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A Vision for Long-Range Planning

Designing Healthy, Equitable, Resilient, and Economically Vibrant Places

“A city is not gauged by its length and width, but by the broadness of its vision and the height of its dreams.”

—Herb Caen

Why the General Plan Matters

California state law requires each city and county to adopt a general plan “for the physical development of the county or city, and any land outside its boundaries which in the planning agency’s judgment bears relation to its planning” (*Gov. Code § 65300*). The general plan expresses the community’s development goals and embodies public policy relative to the distribution of future **land uses**, both public and private. The California Supreme Court has described general plans as the “charter to which [zoning] ordinance[s] must conform”, but the general plan extends far beyond zoning and land use (*Leshar Communications, Inc. v. City of Walnut Creek* (1990) 52 Cal.3d 531, 540).

According to Litman’s *Land Use Impact Costs of Transportation*, studies show that **land use** decisions affect **transportation**, electricity, and water demand. Each planning decision affects multiple objectives beyond the immediate outcomes. General plans benefit local communities by promoting better projects, streamlined processes, integrated planning, and improved access and use of available resources.

A general plan allows a community to create a vision for its future.



Image by Urban Advantage, Ferrell Madden Lewis

Furthermore, local policies affect building decisions, energy efficiency, and the development of infrastructure.

A local general plan should start with a shared community vision that will help set priorities throughout the planning process, and inform decision makers about community values. Creating a community vision may include the following:

- Expanded outreach to all members of the community, including public agencies and local residents
- Looking back to identify past challenges and accomplishments
- Examining current data and emerging data trends
- Considering future issues, challenges, and goals

With continued input and engagement from community members and decision makers, the processes of preparing, adopting, implementing, and maintaining the general plan serves to:

- Provide a basis for local government decision-making, including decisions on development approvals and exactions
- Provide residents with opportunities to participate in the planning and decision-making processes of their communities
- Inform residents, developers, decision makers, and other cities and counties of the ground rules that guide development within a particular community

Engaging the community in multiple ways ensures a strong general plan. For example, the [City of Chula Vista](#) held numerous community workshops to craft their vision statement, and used it to inform future goals and policies. The [City of Chino](#) engaged with the community at existing events in developing its vision statement, traveling to farmers markets, events, and local groups before meeting with city officials to craft the final statement. Chino also used the vision statement to inform the land use diagram included in their general plan, ensuring the community's values were reflected in the future growth of the city. [Chapter 3](#) discusses community engagement in more detail.

Local General Plans and Statewide Goals

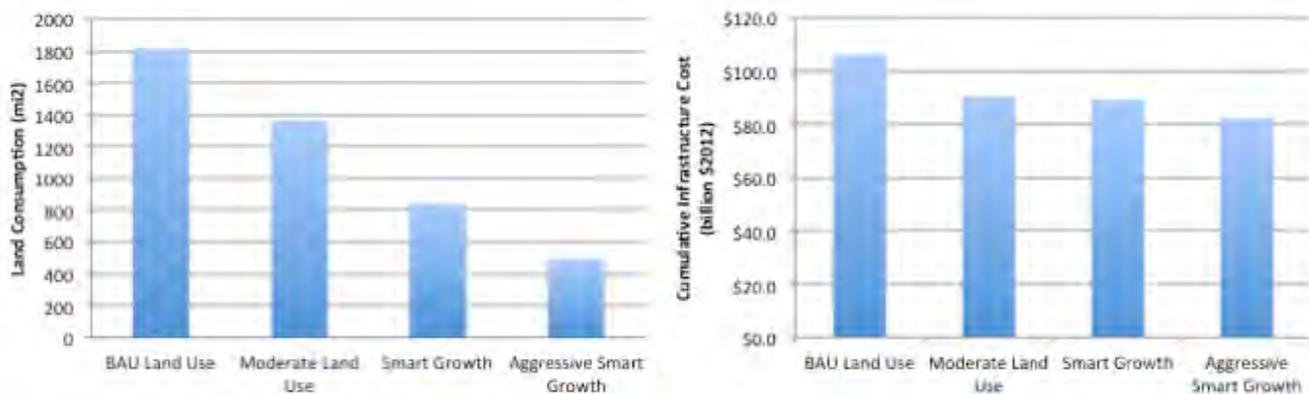
Cities and counties are critical partners in helping to achieve statewide goals. The [U.S. Census Bureau](#) projects California's population to reach 50 million residents by 2050. While the largest population will continue to be in Los Angeles County and the San Francisco Bay Area, the largest growth rates are expected to be in the Inland Empire, Sacramento Region, and San Joaquin Valley. Additionally, California's demographic diversity continues to increase, making California a minority-majority state, with residents from over sixty nations, speaking dozens of languages. Almost half of California's residents will identify as Hispanic by 2050, despite decreased immigration from Latin America. Increased immigration from Asia and the Middle East will continue to diversify communities and increase the foreign born percentage of Californians to nearly thirty percent. The overall state economy will continue to grow, but numerous factors will affect how individuals and families benefit. Shifts in demand for labor, regional disparities, and increasing retirement rates among older residents will create differing needs throughout the state. As all Californians live longer, an increase in elderly and middle age residents will increase and shift demands on infrastructure such as housing and education, and resources including transportation and social services. Accommodating this growth equitably while

protecting the state’s environment, supporting equitable development and a strong economy, and preserving the state’s natural and working landscapes – all in the context of climate change – will be critical in the coming decades. Cities and counties are key partners in achieving these goals at both the state and local level.

