



RENO-SPARKS INDIAN COLONY CASE STUDY

Overview

The Reno-Sparks Indian Colony (RSIC) is a Tribal Nation that represents three Great Basin Native Bands: the Numa, Washeshu and Newe Peoples. Their ancestral homelands span across present-day Nevada, California, Oregon, Idaho and Utah. Today, the RSIC land base has expanded to 15,292 acres, including urban areas in Reno, NV and rural lands in the Hungry Valley. The RSIC has over 1,300 enrolled members and is governed by a Tribal Council headed by an elected Chairman and empowered by the RSIC Constitution.

In June 2024, the RSIC adopted its own building codes to improve construction oversight, increase safety and accessibility and ensure that development on RSIC lands reflect community values.



Reno-Sparks Indian Colony Hungry Valley

Code Enactment

Prior to enactment, RSIC relied on case-by-case construction oversight using codes from nearby jurisdictions. This approach made it difficult to standardize practices and support long-term planning. The need for formal codification was first identified in the 2015 Washoe County Regional Hazard Mitigation Plan and again with the 2020 update of the Hazard Mitigation Plan. This plan encouraged codifying model building codes and helped motivate staff to begin the process.

Director of Planning and Community Development, Candace Stowell, and Assistant Planner, Gennavie Bronczyk, were instrumental in the codification process. While RSIC initially worked with a third-party firm, nearly all of the drafting was completed in-house. Stowell led the policy initiative and community engagement while Bronczyk handled the technicalities. Initial work included:

- Researching, reviewing and comparing model and regional codes
- Understanding community needs for code adaptation
- Coordinating monthly interdepartmental working groups to refine drafts

As codified in 2024, RSIC's Building Code Ordinance incorporates provisions from model codes, including:

- 2018 International Building, Residential, Fire, Existing Building, and Green Construction Codes®
- 2017 National Electrical Code
- Uniform Plumbing and Mechanical Codes

- 2018 Northern Nevada Amendments
- International Wildland Urban Interface Code®
- International Energy Conservation Code®

However, the model codes were not adopted in whole. These codes were tailored to the RSIC community and values, including:

- Clear allowances and definitions for traditional and modern housing types (e.g., tiny homes, off-site, modular, manufactured)
- A handyman exemption for small-scale, non-trade work under \$1,000
- Stricter permitting thresholds for accessory structures (lowered from 200 to 120 sq. ft.)
- Community-informed exceptions for features like concrete patios and chain link fencing
- Enhanced accessibility (e.g., ramps, walk-in showers)
- Protections for cultural resources, including inadvertent discoveries during construction

The Building Code Ordinance was enacted after two formal readings by the Tribal Council. In June 2024, RSIC passed Resolution 2024-RS-77, giving the code full legal authority on all trust and restricted fee lands. The code is enforced under RSIC's sovereign jurisdiction, without reliance on the State of Nevada. Staff are already working to return for enactment of the 2024 I-Codes® with amendments tailored to their community.

As Stowell explained, "Having your own building code is the ultimate point of sovereignty...making it tailored to what the community members and what the Tribal Council want, and making sure that we're not using somebody else's building codes."

To prepare for codification and presenting in front of the Tribal Council, RSIC staff:

- Held a formal work session with the Tribal Council
- Published updates in Camp News, the free monthly publication for the RSIC community
- Ran an internal working group for over a year to refine the draft
- Collected input through community planning surveys



Illegal Shed on Colony

Financials

The overall cost of code development was fairly low. While RSIC already had a consulting contract in place, the majority of the technical work was done in-house. Other expenses included ICC training courses and staff salaries. No additional external grants or contracts were required.

Challenges

Community Engagement and Education

While RSIC prioritized timely code enactment model building codes, they acknowledged the need for community education. Many residents were unfamiliar with building codes in general and were unsure how

the 2024 ordinance would affect their homes or properties.

Some challenges include:

- Misunderstandings about “grandfathering” existing structures
- Prevalence of unpermitted buildings, especially sheds
- Lack of awareness about new permitting processes
- Concerns about enforcement and fees

Post-enactment, RSIC staff shifted their focus to educating the community. They are working on explaining what the code is, how it has changed

and why it matters. After reflecting, staff noted that more workshops and outreach prior to codifying model building codes would have made getting buy-in from the community easier. They now plan to increase outreach efforts accordingly before the next code update (anticipated to include the 2024 I-Codes®).



Inspecting Illegal Shed

Enforcement

RSIC contracts with a third-party firm for inspections, but the arrangement has proven expensive and limited. Inspectors are based out of Utah, and each visit costs approximately \$2,000. Additionally, early confusion with the firm led to incomplete reviews focused only on fire/life safety rather than full code compliance.

To improve enforcement, RSIC is:

- Developing a new RFP to secure a more local and cost-effective inspection partner
- Exploring ways to train and certify Tribal members in inspection and enforcement roles
- Considering commercial permitting fees to financially support the program and capacity building

In addition, RSIC is preparing an amendment to the ordinance that would direct code citations to Tribal Court. This change is intended to strengthen the enforcement process and clarify legal pathways for compliance.

Impact

The RSIC’s enactment of their Building Code Ordinance is a monumental step toward the long-term resilience of their built environment. By formalizing construction standards under sovereign Tribal law, RSIC has laid the foundation for safer, more consistent development across their lands.

One immediate positive impact has been the implementation of a fully digital permitting system. This system has replaced paper workflows, centralized review and tracking and improved coordination across departments.

Beyond permitting, the building code has helped:

- Standardize internal procedures across planning, housing and enforcement
- Support grant readiness and infrastructure planning
- Promote long-term housing quality and safety through clear minimum standards for new construction and renovation

Lessons Learned and Opportunities

- Internal expertise is essential. By investing in technically experienced staff, RSIC reduced reliance on third-party companies and ensured the code reflected the community's specific needs.
- Clarity in contracts matters. Ensure third-party scopes of work are explicit. Some vendors focus on software over services or misunderstand expectations.
- Community outreach strengthens codification and implementation. While RSIC needed to prioritize timely enactment, staff recognize that more upfront education and engagement could have eased implementation. Future updates will be paired with workshops, educational materials and more opportunities for community input.
- Cultural integration and workforce development are areas for growth. The next phase of RSIC's code journey includes training community members for inspection and enforcement roles and further amending the codes to further reflect traditional and cultural values.

Learn more about the Reno-Sparks Indian Colony – www.rsic.org