

CITY OF LA'S DRAFT

# Wildlife Ordinance

The Wildlife Ordinance is designed to protect our hillside neighborhoods from the dangers of overdevelopment, including landslides, flooding, wildlife habitat loss, and other hazards. Out-of-scale development has put hillside stability and natural habitats at risk, resulting in increased incidents of mudslides, erosion, and disrupted wildlife movement, as we saw in the aftermath of last winter's storms.

By setting thoughtful limits on new construction, the ordinance aims to protect both the natural landscape and the diverse wildlife that depends on it, while supporting responsible development and safeguarding personal property rights. These measures help maintain safe, stable hillsides and uninterrupted wildlife corridors for local species.

The Draft Wildlife Ordinance reflects over a decade of community input and careful planning, guided by both [scientific research](#) and resident feedback. Informed by a comprehensive 2021 study, the ordinance was shaped through multiple public workshops, hearings, and neighborhood discussions. Throughout this process, more than 62,000 notices were sent to local property owners, and countless hours were dedicated to listening to community voices and refining the ordinance.

The Wildlife Ordinance aims to balance hillside development with the natural landscape, supporting both community safety and the unique environment of the Santa Monica Mountains. The ordinance has four main goals:

- Keeping hillside development within a reasonable footprint to maintain the stability of the land and reduce risks like mudslides and erosion.
- Protecting native plants and wildlife that thrive in these areas and depend on a connected habitat.
- Ensuring that wildlife can move freely between habitats, reducing the risk of injury to animals.
- Preserving property rights and allowing for thoughtful, responsible development that respects the area's natural features



## Applicability

The Wildlife Ordinance applies to specific types of projects in the Wildlife District that could impact hillside stability, safety, or the natural landscape. These projects include:

- New construction over 500 square feet.
- Large remodels on hillside properties where the cost of changes in a year is more than half of what it would cost to replace the entire building.
- Additions to any existing structure over 500 square feet.
- Grading or earth-moving work that involves more than 500 cubic yards of soil.
- Removal of any Protected or Significant Tree, or any tree located within a public right-of-way.

These activities will be reviewed to ensure they follow the Wildlife Ordinance's guidelines for safe and responsible development.

Each of the five types of projects will need to meet specific requirements of the Wildlife Ordinance, depending on the type of work planned. Existing buildings or structures won't be required to make changes to comply with these new regulations.

For certain larger projects, there will be an additional review step, called Project Review, to make sure they are designed with attention to protecting natural and wildlife resources. This review is conducted by City Planning to ensure that larger developments fit safely and thoughtfully within the surrounding environment.

## Development Regulations

The Wildlife Ordinance introduces specific guidelines for construction projects in the Wildlife District. These guidelines focus on areas important for hillside stability, safety, and preservation of natural habitats, including:

- Grading – controlling earth-moving activities to help prevent landslides and erosion.
- Residential Floor Area – managing building size so that homes are suited to the natural landscape.
- Lot Coverage – limiting how much of the land can be covered by buildings and hardscape to reduce flooding and allow rainwater absorption.
- Height – limiting the height of new buildings to reduce risks related to slope stability and visual impact.
- Fences and Walls – ensuring they are designed to protect wildlife as well as resident privacy and security.
- Trees – protecting mature and significant trees that contribute to hillside stability and wildlife habitat.
- Vegetation and Landscaping – encouraging native plants that require less water and support local wildlife.
- Lighting – reducing light pollution to create a safer environment for nocturnal wildlife.
- Windows – requiring bird-safe designs to prevent accidental bird collisions.
- Solid Waste Enclosures – making sure that waste storage areas are secure and minimize wildlife encounters.

Existing hillside regulations, like the Baseline Hillside Ordinance and the Mulholland Scenic Parkway Specific Plan, will still apply unless the Wildlife Ordinance sets stricter standards.

# Minimizing Development Footprint and Land Disturbance

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## Lot Coverage

Lot coverage refers to the percentage of a lot covered by buildings and hard surfaces like pools, patios, and sport courts. When too much of a lot is covered by these structures, it reduces natural ground, which absorbs rainwater. This increases the risk of flooding and landslides, especially in hillside areas.

## Current Regulations

Today, hillside properties are allowed to cover up to 40% of the lot with buildings. However, this 40% limit applies only to buildings and does not include other hard surfaces like pools and patios.

## What the Draft Ordinance Proposes

The Wildlife Ordinance proposes expanding the lot coverage limit to 50%, but also would include all hard surfaces—not just buildings. Under the ordinance:

- Buildings, pools, patios, and other hardscape combined could cover up to 50% of a lot's area.
- For very large lots over 200,000 square feet, lot coverage would be capped at 100,000 square feet to preserve ample natural space and reduce flooding risks.