Decisions made at the local level have a real impact on, for example, statewide greenhouse gas emissions. Local actions help determine how vulnerable the community and the state will be in the face of a changing climate and, alternatively, how resilient they can be by addressing such vulnerabilities. In many cases, the impacts of these decisions can be measured. For instance, tools like [Urban Footprint](#) can estimate health, infrastructure, services and other costs associated with various land use patterns. Measuring impacts and outcomes enables communities to weigh costs and benefits of new development and to grow in a manner consistent with community values.

Quantifying outcomes can provide meaningful contrasts for general plan development. For example, the graphs below show the aggregate impacts of development decisions on land consumption and infrastructure costs, statewide.

Figure 3: Land Consumption and Infrastructure Costs Increase with Less Dense Development Patterns



These results come from analysis prepared by Calthorpe Associates for the state as a whole. City- and county-level analyses have yielded similar results. Current density patterns (BAU) and increasingly dense development expectations form the basis for the land use assumptions.

California’s Planning Priorities

The 1978 [Urban Strategy](#) first articulated statewide planning priorities for California which were adopted in law in 2002. Briefly, the priorities are to

1. Promote infill development and rehabilitation and utilization of existing infrastructure, including water, sewer, and transportation.
2. Protect the state’s natural and working lands, including agricultural land, lands of cultural and historic significance, wetlands, and wildlands.
3. Develop in an efficient manner that limits sprawl and minimizes costs to taxpayers.

These priorities are intended to inform planning and investment at all levels of government.

California's Planning Priorities

The state planning priorities, which are intended to promote equity, strengthen the economy, protect the environment, and promote public health and safety in the state, including in urban, suburban, and rural communities, shall be as follows:

- (a) To promote infill development and equity by rehabilitating, maintaining, and improving existing infrastructure that supports infill development and appropriate reuse and redevelopment of previously developed, underutilized land that is presently served by transit, streets, water, sewer, and other essential services, particularly in underserved areas, and to preserving cultural and historic resources.
- (b) To protect environmental and agricultural resources by protecting, preserving, and enhancing the state's most valuable natural resources, including working landscapes such as farm, range, and forest lands, natural lands such as wetlands, watersheds, wildlife habitats, and other wildlands, recreation lands such as parks, trails, greenbelts, and other open space, and landscapes with locally unique features and areas identified by the state as deserving special protection.
- (c) To encourage efficient development patterns by ensuring that any infrastructure associated with development, other than infill development, supports new development that does all of the following:
 - (1) Uses land efficiently.
 - (1) Is built adjacent to existing developed areas to the extent consistent with the priorities specified pursuant to subdivision (b).
 - (1) Is located in an area appropriately planned for growth.
 - (1) Is served by adequate transportation and other essential utilities and services.
 - (1) Minimizes ongoing costs to taxpayers

As of this update, the state is in the midst of a severe drought, continues to lose agricultural lands due to conversion, and continues to face severe [air quality](#) challenges in several regions. At the same time, since the 1970s, California has introduced a robust suite of environmental goals and policies that will help combat these issues. These policy tools have and will continue to help improve the quality of the state's environment. Most notably, the suite of policies that California has adopted to address [climate change](#) will touch on nearly every facet of the state's development.

California's Climate Change Policy and Local Communities

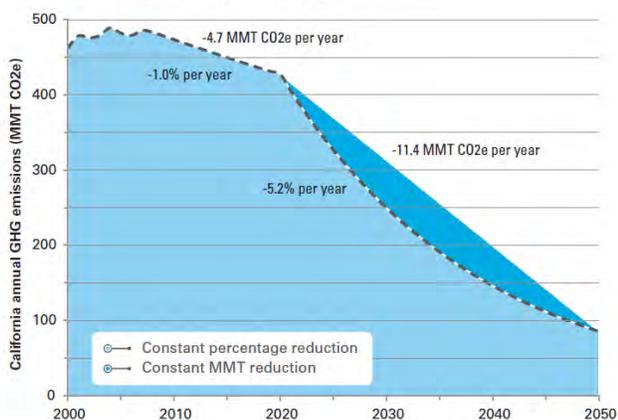
The effects of [climate change](#) and pollution pose great risks for Californians, including more frequent and more intense forest fires, more air pollution, deadly heat waves, a significant reduction in snowpack and state water supplies, sea level rise and erosion along California's long coastline, and billions of dollars in damage to our agricultural, tourism, recreation, and other industries. These impacts have the potential to be hugely disruptive to how local governments operate.

[Executive Order S-03-05](#) established greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions reduction targets for the state. Subsequently, [AB 32 \(2006\)](#) established a comprehensive program to achieve quantifiable, cost-effective reductions of greenhouse gases on a scheduled basis. Additional legislation supported AB 32, including [SB 375 \(2008\)](#), which aligned land use and transportation with environmental goals locally through Sustainable Community Strategies (SCS), and [Executive Order B-30-15](#), which establishes 40% below 1990 levels by 2030 as an intermediate target towards the 2050 goals. The [2014 revised AB 32 scoping plan](#) highlights the importance of local government in reducing emissions to achieve long-term statewide goals. In order to achieve California’s 2050 emissions goal of 80% below 1990 levels, emissions must decline several times faster than the rate needed to reach the 2020 emissions limit. The 2017 revised scoping plan, per SB 32 and SB 197, is being developed to include 2030 targets and additional local guidance.

