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A National Scan of Pre-Approved Building Programs and Their Potential Application in Ohio

***Memo originally written in August 2023. Since then, Green Bay suspended their pre-approval program for funding reasons, even though it was deemed a success, and some of the early recommendations offered for Ohio were subsequently de-prioritized after additional research.*

GREATER OHIO POLICY CENTER

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Pre-approved Building Plans are a versatile tool used to address a variety of housing issues in a range of market contexts. They are highly customizable, work best as part of larger strategy, and have the potential to help address housing challenges in Ohio, particularly around promoting infill development in mature neighborhoods and repurposing vacant land.

Goal of this Report

GOPC conducted a national scan of pre-approval programs in hopes of informing potential policy development in Ohio. We looked at a variety of programs in order to understand the benefits and applications of the pre-approval tool. This report outlines the places around the country utilizing pre-approval programs and how they are using them. In subsequent phases of research, GOPC will do more in-depth analysis of programs that offer potential lessons and applicability in Ohio and we will offer recommendations for how to best bring this tool to the Ohio market.

What are Pre-approved Building Plans?

Pre-approved infill building plans grant expedited permitting to a set of pre-designed plans that are architecturally-appropriate for a specific community. Pre-approved building plans are designed to promote new construction by limiting the time and expense associated with the city's plan review process.

Cities around the country are adopting pre-approved building plans to attract new development to their community and stimulate the development of missing middle housing. The pre-approved building plans help to streamline regulatory processes, promote new housing development in existing neighborhoods, offer more choice in housing types, and reduce some development costs.



Figure 1 ADU in Seattle

Housing Type Definitions

Missing Middle housing refers to a range of housing types comparable in size to single-family homes but that contain multiple units and are located in walkable neighborhoods.

Examples of Missing Middle housing include:

- Duplexes
- Fourplexes
- Courtyard buildings
- Cottage courts
- Townhouses
- Multiplex or Triplex apartments
- Live/work space

An **Accessory Dwelling Unit (ADU)** is an independent residential unit located on the same lot as a stand-alone single-family home. The ADU is typically smaller than the single-family home and can be freestanding in the backyard, attached to the home, or attached or over a garage. ADUs are sometimes also referred to as granny flats or in-law units.

Figure 1. [Location of American Pre-Approval Programs \(link for interactive map\)](#)



Overview of National Trends

Where are Pre-approved Building Plans Being Adopted?

As shown in Figure 1, Pre-approved Building Plan programs are in effect in at least 30 municipalities around the country. The vast majority of programs are on the West Coast but programs also exist in the South, Midwest, and in Texas.

On the West Coast and in the South, pre-approved plans are frequently used to promote the development of Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs). This is the most common use of existing programs. These smaller units are often more affordable than larger ones and address shortages of developable sites by incorporating new units onto sites that already having housing. In the Midwest and modest market contexts, pre-approved plans have been adopted with a focus on promoting infill

development and stabilizing mature, built-out neighborhood. These programs are sometimes paired with low-cost, city-owned vacant land to make programs even more appealing to developers and achieve city goals.

Because buildable land is typically available in these jurisdictions, pre-approval programs often include a broad range of housing types, including ADUs, cottage homes, duplexes, single family homes, live/work spaces, and apartment buildings suitable to a range of lot sizes and neighborhood contexts.

Many jurisdictions, regardless of regional or market context, use pre-approval programs to add new, smaller housing units to their supply in order to provide units suited to a range of household types, particularly older residents who want to age in place.

Table 1: List of Cities with Pre-Approval Programs Reviewed in Detail in this Scan