## Who Is Affected

These changes would apply to new construction, major remodels, and additions on most hillside lots. However, smaller residential lots (R1 and R2 zones) would keep the existing lot coverage rules, as they are generally smaller and more constrained. To find out if you live in an R1 or R2 zoned parcel, go to: [zimas.lacity.org](https://zimas.lacity.org).

## Residential Floor Area

Residential Floor Area, or RFA, is the total livable square footage of all buildings on a property, including the main home and any accessory buildings like ADUs. This figure helps regulate the overall size of buildings in hillside areas to balance development with natural land stability.

## Current Regulations

In hillside areas, current rules set RFA limits based on the steepness of the lot. The amount of total RFA allowed is determined by evaluating different sections of the lot's slope: flatter sections contribute more to the total RFA, while steeper sections contribute less. This limit doesn't regulate where on the lot you can build but rather sets an overall limit for all construction based on the land's natural grade.

To ensure property owners can develop even on very steep lots, the regulations also guarantee a minimum RFA, calculated as a percentage of the lot size. Currently, hillside properties can also build basements without counting them toward the RFA, which allows for larger overall home sizes.

## What the Draft Ordinance Proposes

**RFA Adjustments for Steep Slopes:** To protect sensitive hillside areas, the Wildlife Ordinance proposes no longer allocating RFA for very steep sections of a lot (over 60% slope or 31-degree angle). Under this change, only flatter sections of a lot would contribute to the total allowable RFA. This is important because building large homes on steep lots often requires extensive grading and soil removal, which can destabilize the hillside and increase the risk of landslides. By limiting the RFA for steeper areas, the ordinance encourages building sizes that fit the natural landscape and help maintain slope stability. The guaranteed minimum RFA will remain unchanged, ensuring that even steep lots retain a reasonable development allowance.

**Removing the Basement Exemption:** Today's existing basement exemption has allowed hillside development to avoid square footage limits by building excessively large basements. Under the Draft Ordinance, basements would now count toward a home's RFA. The exemption has previously allowed overly large basements, which can weaken hillsides and increase landslide risks.

## Grading

Grading involves moving soil and rock to prepare a site for construction. In hillside areas, excessive grading can destabilize slopes, leading to dangerous landslides, flooding, and loss of natural habitats.

### Current Regulations

Today, hillside grading is limited based on lot size. Generally, properties can grade up to 1,000 cubic yards of soil, with an additional 10% of the lot size. There are also exemptions for certain grading, such as grading for driveways and some portions of building foundations.

### What the Draft Ordinance Proposes:

To protect hillside stability, the Wildlife Ordinance proposes the following limits on grading:

- No grading or construction on slopes steeper than 100% or a 45 degree angle, except when needed to meet the minimum floor area allowance.
- All grading for driveways, basements, and foundations (except for caissons/piles) would count toward the site's grading limit.
- On very steep slopes (over 60% or a 31 degree angle), "remedial grading" – soil work to fix hazardous conditions – will count toward the grading limit, except where absolutely necessary for safety.

These new grading rules will apply to new construction, major remodels, additions, and grading permits, helping to preserve natural slopes and reduce landslide and erosion risks.



# Facilitate Wildlife Movement and Minimize Injury to Wildlife

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## Fences and Walls

In hillside areas, fences and walls help secure properties, but certain types can unintentionally harm wildlife that travel through these spaces. The Wildlife Ordinance aims to make fences and walls safer for animals while respecting residents' need for security.

### Current Regulations

Today, fences and walls in hillside areas are regulated for height, placement, and materials.

### What the Draft Ordinance Proposes:

The Wildlife Ordinance would continue to allow fences and walls but proposes a new restriction on materials known to harm wildlife. New fences and walls cannot include barbed wire, sharp spikes, uncapped hollow posts, or similar features that could injure animals. This change would apply to new construction and major remodels where fences or walls are added or modified.

## Windows

Windows in hillside homes can pose a hazard to birds, especially when they involve large, clear expanses of glass. Birds often cannot detect glass as a barrier, leading to accidental collisions that can cause serious injury or death.

### Current Regulations

Existing city regulations for windows focus on insulation, safety, and emergency access but do not address bird safety.

### What the Draft Ordinance Proposes:

To help prevent bird collisions, the Wildlife Ordinance would require bird-safe treatments on large windows and glass walls for new construction, major remodels, and additions. These treatments make glass more visible to birds and can include:

- UV-reflective glass that birds can see but appears clear to people
- Patterned glass or visible markers that break up large glass surfaces
- Architectural features, such as screens or dividers, that reduce clear, reflective expanses

These new rules apply only to new projects and do not affect existing homes.