[Transportation](#) and electricity generation are the largest sources of the state’s GHG emissions. State policies focus on reducing transportation emissions through cleaner fuels and promoting alternative access to destinations (e.g., walking, biking, transit, and carpooling). The state’s goals for renewable energy and energy efficiency will also reduce emissions from electricity generation.

Figure 4: GHG Emissions Reductions Will Need to Occur at a Faster Rate to Achieve the State’s 2050 GHG Emissions Reduction Target of 80 percent below 1990 levels, as established by EO S-3-05

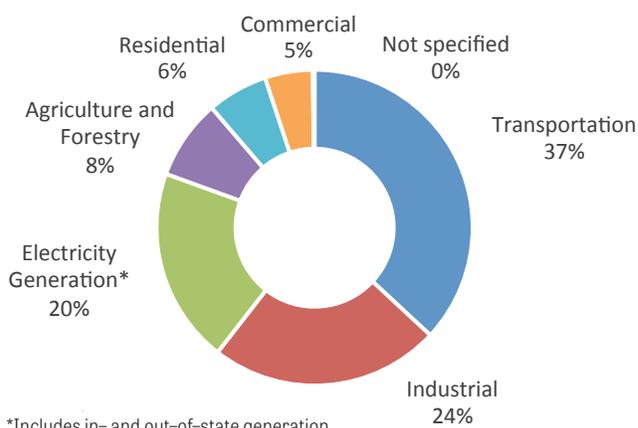
Pre-2020 and Post-2020 emissions trajectories



Source: Data from California Air Resources Board

Figure 5: GHG Emissions in California Are Dominated by Emissions from Transportation and Electricity Generation (Data from: California Air Resources Board)

Greenhouse Gas Emissions in California, 2014



General Plan Basics

The purpose of a general plan is to guide land use planning decisions. Under state law, subdivisions, capital improvements, development agreements, and many other land use actions must be consistent with the adopted general plan. In counties and general law cities, zoning and specific plans are also required to conform to the general plan. In addition, preparing, adopting, implementing, and maintaining the general plan serves to identify the community’s [land use](#), [circulation](#), [environmental](#), [economic](#), and [social goals](#) and policies as they relate to future growth and development.

The City of Fresno engaged in a robust four-year process to update its [general plan](#), which focuses on encouraging new development within the existing footprint of the city. Citing past mistakes that left some neighborhoods behind and hoping to reverse sprawl patterns, the City used [Rapid Fire](#) – the predecessor to [Urban Footprint](#) – to engage the entire community in creating their new plan for future growth.

Source: www.fresno.gov



General Plan Elements

In statute, the general plan is presented as a collection of “elements,” or topic categories ([Gov. Code §65302](#)). These elements are briefly summarized below. Examples from cities and counties in the state are embedded in the GPG with links throughout the document.

- **Land Use:** designates the type, intensity, and general distribution of uses of land for housing, business, industry, open space, education, public buildings and grounds, waste disposal facilities, and other categories of public and private uses.
- **Circulation:** correlates with the land use element and identifies the general location and extent of existing and proposed major thoroughfares, transportation routes, terminals, and other local public utilities and facilities.
- **Housing:** assesses current and projected housing needs for all economic segments of the community. In addition, the housing element embodies policies for providing adequate housing and includes action programs for that purpose. By statute, the housing element must be updated every, five or eight years, according to a schedule set by the [Department of Housing and Community Development \(HCD\)](#).
- **Conservation:** addresses the conservation, development, and use of natural resources, including water, forests, soils, rivers, and mineral deposits.
- **Open Space:** details plans and measures for the long-range preservation and conservation of open-space lands, including open space for the preservation of natural resources, the managed production of resources, agriculture, outdoor recreation, and public health and safety.
- **Noise:** identifies and appraises noise problems within the community and forms the basis for land use distribution determinations.
- **Safety:** establishes policies and programs to protect the community from risks associated with seismic, geologic, flood, and wildfire hazards, as well as from other concerns such as drought.
- **Environmental Justice** (if completed as a stand-alone element): identifies objectives and policies to reduce pollution exposure, improve air quality, promote public facilities, improve food access, advance access to housing, and increase physical activity in identified disadvantaged communities.

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- **Air Quality:** establishes policies and programs to reduce impacts to air quality in the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. Air quality considerations are also required for cities and counties who are required to include an environmental justice element in their general plans, and are optional elements in other areas of the state.
 - **Other optional elements, identified by community:** [health](#), [equity](#), [community development](#), water, climate change, and [resiliency](#) are some examples of additional elements that can be added to general plans or used to frame general plans.

The level of discussion given to each issue in the general plan depends upon local conditions and the relative local importance of that issue. When a city or county determines that an issue specified in the law is not locally relevant, the general plan may briefly discuss the reason for that decision but does not otherwise have to address that issue ([Gov. Code § 65301](#)). A jurisdiction may choose to combine elements as appropriate for local context.

A general plan may also include other topics of local interest. In addition to the mandatory elements, a city or county may adopt any other elements that relate to its physical development ([Gov. Code § 65303](#)).

Once adopted, these optional elements become an integral part of the general plan with the same force and effect as the mandatory elements. Accordingly, zoning, subdivisions, public works, specific plans, and other areas that must be consistent with the general plan must also be consistent with any optional elements. Likewise, the practice of developing stand-alone climate action, adaptation, or emissions reduction plans, if properly linked to the general plan, must also be internally consistent if used to support or augment policy, programs and implementation associated with the general plan.

