



ADU DESIGN CHALLENGE



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ADU DESIGN CHALLENGE**

Massachusetts ADU Design Challenge Submissions Guidelines

Welcome to the Massachusetts Statewide Accessory Dwelling Unit (ADU) Design Challenge that will help further unlock ADU development. This Challenge calls on architects, planners, design professionals, and design teams to present their vision, ideas and plans for the future of ADUs in Massachusetts. This guideline document was prepared for those interested in submitting an entry to the ADU Design Challenge and will provide you with all the information you need to prepare materials to submit a submission entry.

Acknowledgements

The ADU Design Challenge is led by the Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities (HLC) in partnership with the ADU Design Challenge Steering Committee:

ADU Design Challenge Steering Committee Organizational Members
American Institute of Architects Massachusetts (AIA MA)
AIA MA Central Massachusetts
AIA Western Massachusetts
Boston Society of Architects (BSA)
Massachusetts Housing Partnership (MHP)
Massachusetts Clean Energy Center (MassCEC)
Abundant Housing Massachusetts (AHMA)
Citizens' Housing & Planning Association (CHAPA)

Table 1: List of organizations part of the ADU Design Challenge Steering Committee

The Commonwealth extends a thank you to the ADU Design Challenge funding partners who saw the value of quality, winning designs, and providing financial awards to winners:

ADU Design Challenge Funding Partners
Eastern Bank Foundation
Boston Foundation
AIA MA
Massachusetts Housing Partnership (MHP)

Table 2: List of organizations funding the ADU Design Challenge

Awards made to winning designs will be made solely with privately raised funds and no public dollars will be awarded to Challenge winners.

ADUs and Massachusetts

Massachusetts faces [a housing supply shortage and affordability crisis](#), and the Healey-Driscoll Administration has taken steps to increase housing production of all types. One type of housing key to this strategy is the accessory dwelling unit (ADU), a small residential living space located on the same lot as another home.

On August 6, 2024, Governor Healey signed the Affordable Homes Act (AHA) into law, which, among other provisions, allows “Protected Use” ADUs under 900 square feet to be built by-right across the state in single-family zoning districts. Protected Use ADUs must also meet the definition of Protected Use as defined by the [ADU Statute](#) and the [ADU Regulations](#). This policy change was necessary because prior to the passage of the AHA, Massachusetts had no statewide standard for ADU zoning and permitting. Many municipalities had ADU bylaws, but a patchwork of differing requirements including owner-occupancy restrictions, small size limits, subjective design reviews and discretionary approvals made ADUs difficult to build.

Section 8 of Chapter 150 of the Affordable Homes Act amends the Zoning Act (M.G.L. Chapter 40A) to allow Protected Use ADUs to be built by-right in single-family zoning districts for all cities and towns in Massachusetts, except for the City of Boston.

Many property owners are now empowered to build ADUs for the first time without needing to apply for special permits and variances from their city or town. ADUs can play an important role in addressing Massachusetts’ housing crisis by allowing for the gradual addition of diverse, less expensive homes to our neighborhoods. They can take many forms, such as, but not limited to, converting a basement or attic into an apartment, adding an attached ADU to a primary residence as an addition, or a completely detached ADU, like a cottage or converted garage in a backyard.



Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#)

ADUs also have many benefits as a housing type. ADUs can provide rental income for property owners, helping to offset maintenance and repair costs; offer lower cost housing for young families; support seniors aging in place by providing accessible housing for a nearby caregiver; and create opportunities for individuals with medical needs or disabilities to live close to family while maintaining some independence. As smaller housing designs, ADUs utilize less water and electricity, making them a more sustainable and cost-effective housing option, and a sustainable use of existing land, structures, and infrastructure.

ADU Design Challenge Goals

The ADU Design Challenge has three overarching goals:

- 1) Give property owners easy access to a menu of high quality ADU design options.
- 2) Make the ADU design process more accessible and affordable for property owners.
- 3) Unlock opportunities for property owners to explore, design, and build an ADU.

