

General Plan Guidelines, 2017 Update- FAQ

OPR is statutorily required by Government Code Section 65040.2 requires OPR to adopt and periodically revise State guidelines for the preparation and content of local general plans for all cities and counties in California. The 2017 version of the General Plan Guidelines (GPG) was informed by years of research, interagency input, statewide workshops, comment letters, and engagement with various stakeholders.

Why update the GPG?

The GPG serves as the “how to” document for cities and counties that are drafting or updating their general plans. While the GPG is not a legally binding document, it pulls together statutory language from planning law and provides guidance on methods of compliance. The GPG is a resource, to help planners, community members, and local decision makers achieve their goals for how their community develops and grows.

The last version of the GPG has not been updated since 2003. Numerous legal changes have occurred in the past 14 years. As each legislative cycle has passed bills creating or modifying statutory requirements, changes were addressed through technical advisories and parallel guidance documents.

Additionally, new tools, resources, case studies, and examples are available for communities to create and implement their vision. And expanding research is demonstrating the importance of local communities in regional, state, and greater issues such as climate change and equity.

The 2017 GPG pulls together existing legislation, guidance, technical assistance, case studies, tools, and resources, and makes them available to communities on one platform. It connects users to data, templates, research, and case studies without requiring the user to navigate multiple searches and sites. Finally, it connects local goals and visions with larger issues, to assist in planning for the most beneficial outcomes.

In short, OPR wanted to create a more modern, user friendly, and useful GPG.

What is new/ different in the GPG?

The new GPG has many significant changes from the 2003 version. The changes are intended to inform users of updated planning law, as well as improve the usability of the GPG. These changes include:

- A new introduction and visioning section
- Entirely new chapter on community engagement
- Statutory checklists for all mandatory elements
- Updated and expanded sections on visioning and community engagement

- New sections on optional elements: healthy communities, equitable and resilient communities, economic development, and climate change
- Incorporation of existing legislative changes and guidance
- Links to additional online tools and resources
- Recommended policies in cut and paste format, with examples of adopted policy language
- Infill compendium
- Renewable energy compendium
- Model template for mitigation of agricultural land conversion
- General Plan Mapping Tool, enabling free, easy access to helpful data for cities and counties

Is the GPG law? Does my (city/county) have to comply with the GPG?

The GPG is not law, but rather guidance on how to comply with statute. Communities can complete a general plan or update without using the GPG, as long as they comply with all statutory requirements in planning law. The GPG is a tool to help communities understand statute.

My (city/county) is in the middle of a general plan update. Will we need to change our draft/start over?

The GPG is not law, and does not create nor negate any existing law. Thus, a community that is in the midst of a general plan update and has been following statutory requirements should not be affected by the GPG. The GPG does provide guidance on general plan statutes, including recent legislation. The GPG may be useful for communities undergoing a general plan update, regardless of what phase of the process they are in. However, it does not change any requirements and is an advisory, not mandatory, document.

How often is my (city/county) required to update their general plan?

By statute, the general plan is required to be updated “periodically.” While there is no requirement for how often to update the general plan, the planning period has traditionally been 15-20 years. Some cities and counties update their general plans as often as every 5 years, while others update in portions over time. The housing element is the only portion of the general plan that is on a mandated update schedule- 4,5,or 8 years, as listed by the Housing and Community Development agency (HCD)/

How will I know what is required and what is recommended?

OPR made every effort to separate requirements from recommendations. Every required element has its statute listed, each section of statute explained, and a checklist of mandatory requirements at the beginning of the section. Additionally, the language of

“shall” (for requirements) and “should” (for recommendations) has been examined by legal experts.

I submitted a comment letter on the public draft. Can I find out what the response to my comment was?

OPR held dozens of workshops around the state, receiving hundreds of comments in person and through letters. Participants were assured their comments would not be made public in order to incentivize the most honest input. OPR looked over every suggestion and comment and addressed them in the text where possible. If you have a specific question about your comment, please feel free to reach out to OPR directly.

Is climate change (adaptation) required to be addressed by a general plan?

General Plans are required to include an analysis of climate change adaptation in the Safety Element of the General Plan. Further guidance on how to do the analysis, meet timelines, and how to meet statutory requirements is provided in Chapter 4, Required Elements, Safety.

Is climate change (greenhouse gas emissions) required to be addressed by a general plan?

Greenhouse gas emissions (GHGs) are not required by statute to be addressed in the general plan. However, GHGs are required to be addressed in the California Environmental Quality Act analysis prepared for the general plan. For this reason, many local governments also choose to incorporate GHGs in local plans as well. Many local governments address GHG emissions as a part of the general plan or as a part of a climate action plan or greenhouse gas emissions reduction plan coordinated with the general plan. For more guidance on addressing greenhouse gas emissions in a general plan or in related documents see Chapter 8, Climate Change.

SB 1000 was passed last year, there is some guidance in the GPG, but the website says OPR will be hosting more outreach, is that true?

Yes, SB 1000 was passed after public comment was finished. Since this is new legislation it will be important to hear more about the process, definitions, and potential policies over the coming year. OPR will be working with state, regional, and local partners across the state to provide additional information and guidance to assist with implementation. More information can be found on the website.

Is health required?

Health is something jurisdictions across the state are increasingly adopting, but it is optional. The new guidelines have many resources for local governments to help them integrate health considerations. If a city or county has a disadvantaged population, in order to comply with SB 1000, there are certain health-related policies including environmental health including air quality, food access, physical activity, and safe and sanitary homes that need to be addressed. See chapter 4 EJ for more details.