Common topics that might be addressed in an additional, separate element include [air quality \(outside the San Joaquin Valley\)](#), [climate change](#), [capital improvements](#), [community design](#), [healthy communities](#), [economic development](#), [energy](#), [water](#), and [watershed planning](#). Depending upon the format a jurisdiction decides to use for its general plan, these topics may also be crosscutting themes, addressing required and optional elements throughout each chosen section.

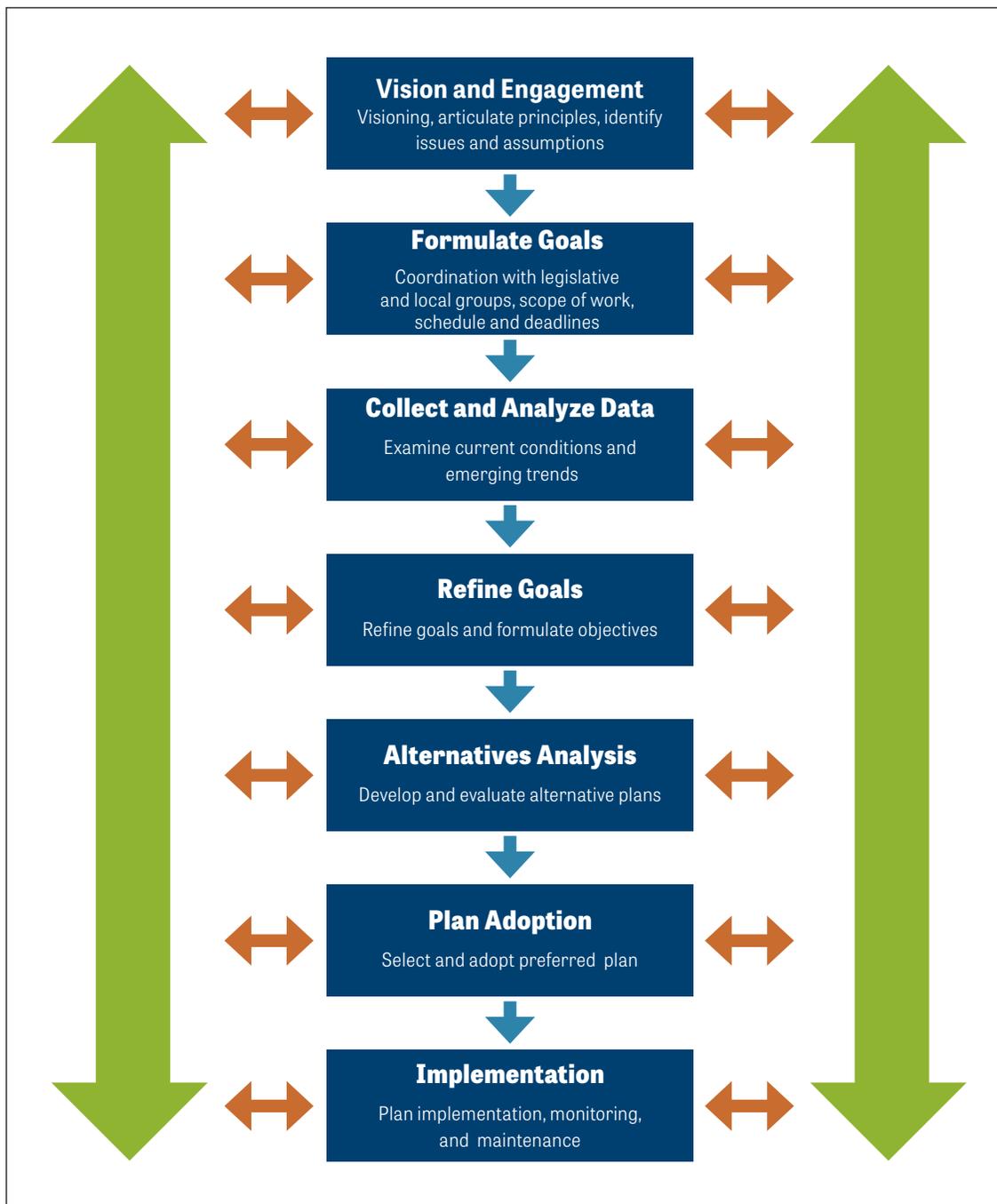
An optional element may indicate how a local government will apply its existing police power or other authority to address the issues included in the optional element. For example, a historic preservation element may lay the foundation for historic district regulations or participation in the [California Main Street Program](#), or a strategic fire prevention planning element could identify wildfire hazard areas, control new development within those areas, and provide the basis for zoning, subdivision, and brush clearance ordinances intended to minimize fire hazards.

In the statutory descriptions of the elements, a number of issues appear in more than one element. In order to minimize redundancies or internal conflicts in the general plan, combining elements or organizing the plan by issue often makes practical sense. This idea is explored further in [Chapter 1](#).

A number of state and federal laws, such as the [Infrastructure Planning: Priorities and Funding Act of 2002](#) the [Surface Mining and Reclamation Act of 1975](#), the California [Endangered Species Act of 1970](#), and others can affect the content of the general plan. These laws are discussed in detail throughout these guidelines.