To achieve these goals, the ADU Design Challenge will look for design submissions that are replicable, sustainable, and equitable ADU prototypes that fit within diverse zoning contexts and allow property owners to explore and embrace the potential for ADUs on their properties. The ADU Design Challenge will help property owners throughout the Commonwealth meet these goals by providing tools that:

- **Reduce the cost of ADU development and streamline permitting.** HLC will make available to the public all strong submissions to the ADU Design Challenge on www.mass.gov/adu. Property owners can select from replicable prototypes that best fit their needs and collaborate with architects, contractors, and other construction professionals to adapt them into site-specific plans. This approach streamlines the design process and reduces pre-development costs for property owners.
- **Showcase design excellence for smaller spaces.** ADUs are compact spaces where every square foot must be purposeful, functional, and appealing. By elevating small-scale design through creative techniques, submitters will showcase how ADUs can expand compact, low impact, less expensive housing options across the Commonwealth while preserving livability.
- **Meet the Commonwealth's housing goals.** This initiative will promote ADU designs that creatively address the housing challenges facing Massachusetts households, including embracing sustainable and resilient solutions to combat climate change, mitigating rising construction costs and the demand for lower cost housing through innovative construction strategies, and presenting accessible designs that respond to the needs of Massachusetts' aging population.
- **Increase public awareness and education on ADUs.** The passage of the AHA, which enables by-right ADU construction statewide, marks a significant step toward expanding housing options in Massachusetts. This challenge builds on that momentum by raising public awareness about ADUs and how they can be developed in communities across the Commonwealth.
- **Create connections and catalyze collaboration.** This initiative will create long-lasting partnerships between HLC and the ADU Design Challenge's collaborators and sponsors – AIA Massachusetts, Boston Society of Architects, The Boston Foundation, Eastern Bank, Massachusetts Housing Partnership, Abundant Housing Massachusetts, and Citizens' Housing & Planning Association - and other design, development and construction professionals, and property owners to come together to lower costs and drive ADU development forward.

ADU Design Challenge Estimated Timeline

The ADU Design Challenge anticipates following the timeline outlined below. This timeline is subject to change at HLC's discretion, if changes take place they will be publicly announced and updated on www.mass.gov/ADUChallenge.

Phase	Dates	Details
Challenge Launch	12/15/2025	Submission period begins.
Submission Window	12/15 2025 – 2/27/2026	Entries may be submitted during this time.
Submissions Due	2/27/2026 at 11:59 pm	Submission window closes.
Jury Review	March 2026	Independent jury evaluations.
Winners Announced	April 2026	Public ceremony and statewide promotion.

Table 3: ADU Design Challenge Anticipated Timeline

Eligibility

- Submissions are welcome from **architects, builders, designers, contractors, and design-build partnerships practicing in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts**.
- Applicants may submit as individuals or teams, including those representing multiple firms, organizations, or collaborative entities.
- Applicants must be 18 years of age or older.
- For team submissions involving multiple entities, you must designate a **Lead Applicant** and clearly **identify all partner organizations or individuals** in the submission.

Design Submission Requirements

To be considered by the ADU Design Challenge, designs must be complete and submitted online via the [ADU Design Challenge Application Form](#). All applicants should carefully review this guideline to ensure their submissions are complete. If an applicant has issues applying, they may reach out to HLC at EOHLCADUHomes@mass.gov for technical assistance and support.

How to Apply

- Submissions open on **December 15, 2025, at 9:00 AM**.
- All submissions are due no later than **February 27, 2026, at 11:59 PM**.
- Applicants must submit a complete entry via the [ADU Design Challenge Application Form](#).
- Any submissions by email or mailed to HLC or any of our partners will not be considered for independent jury consideration.
- A complete submission must include:
 1. Applicant information
 2. Project information

3. A Project Narrative describing your design concept (Maximum 1,000 characters)
4. Supplemental Questions to assist with award selection
5. **Attachments A – G** as described in the [Technical Submission Requirements](#) section of the Guidelines
6. Legal documents; Assignment of Copyright and Related Rights, Representations and Assumption of Liability; and Waiver of Claims.