City	Year Started	Type of Housing Addressed			Significant Rezoning or State Mandate?	Reported Outcomes
		ADU only	Range of Types	Single-Family focus		
Clovis, CA	2017	x			yes	30 pre-approved permits issued 2018-2022
Los Angeles, CA	2021	x			yes	ADU permits jumped from 80 in 2016 to 5,064 (2021).
Sacramento, CA	2023	x			yes	76 units in 2020, 170 units in 2021
Stockton, CA	2020	x			yes	1,020 total ADUs built 2018-2022 when zoning changed
South Bend, IN	2022		x		yes	12 projects in pipeline; 10% annual housing starts
Kalamazoo, MI	in development		x		yes	Data not yet available
Raleigh, NC	2022	x			yes	~200 permits issued
Shaker Heights, OH	pre-2008			x	no	2-3 houses
Eugene, OR	2021	x			yes	95 units (2018-2022) following ADU ordinances
Portland, OR	2006-2011			x	no	13 units
Bryan, TX	2020		x		yes	Not reported
Roanoke, VA	2008			x	no	Not reported
Seattle, WA	2020	x			yes	130 pre-approved unit in 2022
Green Bay, WI	2019?			x	no	Not reported

Key Takeaways on Pre-approval Programs

Overview

- Pre-approval programs are in effect in at least 30 municipalities across the country.
- Pre-approved Building Plans are a versatile tool and can be used in a variety of market contexts.
- At their core, the pre-approval tool simply grants expedited city review for sets of building plans. Other programmatic details associated with these programs vary considerably, including type of housing promoted, end user requirements, geographic targets, etc.
- Many West Coast programs focus only on ADUs, other programs promote a range of Missing Middle housing types, and a few focus only on single-family housing.
- Most of the programs are relatively new and outcomes are not consistently available. (California and Seattle ADU program reviews offer the most complete outcomes available.)
- Pre-approval programs are often used as a tool within a larger strategy, for example, as a way to promote infill on vacant lots or promote new development in accordance with a city plan.

Important Context

- A significant rezoning effort is often the precursor to a pre-approval program.
- However, pre-approval programs, focused on single-family housing, exist in places where there hasn't been a major rezoning.
- Some pre-approval programs in more modest markets also utilize city-owned vacant land to promote infill development and neighborhood stabilization.

Impact of Pre-approval Programs

- Pre-approval programs seem most effective in producing units when they are used to expedite broader efforts, like rezoning or state policies to promote housing.
- Pre-approval programs reduce soft costs and time at plan review.
- Pre-approval programs do little to reduce construction costs on their own.
- Programs that allow for ADUs, duplexes, and smaller housing types seem most effective at producing lower-cost housing.
- ADU development in Seattle and California added unsubsidized affordable rental units to the supply.



Mixed-use Walkup Apartment, Bryan, TX

Comprehensive Rezoning is Often the Backbone of a Pre-approval Program.

The seven ADU-only programs we studied are unique in that they started with a major rezoning or local ordinances as well as state initiatives that legalized previously uncommon unit types. The evolution of the West Coast ADU programs is discussed in more detail in the text box at the bottom of this page.

Bryan, TX and **South Bend, IN** both engaged in comprehensive rezoning in the late 2010s and have programs focused on promoting a range of Missing Middle housing types. Both cities transitioned zoning ordinance to a Form Based Code, a type of land organization system that focuses on physical form rather than land use. In **Bryan, TX** planners have evolved the traditional Form Based Code to include what they call a “Pattern Zone.” The “Pattern Zone” includes architectural designs and pre-approved plans for many of the forms

identified in the Form Based Code. Bryan, the home of Texas A&M, also passed an ordinance legalizing ADUs. Bryan’s pattern zone focuses on a downtown area of the city where single-family homes were frequently used as multi-family apartments by college students. The pattern zone offers plans for ADUs, flex houses, and 3-12 unit apartments with several design variations available for each. Bryan, TX’s pre-approval program is relatively new and has not published outcomes.

South Bend, IN’s award-winning rezoning was done incrementally over nearly three years and aimed to streamline the code to make it more user-friendly (over time they reduced 500 land uses to 65), while also promoting walkability, a new mixture of Missing Middle building types, and city fiscal sustainability. The plan is credited with increasing development activity in the city. The South Bend pre-approvals include designs for ADUs, single-family homes, duplexes, and 6-unit apartments with several design variations available for each.

Putting West Coast ADU Pre-approval Programs in Context

West coast ADU pre-approval programs are driven by the intense housing pressures faced by coastal cities. These places contend with a lack of developable land, high housing prices, constrained supply, and displacement concerns. The proliferation of local programs is supported by state policy incentives. GOPC reviewed them to learn lessons that can translate into the Ohio context.