## Height

In hillside areas, building height can impact both the natural landscape and wildlife, especially birds. Taller buildings may require more grading and retaining walls, which can disturb the land and pose risks for wildlife.

### Current Regulations

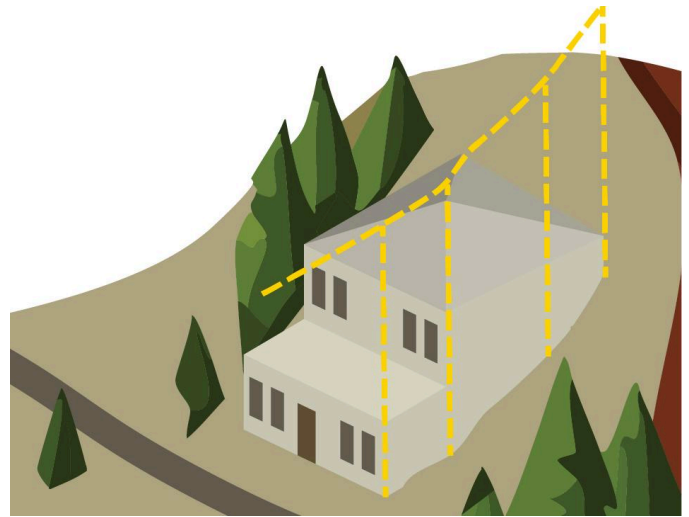
Currently, hillside properties are restricted by “envelope height.” This measures the building’s height within an “envelope” that follows the natural slope of the land. For example, a home might be allowed an envelope height of 30 feet, meaning all parts of the building must fit within an imaginary 30-foot-tall plane that follows the shape of the slope. This method limits height based on the terrain, allowing buildings to step down with the natural landscape. The Mulholland Scenic Parkway Specific Plan has additional height restrictions.

### What the Draft Ordinance Proposes:

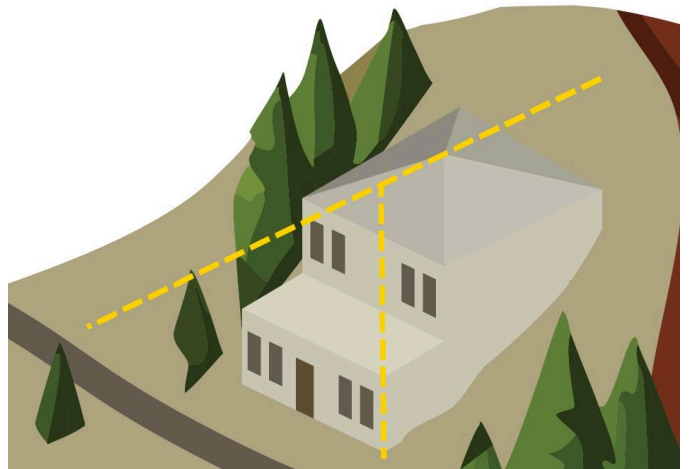
The Wildlife Ordinance introduces a new “overall height” limit, which is different from envelope height. Overall height measures the total vertical distance from the lowest ground level next to the building up to the tallest point on the roof, regardless of slope. Under the ordinance, this overall height would be capped at 45 feet for new construction, major remodels, and additions. This proposed limit addresses two main concerns:

**Reducing Land Disruption:** Tall, multi-story buildings on steep slopes often need extensive grading and retaining walls, which can lead to erosion.