Multiple Entries

Applicants may submit more than one ADU design; however, each design must be accompanied by a **separate submission** submitted online via the [ADU Design Challenge Application Form](#). Note that while applicants may submit more than one entry, winners will be eligible to receive only up to one monetary prize as described in the [Prizes](#) section of the Guidelines.

Minimum Requirements

- Only detached ADU designs are eligible for consideration in the ADU Design Challenge.
- All design submissions must include a sleeping area, kitchen, and bathroom (i.e., it must be a dwelling unit).
- All designs must meet the [State Building Code – 780 CMR](#).
- Applicants must select from one of two ADU size categories based on gross floor area. *When calculating square footage, please use the Gross Floor Area definition in the ADU Regulations, located at [760 CMR 71.00](#)¹.*
 - Compact ADU (up to 500 square feet – Studio & 1-bedrooms)
 - Standard ADU (up to 900 square feet – Studio, 1-bedrooms, 2-bedrooms or more)
- All designs must adhere to the minimum energy performance thresholds described in **Table 4: Required Minimum Energy Performance Thresholds for all ADU Designs** below.
 - Note these requirements align with the Massachusetts Stretch Code Accessory Dwelling Units requirements found at [225 CMR 22.00](#), however, In stretch and specialized energy code communities, a HERS model will be required to show energy compliance. A HERS model is not a requirement for this Challenge.

¹ Gross Floor Area (GFA). The sum of the areas of all stories of the building of compliant ceiling height pursuant to the Building Code, including basements, lofts, and intermediate floored tiers, measured from the interior faces of exterior walls or from the centerline of walls separating buildings or dwelling units but excluding crawl spaces, garage parking areas, attics, enclosed porches and similar spaces. Where there are multiple Principal Dwellings on the Lot, the GFA of the largest Principal Dwelling shall be used for determining the maximum size of a Protected Use ADU. ([760 CMR 71.00: Protected Use Accessory Dwelling Units](#))

Building Assembly	Minimum R-Value (or R-value alternative)	Maximum U-Factor
Ceiling / Attic	R-49	U ≤ 0.026
Wood-frame Above-grade Walls	R-20 + R-5 ci or R-13 + R-10 ci or R-20 ci or R-30	U ≤ 0.045
Basement Wall	R-19 or R-13 + R-5 ci or R-15 ci	U ≤ 0.050
Crawl Space Wall	R-19 or R-13 + R-5 ci or R-15 ci	U ≤ 0.055
Fenestration		U ≤ 0.30
Skylights		U ≤ 0.55

Table 4: Required Minimum Energy Performance Thresholds for all ADU Designs

Technical Submission Requirements

To ensure a fair and impartial jury process, all Attachments must be completely anonymous. Applicant shall not include any identifying information on the design challenge boards or within any graphics, notes, diagrams, or file names. This includes but is not limited to:

- Firm name, logo, or branding
- Designer or team member names
- Contact information of any kind
- Watermarks, initials, or metadata that may reveal the author
- References to previous projects that would clearly identify the applicant

A complete submission form will separately attach a Showcase Image, Design Challenge Boards (Digital Poster Design), Scaled Floor Plans, Exterior Elevations, Wall Section, Site Plan Contextualization and Renderings. Each individual attachment must be under 50 MB.

A. Attachment A: Showcase Image

- *Format:* PNG, 300 DPI, 50 MB max
- *Quantity:* 1 image/rendering of designer's choice
- *Requirements:* Please choose an image that best highlights your design
- *Purpose:* Will be displayed on HLC's website

B. Attachment B: Design Challenge Boards (Digital Poster Design)

- *Format:* PDF, 24" x 36" landscape orientation, 50 MB max
- *Quantity:* 2 pages minimum, 3 pages maximum
- *Requirements:* Please include:
 - Floor plan at 1/4" scale
 - All exterior elevations at minimum 1/8" scale
 - Site Plan Contextualization
 - Renderings & Diagrams of your choice.
 - Project Narrative (1,000 characters maximum, 12-point font minimum)
 - Inclusion of your wall section is optional.
- This digital poster should highlight the vision and creativity of your design and key components.