Starting in 2016, the California Legislature began passing bills supportive of ADU development. These bills: legalized the addition of one ADU on many single-family lots in California; granted ministerial review of ADU applications (as opposed to discretionary review); waived parking requirements near transit; required building departments to decide on ADU applications within 60 days; reduced minimum lots sizes and other setback requirements; and have repeatedly enacted legislation aimed at reducing ADU fees and easing requirements associated with ADU development. The California Legislature also allocated \$100M to the Housing Finance Authority to offer income-restricted \$40,000 predevelopment grants for ADUs.

In 2019, the Oregon Legislature passed a bill (HB 2001) allowing duplexes, triplexes, quads, cottage clusters, and townhouses on single-family lots, depending on city size. Washington followed and passed state laws in 2023 requiring municipalities to address Missing Middle housing (HB1110) and also legalized two ADUs for most single-family lots in the state’s Growth Management Act urban growth areas (HB1337). Seattle is a leader in the promotion of ADU development. They have done this by adopting some similar policies as California, but also allowed two ADUs for most single-family site, removed parking and owner-occupancy requirements for ADUs, allowed ADUs to become condominiums, and put a square footage limit on the size of new single-family construction.

To promote development, South Bend is waiving System Development Charges (SDC) for infill development with 5 units or fewer. SDCs cover utility costs of connecting new development to sewer and water. South Bend also created a new Sewer Lateral Reimbursement Program which reimburses up to \$20,000 for connecting sewer lateral to new low- and moderate-income homes. The city also offers residential tax abatements for new construction.

South Bend reports that in the first year of the pre-approvals program, two projects are under construction and 10 are in the pipeline. These 12 projects amount to 10% of the city's annual housing starts.

Rezoning is also currently underway in **Kalamazoo, MI** but details are sparse. Media coverage of the rezoning reports that Kalamazoo will offer a pre-approvals program in conjunction with the zoning changes. The pre-approved plans are expected to include: carriage houses, duplexes, fourplexes, and single-family homes. The plans emphasize energy-efficient designs and include EV charging stations and solar panels. Launching the pre-approval program was reportedly paid for by Kalamazoo's Foundation for Excellence and cost \$230,000.

Some Pre-approval Programs are not Rooted in a Rezoning or Policy Reform Efforts. Some programs that promote the development of already-allowed housing types, particularly single-family homes, are in operation and were established without a significant antecedent rezoning or policy change. Programs in Green Bay, WI and Shaker Heights, OH, and Roanoke, VA are discussed in more detail on in the following section and on page 8.

While these programs demonstrate that it is possible to execute pre-approvals without rezoning, it is also conceivable that in some places zoning changes to address lot size will be necessary to promote even a single-family home pre-approval program. In some existing communities and First

Ring suburbs, even where single-family residential is an allowable use, existing lot size, height and set back requirements can present a challenge to infill development on vacant lots. The Cuyahoga County Planning Commission has illustrated this dynamic in their "Single-Family Zoning Analysis."

Pre-approvals are commonly employed to achieve broader goals rather than a stand-alone program operating in isolation. For example, **Shaker Heights, OH** operates a Vacant Lot program to promote greater uptake of vacant lots in productive use. They allow the lots to be conveyed to neighbors as side yards, community space, or for infill utilizing pre-approved facades.



Two family house in Roanoke, VA

It is also common for pre-approvals to be a secondary component of a larger development program. For example, **Roanoke, VA's** adopted a book of pre-designed residential plans in 2008 to promote housing development, and then later granted pre-approvals to several of those plans. Similarly, in 2022, The Michigan Municipal League created a pattern book called, *This Used to be Normal: Pattern Book Homes for 21st Century Michigan*, which includes detailed design plans compatible with Great Lakes vernacular architecture and encourages the use of pre-approvals in local communities. We were unable to find any local governments in Michigan that have issued pre-approvals in conjunction with the

pattern book yet, however, the book is still relatively new and it's likely some programs will be developed soon.