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General Plan Flow Chart



Placemaking and Urban Design

While the general plan land use map is two dimensional, placemaking takes land use policies into a three-dimensional realm by focusing on what a place will actually look like when it is built. Great districts, corridors, and sites contribute to the vitality and quality of life of a community by considering carefully the placement of buildings, the relationship of buildings to one another and to public spaces, and the design and quality of sidewalks, open spaces, and other elements of the public realm. Many communities address placemaking and urban design through an optional element such as an urban design element. However, these policies can also be incorporated into a land use element as urban form is closely related to the location of land uses and land use densities and intensities. Urban design considers the relationship between land use and the image or character of the built environment with the ultimate goal of attaining a strong sense of place. Placemaking re-envisioning a community's assets, spaces, and surroundings and their relationships to each other. Using extensive public participation, placemaking attempts to create public spaces that are useful, attractive, and utilized extensively by the community, who consequently feel ownership and pride in the space.

Form based codes may be one useful tool for achieving the placemaking and urban design visions of the community. Functioning as both zoning designations and design standards, form based codes focus on creating places by examining building types, standards, sidewalks, landscaping, and other relevant issues. The form based code approach is applicable to many types of communities and can be especially meaningful in suburban contexts seeking to instill a stronger sense of place in sprawl environments and in areas focusing on infill development. Placemaking is also important to carefully plan for the public realm.

Several cities have taken varied approaches to incorporate urban design and placemaking into their general plans and land use elements.

- The City of Fullerton developed [The Fullerton Vision](#) to identify 12 distinct focus areas within which to concentrate potential change through community-led planning processes.
- The City of Sacramento's [Land Use and Urban Design](#) chapter focused on creating complete neighborhoods, distinct and memorable places, and excellence in the design of the city's form and structure through development standards and clear design direction.
- The City of Tracy used a [community character element](#) in its general plan to develop urban design principles including human-scale design, community focal points, and visual landmarks and entryways.
- The City of Brea [community development element](#) contains an urban design plan with policies for creating a sense of place and policies for creating connections. The plan also includes a Public Realm Urban Design Palette which establishes direction for city-sponsored improvements of public property, including city gateways, landscape corridors, neighborhood linkages, and public plazas.

Criteria for the General Plan

General Plan criteria must include comprehensiveness, internal consistency, and long-term perspective, which are discussed below.

Comprehensiveness

Every city and county must adopt “a comprehensive, long-term general plan” ([Gov. Code § 65300](#)). The general plan must cover a local jurisdiction’s entire planning area and address the broad range of issues associated with a city’s or county’s development. The overall general plan may also include linkages to regional plans, incorporating, where appropriate, regional policy and context.

Geographic Comprehensiveness

The plan must cover the territory within the boundaries of the adopting city or county as well as “any land outside its boundaries which in the planning agency’s judgment bears relation to its planning” ([Gov. Code § 65300](#)). For cities, this means all territory within the city limits, both public and private. Counties must address all unincorporated areas.

When establishing its planning area, each city should consider using its sphere of influence as a starting point, and building off of that area based on factors such as its location in a [watershed](#). The Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO) in every county adopts a sphere of influence for each city to represent “the probable physical boundaries and service area” of that city ([Gov. Code § 56076](#)). Although there is no direct requirement that the sphere of influence and the planning area match, the former provides a convenient measure of the city’s region of interest.

When making its general plan, a county should consider the general plans of every city within the county itself as well as adjacent jurisdictions even if they are in a different county.