C. Attachment C: Scaled Floor Plan

- *Format:* PDF, $\frac{1}{4}$ " scale, 50 MB max
- *Quantity:* No maximum, 1 floor plan per page for each level (if applicable)
- *Requirements:* Show the complete floor layout of the ADU including:
 - Show all levels of the ADU, if applicable
 - Label the use of each room and room size
 - Bedroom(s) must be a minimum area of 70 square feet with the shortest wall no less than 7 feet
 - Minimum ceiling height: 7 feet
 - Location of doors and door width
 - Identify locations of all furniture, fixtures, appliances, and equipment including but not limited to: beds, tables, chairs, cabinets, sinks, showers, toilets, etc.
 - Identify the location of wall section (**Attachment E**)

D. Attachment D: Exterior Elevations

- *Format:* PDF, $\frac{1}{8}$ " scale minimum, $\frac{1}{4}$ " scale maximum, 50 MB max
- *Quantity:* No maximum, 1 elevation per page
- *Requirements:*
 - Show all sides of the ADU including identification of materials.
 - ADUs must not exceed 35 feet in height.

E. Attachment E: Wall Section

- *Format:* PDF, $\frac{3}{4}$ " scale minimum, 50 MB max
- *Quantity:* 1 page maximum
- *Requirements:* Show from the bottom of the foundation to the highest point of the ADU including:
 - Identification of materials
 - Insulation types and Values
 - Framing/Structural System
 - Foundation System

F. Attachment F: Site Plan Contextualization

- *Format:* Export DWG format to PDF for submission, Scale 1:20, 50 MB max
- *Requirements:* Please select **at least one** of the three scenario parcels (7,000 sq ft, 10,000 sq ft, 22,500 sq ft) found at [Attachment F: Site Plan Contextualization](#) and demonstrate your design meets the following parameters:
 - Principal dwelling footprint (is pre-defined and can be moved) falls within the required setbacks as defined by the black dotted line
 - ADU footprint falls within the required setbacks as defined by the red dotted line.
 - Illustrate the relationship between the ADU footprint and the principal dwelling footprint. ADU must be located a minimum of 10'-0" from the primary residence.
 - *While not required, designers may add additional site features such as but not limited to soft and hard landscaping features and parking.*

- Only detached ADU designs are eligible for consideration in the ADU Design Challenge.

G. Attachment G: Renderings & Diagrams

- *Format:* PDF, 300 DPI, 50 MB max
- *Quantity:* Up to 10 images maximum, including at least one exterior, one interior, and one showing the relationship of the ADU to the principal dwelling.
- *Requirements:* Please order in preference for publication/recognition should your design be selected.

Digital Accessibility

To help everyone in our community, including people with disabilities, explore and understand your design, design submissions are **strongly encouraged** to strive to meet [ADA Title II requirements](#) and the [WCAG 2.1 AA](#) standards (www.w3.org). Below are a few tips to keep in mind when exporting your design to PDF. Thank you for taking these steps to make your submission accessible to all members of our community.

1. Use real text, not just images of text.

- Make sure the **text** in your design is selectable text.

2. Provide descriptions for images and floor plans

- For each drawing set requirement, include a brief description that explains the design elements. Note how someone would move through the space and include important accessibility features (entrances, clearances, restroom type, circulation, etc.)
 - i. Add description as alt text to your image(s).
 - ii. Add description as nearby visible text in the document, for example, a caption or a short “Floor plan description” paragraph on the document.