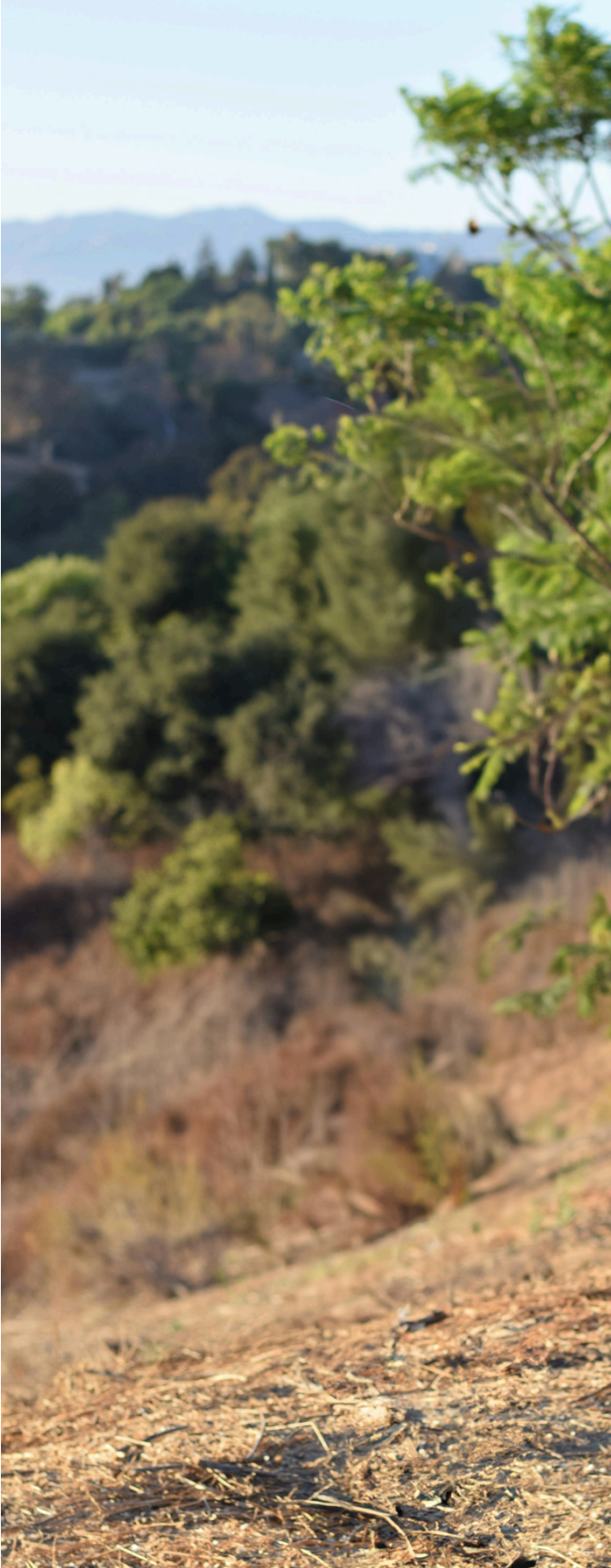
**Protecting Bird Safety:** Higher structures increase the risk of bird collisions, particularly when reflective glass is used. Limiting overall height helps mitigate this risk.



**ENVELOPE HEIGHT**



**OVERALL HEIGHT**



## **Project Review**

Project Review is a process in which City Planning evaluates large or impactful projects to ensure they fit well within the surrounding environment, protect wildlife resources, and maintain hillside stability.

Project Review applications are processed by City Planning staff and the Director of City Planning is the decision maker. A public hearing is only required if the project may have a significant effect on neighboring properties. The Director's decision typically must be issued within 75 days after the application or environmental review is deemed complete.

### **Current regulations**

Today, in many hillside areas, Project Review is required for homes that exceed 17,500 SF.

### **What the Draft Ordinance Proposes:**

Under the Wildlife Ordinance, Project Review would apply to more types of projects that could impact hillside stability and wildlife habitats.

Projects needing Project Review would include:

- Projects involving over 1,000 cubic yards of remedial grading, which can significantly alter the land.
- Projects creating or resulting in 6,000 square feet or more of Residential Floor Area.
- Any project located in a designated Wildlife Resource area, as shown on City Planning's wildlife resources map. Projects in these areas would also need a biological assessment to identify potential impacts.

With Project Review, City Planning can work closely with applicants to ensure their designs meet the goals of the Wildlife Ordinance, with minimal impact on natural resources. Projects must demonstrate compatibility with the surrounding landscape, avoid major land alterations, and preserve wildlife access to key resources. A Director's Determination is required for Project Review.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### **Will the Wildlife Ordinance stop me from building an Accessory Dwelling Unit (ADU)?**

No, the ordinance doesn't change the state laws that allow ADUs, so they will still be permitted. The same zoning standards will continue to apply to ADUs.

### **Can I rebuild my home if it's damaged or destroyed in a natural disaster?**

Yes. If a natural disaster damages or destroys your home, you can still rebuild it under existing city rules. The Wildlife Ordinance won't add any new restrictions on rebuilding homes lost to events like wildfires, floods, or earthquakes.

### **Can I remodel my home or add more rooms?**

Yes. You can remodel or add onto your home. However, if the addition is large enough, some regulations under the Wildlife Ordinance may apply.

### **What if I can't fully comply with the Wildlife Ordinance?**

If you need a small adjustment (up to 10%) to meet the regulations, you can apply for a Project Adjustment, decided by the Director of Planning. For hardships or other unusual circumstances, you can apply for a Project Exception, reviewed by the Area Planning Commission.

### **Will this ordinance affect my home value?**

It's hard to predict the housing market, but the ordinance is designed to balance responsible property development with preserving natural habitats. The city has implemented similar protections in hillside areas for years, and property values have remained strong.

### **What is the next step?**

The Wildlife Ordinance has been reviewed by the City Attorney's Office and returned to the City Council. The City Council's Planning and Land Use Management (PLUM) Committee will make a recommendation, and then the City Council will consider it.