961-9611

### **San Gabriel Valley**

125 S. Baldwin Avenue  
Arcadia, CA 91007  
(626) 574-0941

### **Santa Clarita**

23757 Valencia Boulevard  
Valencia, CA 91355  
(661) 222-2940

### **South Whittier**

13523 Telegraph Road  
Whittier, CA 90605  
(562) 946-1390

### **Southwest**

1320 W. Imperial Highway  
Los Angeles, CA 90044  
(323) 820-6500

\* Please contact each office for hours