3. Strong contrast and colorblind awareness

- Make sure there is strong contrast between text/labels/linework and the background, so information is readable without strain.
- It's important not to rely on color alone in floor plans because some of us cannot see color differences (colorblind) or cannot see the images at all (screen reader users)
 - i. For example, if color indicates something (such as using a red line or red shading to show emergency exit routes), back it up with clear machine-readable text labels such as “Emergency exit” so the meaning is still available if the color isn't.

Design Categories

HLC will consider each design for all categories they are eligible for.

- Compact ADU (up to 500 square feet – Studio & 1 bedrooms)
- Standard ADU (up to 900 square feet – Studio, 1-bedrooms, 2-bedrooms or more)
- Sustainable Design
- Accessible Design
- Innovative Construction Design (off-site fabrication, panelized construction, volumetric units or a hybrid of these methods)

Prizes

An accredited jury of architects will evaluate and deliberate on all designs based against the Scoring Criteria. 1st, 2nd, and 3rd place will be awarded to top scoring designs under the Overall Scoring Criteria. The jury will also select winners from five special categories: Compact ADU, Standard ADU, Sustainable Design, Accessible Design, and Innovative Construction Design. Each category will recognize a winner for designs that meet the threshold criteria and demonstrate excellence under the categories. The AIA MA People's Choice Award will be awarded to one design and be voted by the people of the Commonwealth through a process to be established by AIA MA. Each design may not receive more than 1 monetary prize.

Prize Category	Prize
1st Place Challenge Wide	\$20,000.00
2nd Place Challenge Wide	\$15,000.00
3rd Place Challenge Wide	\$10,000.00
Exceptional Compact ADU	\$3,000.00
Exceptional Standard ADU	\$3,000.00
Exceptional Sustainable ADU	\$3,000.00
Exceptional Accessible ADU	\$3,000.00
Exceptional Innovative Construction	\$3,000.00
AIA MA's People's Choice Award	No Monetary Prize

Table 5: ADU Design Challenge Awards

Scoring Criteria

ADU Design Challenge Scoring Criteria

Designs must meet all high-level and technical submission requirements in the ADU Design Challenge Submission Guidelines to be eligible for award.

Scoring Category	Criteria	Points (max 100)
Design Quality & Vision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Design articulates a clear and compelling design concept, including the Showcase Image and Digital Poster Design. Design is rooted in Massachusetts's ADU goals – cost-effective, sustainable, and embraces universal design principles that accommodate all types of families in Massachusetts. Renderings are appealing including but not limited to modern, historic, or architecture that is responsive to Massachusetts typologies. It is not required that the ADU matches the aesthetics of the principal dwelling. Project Narrative synthesizes the design concept and story. 	30
Presentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Designs are purposeful, organized, and well communicated. Submissions are easily legible for jurors and the public. Designs are consistent across all required Attachments (A-G) described in Submission Guidelines. 	15
Livability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Creates a functional and comfortable living environment within compact dimensions and includes sleeping area, kitchen, and bathroom. Shows excellence in daylighting, ventilation, circulation, and use of multi-functional space. Demonstrates compliance with minimum room sizes, ceiling heights, and fixture requirements as outlined in the Submission Guidelines for the Scaled Floor Plans. 	20
Feasibility & Affordability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Employs feasible and standard building materials, systems, and build sequence that are easily replicable, cost effective, and demonstrate design efficiency. Design is adaptable and feasible across a variety of lot sizes in Massachusetts. Feasibility includes design compliance with the State Building code (780 CMR). 	20
Sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Designs adhere to the Table 4: Energy Efficiency Performance Requirements described in the Submission Guidelines under "High-Level Submission Requirements." Demonstrates creative, scalable, sustainability solutions. 	15

Table 6: ADU Design Challenge Overall Scoring Criteria

Category Awards Criteria

Category-specific awards will be judged qualitatively by the jury. Submitters should reference the Category Awards Threshold Criteria below as a checklist to ensure their design is eligible for consideration.