We also observed pre-approval programs used to leverage other community benefits. For example, in Los Angeles the city hired small- and minority-design firms particularly hard hit by the pandemic to create the pre-approved ADU designs offered there. The city further supported this sector by structuring the program so the designer, rather than the city, retained ownership of the plans and clients buy plans directly from the designer. Though recently the city has added one plan they own that is available to developers for free.

Los Angeles has also paired ADU development with housing security programs and connects homeowners willing to rent their ADUs to older adults in need of housing security. The program provides tenant screening, regular rental payments, and other property management assistance to homeowners.

Pre-approved programs also have the potential to evolve in practice to address other gaps in the marketplace. In South Bend, IN there are early conversations about developers using the pre-approved designs to achieve regulatory efficiencies and soft cost savings, build several units on scattered sites, and then operate a rent-to-own program for tenants living in the units, eventually passing on ownership to the tenant.

Pre-approval Programs in Modest Midwestern Markets

We found four pre-approval programs, in various stages of operation in the more modest Midwestern market context. These are programs in South Bend, IN; Green Bay, WI; Shaker Heights, OH, and Kalamazoo, MI.

The **South Bend** program is the most extensive of the four and was discussed in more detail starting on page 5. Kalamazoo's program was also discussed on page 6.

The Green Bay, WI and Shaker Heights, OH programs promote infill development in existing neighborhoods by making city-owned vacant land low-cost and easily accessible, as incentive for developers. This approach also helps the city by returning this land to productive use. Neither program required significant zoning changes to implement and both focus on single-family home construction.

Green Bay, WI offers eight single-family home plans through their *New Homes in Your Neighborhood* program, which was established around 2019. Plans are available for city-owned lots citywide but, like South Bend, certain designs are specified for certain areas. The city requires that owners occupy the final structure. Plans are free to developers and lots require a reimbursable \$500 deposit to secure. Green Bay offers a \$25,000 grant to develop a pre-approved house. We did not see this type of city-led development grant funding in any other city we studied. Outcomes for Green Bay's program were not available online and will require follow-up with the City of Green Bay, which we plan to do in the second phase of this work.

Shaker Heights, OH offers a façade-only pre-approval program as a component of their *Vacant*

Lot Program, which aims to return city-owned vacant lot to more productive use and support infill development in existing neighborhoods. This program offers nine single-family home facades but not complete, shovel-ready plans. The program has existed since before 2008 and has produced 2-3 new houses which started using the facades and then evolved the plans to better suit their development context. The city has a dedicated staff person who responds to developer inquiries and proactively reaches out to them about to streamline development approvals. While the city is working to promote development on city-owned land, the pre-approved facades could also be used on privately-held land.

Other Pre-approval Activity in Ohio

GOPC is aware of two non-municipal led pre-approval programs in Ohio. In **Cincinnati**, the Port of Greater Cincinnati is exploring ways to obtain pre-approvals on their different redevelopment projects. This program could be layered the recent successful passage of an ADU ordinance in Cincinnati in the summer of 2023.

In **Cleveland**, a now obsolete effort by Ohio City, Inc, a Community Development Corporation (CDC), offers a model that could be more widely disseminated. In this program, the CDC effectively filled the role of a pre-approval program by doing extra legwork to assemble vacant sites, designed plans for each site, and then got approvals from the city for the plans ahead of marketing them to developers or individuals. By the time the CDC was done, they were able to offer a site with a design plan that was entirely pre-approved and ready for construction. Nearly a dozen homes were built by Knez Homes as a result of Ohio City's efforts.

A Closer Look at Programmatic Details

The following programmatic themes emerged from the 14 programs we evaluated in depth, see Table 1 on page 3. For additional detail on each program, see the accompanying matrix, entitled “*Pre-approval Building Programs: Programmatic Details.*”

While this section goes into detail on different programmatic elements, ***the overarching theme is that elements of pre-approval programs can and do vary widely depending on the city’s goals and objectives.***

Programs can be city-wide or based in target neighborhoods. West Coast ADUs programs are by-right on many lots and can occur city-wide. On the other hand, the City of Bryan, TX focuses its pre-approvals in the Midtown District. In either case, the catalog of available designs often indicates which area of the city each design is appropriate for. In some pre-approval programs, like in Stockton, CA, additional review may be required in a historic or design overlay zones.