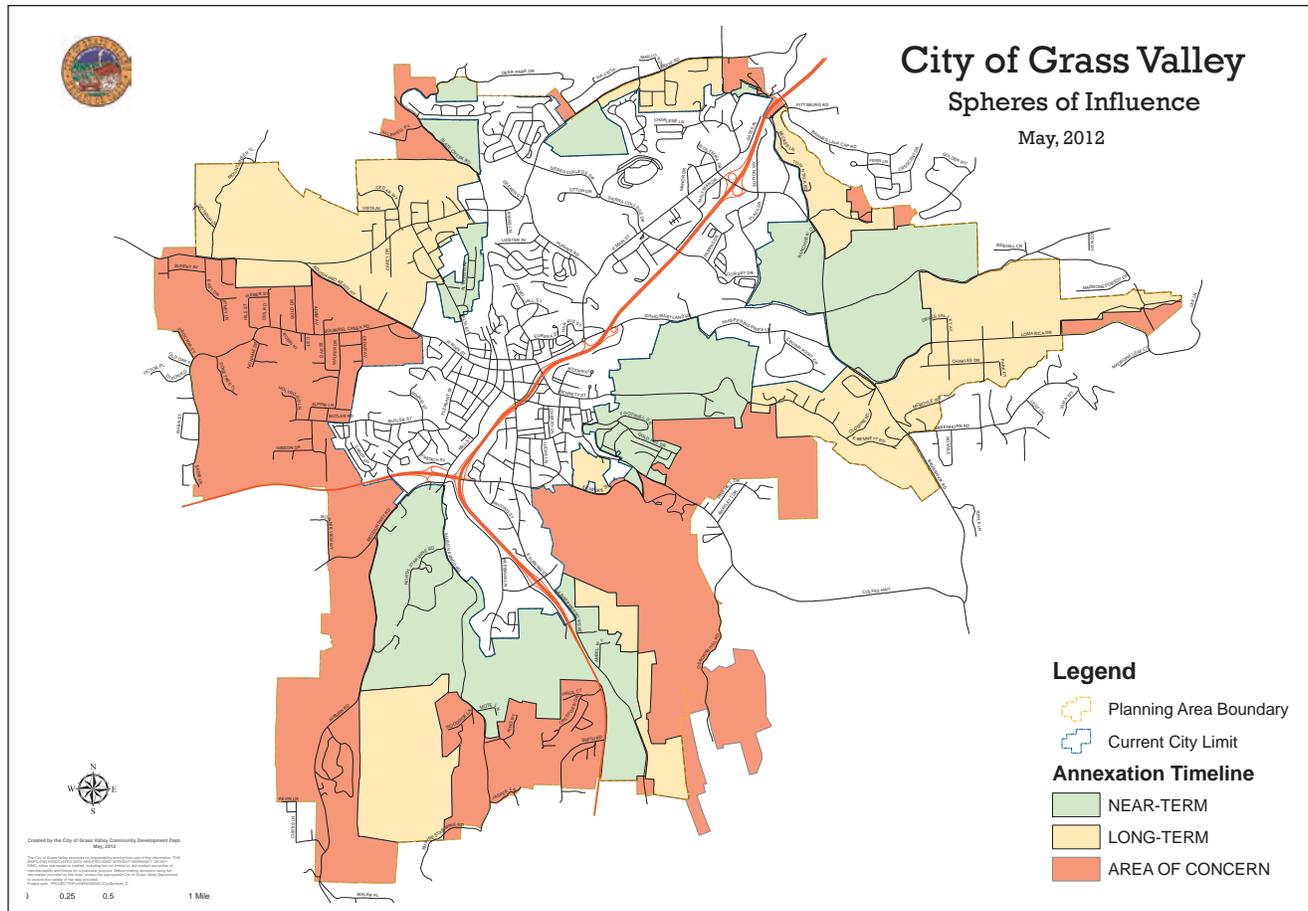
In addition, since issues are not confined to political boundaries, the law provides for planning outside of the jurisdiction’s territory. Cooperative extraterritorial planning can be used to manage groundwater resources; guide appropriate development within specific geographic context (such as areas that may be affected by [sea level rise](#) as a result of [climate change](#)) and the orderly and efficient extension of services and utilities; ensure the preservation of open space, agriculture, and resource conservation lands; and establish consistent standards for development in the plans of adjoining jurisdictions.

Cities and counties should work together to delineate planning areas and may establish formal agreements for processing development proposals. As urbanization occurs and adjoining cities expand, the potential for conflict between cities competing for the same lands increases. Intercity cooperation in establishing planning areas can proactively help to avoid such disputes and avoid additional costs.

Regional Context

Viewing the local general plan in its regional context is important. Traditionally, the concept of “community” encompassed only a local entity—the city or county. With the growing interdependence of local governments, joint planning and procurement, and the increased prevalence of important issues that transcend local boundaries such as transportation, provision of energy, climate change, air quality, water supply and management, and floodplain and flood risk management, it is becoming more important to consider the regional perspective. Cities and counties should coordinate plans regionally when possible and appropriate, in

Figure 6: Map Showing Spheres of Influence for Grass Valley, CA



www.cityofgrassvalley.com/content/maps/sphere-influence-map

alignment with their [sustainable community strategies](#), to work towards regional goals. For example, identifying risks from natural hazards and [climate change](#) may present opportunities for integrated resource management that extend across jurisdictional boundaries. Using [available data](#) – such as watershed-based floodplain management, [mapped earthquake faults](#), or high [fire-hazard areas](#), integrated water management plans (and new requirements for [groundwater sustainability plans](#)), [sustainable community strategies](#), [hazard mitigation plans](#), local coastal programs and other planning documents – will improve planning and expand opportunities. Each local planning agency should coordinate its general plan with regional planning efforts as much as possible. The general plan process allows local jurisdictions to integrate requirements with opportunities provided by multiple regional documents and initiatives.

The legislature has mandated consideration of certain regional impacts, such as regional housing needs, in the general plan. Local general plans should recognize the city or county's [regional role](#) so as to better satisfy regional needs, meet federal and state standards, and coordinate the location of public facilities. Accordingly, city planners should, like the [City of Fullerton](#), include a

discussion of the extent to which the general plan’s policies, standards, and proposals correspond to regional plans and the plans of adjoining communities. A city or county may need to reexamine its own general plan when its neighbors make important changes to their plans.

Issue Comprehensiveness

While a general plan must address a broad range of issues, the plan should focus on those issues that are relevant to the planning area (Gov. Code § 65301(c)). The plan must address the jurisdiction’s physical development, such as general locations, appropriate mix, timing, and extent of land uses and supporting infrastructure. The broad scope of physical development issues may range from appropriate areas for building factories to open space for preserving endangered species. This may include regional issues in addition to the more localized issues described in the planning statutes.

Land use decisions not only have physical and environmental impacts, but also social and economic consequences, especially for vulnerable and disadvantaged communities. Recognizing these concerns in the general plan can help cities and counties plan for or mitigate them. Social and economic issues may be discussed within the context of the mandatory elements, such as [environmental justice](#), [housing](#), and [land use](#), or in additional optional elements such as [economic development](#) or [community health](#). Both methods are discussed in the GPG.

Internal Consistency

Internal consistency requires that no policy conflicts, either textual or diagrammatic, can exist between the components of an otherwise complete and adequate general plan such as internally referenced external documents like a climate action plan or a local energy assurance plan (Gov. Code § 65300.5). Different policies must be balanced and reconciled within the plan. The internal consistency requirement has five dimensions, described below.