Category	Category Awards Threshold Criteria
Exceptional Compact ADU	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Winners will design an ADU up to 500 square feet with a unit layout of either a studio or 1-bedroom and demonstrate excellence on the overall scoring criteria.
Exceptional Standard ADU	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Winners will design an ADU up to 900 square feet with a unit layout of either a studio, 1-bedroom, or 2-bedroom and demonstrate excellence on the overall scoring criteria.
Exceptional Sustainable ADU	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Winners will, through innovative design, integrate passive strategies, a high-performance building envelope, and renewable energy readiness, while also allowing for other creative sustainability solutions – such as the use of low embodied carbon or bio-based materials – that enhance efficiency, resilience, and long-term performance. Design must meet or exceed the Massachusetts Stretch Code based on 2021 International Energy Conservation Code (IECC), 225 CMR Chapter 22 (the residential stretch code) and strive to qualify for Mass Save financial incentives under ENERGY STAR or Passive House programs.
Exceptional Accessible ADU	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Winners must seamlessly integrate universal design principles such as, but not limited to, step-free entry, clear circulation, and properly sized doors and hallways. Floor plans should support independence for people across the spectrum of aging and disability needs, ensuring kitchens, bathrooms, and sleeping areas remain both functional and appealing. Spaces must allow future adaptability, meet or exceed Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) standards and the Massachusetts Architectural Access Board's (MAAB) accessibility regulations (521 CMR). Accessibility features should blend aesthetically, be cost-effective to build, and incorporate innovative, replicable solutions for ADU development across the Commonwealth.
Exceptional Innovative Construction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Winner will be a design that proposes either (a) off-site fabrication (b) panelized construction (c) volumetric units or (d) a hybrid of these methods. Submission will describe the construction and transport method in the Project Narrative and effectively communicate how the ADU can be built faster and more cost-effective than traditional construction methods. The winning design will not sacrifice livability or aesthetic value, scoring highly in both these categories on the overall rubric, with prioritization for effective daylighting, spatial comfort, and architectural coherence.

Table 7: ADU Design Challenge Category-Specific Scoring Criteria

FAQ and Webinars

Please submit all ADU Design Challenge questions via email to EOHLCADUHomes@mass.gov. “ADU Design Challenge Question” should appear in the subject line. Frequently Asked Questions will be posted publicly to the ADU Design

Challenge webpage. HLC will host an informational webinar on the ADU Design Challenge on **December 19th, 2025, at 12:00 PM** and **January 15th 2026, at 6:00 PM** and post the recording of this webinar on www.mass.gov/ADUChallenge.

Legal

Required Legal Documents

Each response (“Submission”) to the Accessory Dwelling Unit Design Challenge (“Challenge”) must be made by a single submitter (“Submitter”) who is authorized to do so on behalf of all collaborators-on or contributors-to (“Team Members”) the materials and substantive components included in the Submission (“Submission Package”). In order to finalize the Submission, the Submitter must execute certain documents with legal effect, including the following; Assignment of Copyright and Related Rights, Representations and Assumption of Liability, and Waiver of Claims. [Submission Agreements](#) should be reviewed by the Submitter and all Team Members before Submission.

Public Records

The Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities is subject to Massachusetts' Public Records Law, Mass. Gen. Laws Ch. 66, which generally requires the disclosure of public records upon request.

Information received by HLC from Participants as part of the Challenge, including the Submission Package, may meet the definition of "public record" under relevant law. The Commonwealth makes no representation that any portion of the Submission Package will be treated as confidential.

Participants should carefully review their communications with HLC, including their Submission Package, in the context of relevant public records laws to ensure sensitive information is treated appropriately.

Reservation of Rights

HLC reserves all rights associated with the Challenge, including:

- To accept or reject any Submission for any reason, including inconsistencies with submission requirements;
- To waive minor inconsistencies/irregularities in submission requirements at its discretion;
- To make scoring decisions;
- To cancel or modify the Challenge in part or in whole, including but not limited to its timeline, prizes, awards, and honoraria.

ADU DESIGN CHALLENGE

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