The elimination or reduction of parking requirements is a trend across programs and aids in the feasibility of the projects. Rezoning efforts across jurisdictions repeatedly reduce or eliminate parking requirements. In Seattle, parking requirements were eliminated for ADUs. The State of California also eliminated parking requirements for ADUs within a 1/2 mile of transit. Likewise, Raleigh, NC allows two ADUs per site on parcels near transit. South Bends’ rezoning eliminated off-street parking requirements and Clovis, CA’s program requires one parking space per cottage home.

Plans themselves can be owned by the city or designer. The most typical model we observed was that cities opt to purchase and hold designs themselves, usually offering them to developers for

free or at very low-cost. In Los Angeles and Seattle, the architect owns most of the plans and developers buy directly from them. The cost of the plans is still attractive, in Seattle plans are \$1,000 or less.

Rules for end use of the units vary dramatically across jurisdictions. Green Bay, WI has the most limited rules, requiring owner-occupancy for the single-family homes developed through its pre-approval program. Seattle is on the other end of the spectrum, and does not require owner-occupancy in either the primary unit or ADU, permits long- or short-term rentals, and even allows ADUs to be condominiumized and sold separately from the main house. Other places are in between. In South Bend, ownership is required in either the primary unit or an ADU. In Los Angeles, ADUs and primary units can both be renter occupied, but ADUs cannot be sold separately from the main property.

The processes cities used to develop designs varied. Several places, LA, Raleigh, and Seattle, hosted traditional design competitions with a jury that selected the winning designs. In Eugene, OR the city hired an architect to develop the plans. In Stockton, CA the city and a student academy developed the plans themselves. In Kalamazoo, MI the process was funded by a local foundation. And in Bryan, TX community outreach meetings were held to conduct a “visual preference survey” given to residents to hone in on preferred designs.

Counties can also adopt pre-approved plans. County-based plans are emerging particularly in California because the state is pushing both cities and counties to adopt ADU plans in the next several years. Currently Los Angeles County and San Diego County run ADU pre-approval programs.

Several programs use the pre-approved plans to promote energy efficient designs and building materials. Plans in LA require solar panels on pre-approved ADUs. In Sacramento, plans are required

to be 100% electric. Early media reports on Kalamazoo's programs suggest they are focused on energy efficient plans that include EV charging and solar panels.

Manufactured homes are granted pre-approvals in Seattle. Seattle grants pre-approved status to three pre-fabricated plans approved by the Washington State Department of Labor and Industries. In Los Angeles some businesses are experimenting with 3D printing ADUs but to date none of these units have pre-approvals.



Figure 2: Home with a second story apartment -Bryan, TX

Scant information is available on opposition to pre-approval programs but what we found follows traditional NIMBY arguments from affluent neighborhoods. In Seattle, wealthy historic neighborhoods challenged ADU and pre-approval programs over concerns about changing neighborhood character, generating traffic, limited parking, and contributing to displacement. More research on opposition will be conducted in phase two.

Early Conclusions About Applying this Tool in Ohio

In subsequent phases of research, GOPC will conduct additional analysis of programs that offer potential lessons and applicability in Ohio, but our initial national scan generated some early insights that we think can help inform future phases of work.

Pre-approval programs tied to city-owned vacant land present a significant opportunity for Ohio cities.

Ohio cities own and/or manage significant amounts of vacant land. Adding a pre-approval program to current vacant land dispensation efforts makes sense to adopt as standard practice and can likely be done without comprehensive rezoning.

Partnering with Land Banks on pre-approval programs could be a way for cities to achieve more impact and increase housing across the state.

County Land Reutilization Corporations (Land Banks) are increasingly addressing vacant land reutilization and expanding accessibly-priced housing options in Ohio. Recent investments through the state budget have increased their opportunities to demolish blighted residential properties that are beyond repair, and a new program established in the FY24-25 budget, *Welcome Home Ohio*, provides additional dollars for Land Banks to build accessibly-priced housing units in their counties.