Equal Status Among Elements

All elements of the general plan have equal legal status. In *Sierra Club v. Board of Supervisors of Kern County* (1981) 126 Cal.App.3d 698, two of Kern County’s general plan elements, land use and open space, designated conflicting land uses for the same property. A provision in their general plan text reconciled this and other map inconsistencies by stating that “if in any instance there is a conflict between the land use element and the open-space element, the land use element controls.” The court of appeals struck down this clause because it violated the internal consistency requirement under Government Code section 65300.5. This holding affirmed the principle that no element is legally subordinate to another; the general plan must resolve potential conflicts among its elements through clear language and policy consistency.

Consistency Between Elements

All elements of a general plan, whether mandatory or optional, must be consistent with one another. In *Concerned Citizens of Calaveras County v. Board of Supervisors* (1985) 166 Cal.App.3d 90, the county land use element contained proposals expected to result in increased population. The [circulation](#) element, however, failed to provide feasible remedies for the predicted traffic congestion that would follow. The county simply

“In construing the provisions of this article the Legislature intends that the general plan and elements and parts thereof comprise an integrated, internally consistent and compatible statement of policies for the adopting agency.”

(Gov Code § 65300.5)

stated that it would lobby for funds to solve the future traffic problems. The court held that this vague response was insufficient to reconcile the conflicts.

Housing element law requires local agencies to adopt housing element programs that achieve the goals and implement the policies of the housing element. The element must identify the means by which consistency will be achieved and maintained with other general plan elements, including **land use** (Gov. Code § 65583(c)).

A city or county may incorporate by reference all or a portion of another jurisdiction’s plan, a regional plan, or its own subsidiary plan, such as a climate action plan, into its general plan. When doing so, the city or county should make sure that any materials incorporated by reference are consistent with the rest of its general plan.

Consistency Within Elements

Each element’s data, analyses, goals, policies, and implementation programs must be consistent with and complement one another. Established goals, data, and analysis form the foundation for any ensuing policies. For example, if one portion of a circulation element indicates that county roads are sufficient to accommodate the projected level of traffic while another section of the same element describes a worsening traffic situation aggravated by continued subdivision activity, the element is not internally consistent (*Concerned Citizens of Calaveras County v. Board of Supervisors* (1985) 166 Cal.App.3d 90)

Area Plan Consistency

All principles, goals, objectives, policies, and plan proposals set forth in an area or community plan must be consistent with the overall general plan.

The general plan should explicitly discuss the role of area plans if they are to be used. Similarly, each area plan should discuss its specific relationship to the general plan.

Airport land use compatibility plans must also be consistent with the general plan. Where appropriate, climate action plans should also be consistent with the general plan. Climate action plans can be created concurrently with or closely following a general plan update. However, if a local agency’s resources do not allow for concurrent preparation of a general plan update and the climate action plan, general plans may be amended later to integrate all or part of the climate action plan.

Text and Diagram Consistency

The general plan’s text and its accompanying diagrams and maps are integral parts of the plan. They must be in agreement. For example, a conflict exists if a general plan’s land use element diagram designates residential development in an area where the text describes the presence of prime agricultural land and written policies to preserve agricultural land or open space. The plan’s text and diagrams must be reconciled, because “internal consistency requires that general plan diagrams of land use, circulation systems, open-space and natural resources areas reflect written policies and programs in the text for each element.”

Long – Term Perspective

Since the general plan affects the welfare of current and future generations, state law requires that the plan take a long-term perspective (Gov. Code § 65300). The general plan projects conditions and needs into the future as a basis for determining objectives. It also establishes long-term policy for day-to-day decision-making based upon those objectives.

The time frames for effective planning vary among issues. The housing element, for example, specifically involves time increments of five or eight years, according to the [HCD schedule](#). Sewer, water, and road systems are generally designed with a 30- to 50-year lifespan. Capital improvement planning is typically based upon a five- or seven-year term. Economic trends may change rapidly in response to outside forces. Climate change is affecting local governments now, but longer term planning should anticipate the significant changes in the environmental setting associated with a changing climate as indicated by the [best available science](#).

Differences in time frame also affect the formulation of general plan goals, objectives, policies, and implementation measures. Goals and objectives are longer term, specific policies are shorter in their outcomes, and implementation programs have the shortest span because they must quickly respond to the demands of new funding sources, the results of their own activities, and the jurisdiction's immediate needs and problems.

Most jurisdictions have selected 20 years as the horizon for the general plan. The horizon does not mark an end point but rather provides a general context in which to make shorter-term decisions. The local jurisdiction may choose a time horizon that serves its particular needs including a later horizon year time frame to address long term issues like [climate change](#) and [land use](#). Planning is a continuous process; as such, the general plan should be reviewed regularly, regardless of its horizon, and revised as new information becomes available and as community needs and values change. With easier access to data, cities and counties have the opportunity to evaluate their general plans more often, link directly to responsible agencies, or monitor their process through data analysis or public dashboards. [The City of Sacramento](#), for example, conducts annual reviews of their general plan as well as five-year updates to the document based on the annual assessments. These regular reviews and updates reduce the potential cost of a comprehensive rewriting of their general plan, while keeping it timely and relevant to community needs.