Per this recent national scan, Green Bay, WI offers the closest existing model with their program geared at building single-family homes on city-owned land throughout the city (that also comes with a \$25,000 predevelopment grant). However, we believe there is even more potential for landbanks and cities to explore layering on additional affordability benefits by developing and holding duplexes, apartments, or single-family homes with backyard ADUs.

In the absence of a formal city-led pre-approval program, local non-profit developers can be encouraged to step in and replicate some of the intended objectives of a pre-approval program. A now-obsolete effort by Ohio City, Inc, a CDC in Cleveland, offers a model that could be more widely



Figure 3: Narrow House in South Bend, from Michael DiVita on Twitter

disseminated. In this program, the CDC effectively filled the role of a pre-approval program by doing extra legwork to assemble vacant sites, designed plans for each site, and then secured approvals from the city for the plans ahead of marketing them to developers or individuals. By the time the CDC was done, they could offer a site with a design plan that was entirely pre-approved and ready for construction.

Ohio could follow Michigan by creating a pattern book of housing designs appropriate to Ohio. The book could then be offered as a free resource that local jurisdictions use as the basis for a pre-approval program. In 2022, The Michigan Municipal League created a pattern book called, *This Used to be Normal: Pattern Book Homes for 21st Century Michigan*, which includes detailed design plans compatible with Great Lakes vernacular architecture and encourages local communities to grant pre-approvals of the plans. Providing a pattern book like this lowers the programmatic cost for a city to develop a pre-approvals program (for example, initial program development cost \$230,000 in Kalamazoo, MI).

To promote affordability, Ohio cities should consider layering other programs with pre-approvals. Even with a pre-approval program in place, the expense of new single-family home construction (estimated to be \$150-200/square foot) makes resulting development too expensive for many Ohioans and does not address the need for starter homes and other accessibly-priced housing that we routinely hear calls for around the state. To address the high cost of new construction, other supportive programs will be needed to work in tandem with the pre-approval. These programs could include: rezoning to legalize a range of housing types; layering pre-approvals with other efforts (like LA’s ADU accelerator program, which houses older adults facing housing insecurity in ADUs); or offering grant or other predevelopment funding to projects built using pre-approvals.

Ohio cities should consider comprehensive rezoning paired with pre-approval programs to promote a range of new housing types. Rooting a pre-approval program in a larger initiative, like rezoning, gives the best chance at producing the greatest number of units. South Bend, IN serves as an encouraging example of how a major rezoning to a Form Based Code and concerted efforts to nurture a home-grown development community, combined with a pre-approval program, can promote development activity. In 2022, 10% of South Bend’s housing starts resulted from their pre-approval program. This example illustrates how pre-approvals work best when tied to other broader programs rather than as a stand-alone program.

Ohio cities, like Columbus and Cincinnati, are on a growth-trajectory with some desirable, stable neighborhoods. They should conduct comprehensive rezoning allowing for ADUs as well as a range of other Missing Middle housing types. More research into places like South Bend and Kalamazoo is needed to understand how well ADUs work in more modest market contexts. ADUs offer a host of benefits for cities and residents, including: creating new ways to age-in-place, wealth-building for residents renting an apartment, and gentle densification that increases the fiscal stability of municipal budgets, to name a few. However, in Ohio, ADUs cannot currently be built without a difficult-to-obtain variance. ADUs programs are most tested in markets with a high-demand for housing, and more research into the legacy cities that have adopted these ordinances will be instructive as we consider if and how ADUs fit with legacy city housing strategies.

The places with the clearest potential for ADU development are those that already have some market strength, higher-income homeowners who can finance development, and desirable neighborhoods with limited development sites but consumer demand. Places like the Columbus and Cincinnati metros are well positioned to rezone to allow ADU development, as well as a range of other housing types, and could adopt pre-approval programs to promote the programs. In fact, Cincinnati’s city council recently passed an ADU-supportive ordinance in the summer of 2023, which could become the basis of a pre-approval program in the future.



ADU in California - Photo courtesy of buildinganadu.com

For reference information regarding any of the information cited in this report, please contact Erica Spaid Patras, espaid@greaterohio.org, at Greater Ohio Policy Center.