Considerations for General Plans

Area Plans, Community Plans, and Specific Plans

Area and community plans are part of the general plan. A specific plan is a tool for implementing the general plan but is not part of the general plan. The following paragraphs look briefly at each of these types of plans. In addition to consistency between plans, general plans must also be consistent with airport land use compatibility plans in specified regions, unless overridden by a two-thirds vote of the local government, pursuant to [Public Utilities Code section 21676](#).

“Area plan” and “community plan” are terms for plans that focus on a particular region or community within the overall general plan area. A resolution is required to adopt an area or community plan as an amendment to the general plan, in the manner set out in [Government Code section 65350](#). Such plans refine the policies of the general plan as they apply to a smaller geographic area and are implemented by ordinances and other discretionary actions, such as zoning. The area or community plan process also provides a forum for resolving local conflicts. Large cities and counties where there are a variety of distinct communities or regions commonly use these plans.

As discussed earlier, an area or community plan must be internally consistent with the general plan. To facilitate such consistency, the general plan should provide a policy framework for the detailed treatment of specific issues in the various

area or community plans. Ideally, to simplify implementation, the area or community plans and the general plan should share a uniform format for land use categories, terminology, and diagrams.

Each area or community plan need not address all of the issues identified by [Government Code section 65302](#) when the overall general plan satisfies these requirements. For example, an area or community plan need not discuss fire safety if the jurisdiction-wide plan adequately addresses the subject and the area or community plan is consistent with those policies and standards. While an area or community plan may provide greater detail regarding policies affecting development in a defined area, adopting one or a series of such plans does not substitute for regular updates to the general plan. Many of the mandatory general plan issues are most effectively addressed on a jurisdiction-wide basis that ties together the policies of the individual area or community plans.

A specific plan is a hybrid that can combine policy statements with development regulations ([Gov. Code § 65450](#)). It can be used to address the development requirements for a single project such as urban [infill](#) or a planned community. As a result, its emphasis is on concrete standards and development criteria. Its text and diagrams will address the planning of necessary infrastructure and facilities, as well as land uses and open space. In addition, it will specify those programs and regulations necessary to finance infrastructure and public works projects. A specific plan may be adopted either by resolution, like a general plan, or by ordinances such as zoning.

Specific plans must be consistent with all facets of the general plan, including the policy statements. In turn, zoning, subdivisions, and public works projects must be consistent with the specific plan ([Gov. Code § 65455](#)). Once a specific plan has been adopted, later projects may not require additional review ([Cal. Code Regs., tit. 14, § 15182](#)). The publication *A Planner's Guide to Specific Plans*, by the Governor's Office of Planning and Research (OPR), provides further information on relationships between plans.

Adoption of Another Jurisdiction's General Plan and Joint Adoption

A city or county may adopt part or all of a general plan of another public agency, or adopt a functional plan – such as a regional transportation plan, climate action plan or sustainable community strategy – prepared by a special district, regional planning agency, or some other public agency ([Gov. Code § 65301\(a\)](#)).

One of the benefits of this approach is that it eliminates duplication of effort in collecting data for more technical elements. A city and county may jointly prepare and separately adopt an entire general plan or individual elements within a general plan. Although joint adoption of another jurisdiction's plan or elements may be advantageous, a city or county remains solely responsible for the legal adequacy of its general plan. The other jurisdiction's plan and elements whether jointly prepared or not must be sufficiently detailed to address the concerns of the adopting agency and to provide adequate coverage of the issues required in the Government Code. A plan or element that is jointly prepared or adopted from another jurisdiction's general plan has the same legal standing as the rest of the adopting agency's general plan and internal consistency requirements continue to apply. Similarly, discretionary zoning, subdivision, and capital improvement project decisions must be consistent with the joint plan or element. One example is [Government Code section 65302\(g\)](#), which specifically provides that a city may adopt the county's safety element if the county's element "is sufficiently detailed and contains appropriate policies and programs for adoption by a city."

Funding a General Plan

Updating a general plan can be a costly exercise. The cost of preparing or revising the general plan will vary tremendously with the scope of the program and the jurisdiction's circumstances. A new plan or a comprehensive revision will be much more costly than a general plan amendment. For most jurisdictions, preparing and maintaining the general plan is a general fund expense. The availability of general purpose planning grants is limited. There are, however, federal and state funds for particular planning issues, such as housing, transportation, and habitat. These planning processes can be incorporated into the general plan process in order to leverage resources.

The cost of a general plan amendment associated with a particular development is typically passed on to the developer. Some jurisdictions attempt to recoup the costs of comprehensive updates in a similar manner. In 2002, the Legislature changed state law to allow development fees to include "costs reasonably necessary to prepare and revise the plans and policies that a local agency is required to adopt before it can make any necessary findings and determinations" ([Gov. Code § 66014](#)). This change makes it clear that an update of the general plan and related planning documents may be a recoverable expense.

Potential rotating sources of funding for portions of the general plan include:

- [Choice Neighborhoods Planning Grants \(US HUD\)](#)
 - » Grants for planning transformation of housing and surrounding built environment
- [Brownfields Area-Wide Planning Grants \(US EPA\)](#)
 - » Grants to research, plan and develop implementation strategies for an area affected by one or more brownfields
- [TIGER Discretionary Grants \(US DOT\)](#)
 - » Grants for local communities to plan and implement transportation in relation to other goals. Some annual cycles allocate funding for planning only.

The California Air Resources Board manages the [Funding Wizard](#), which lists current funding opportunities for a broad variety of topics related to sustainability and climate change.

The [US EPA Smart Growth National Funding Opportunities](#) page houses a list of additional funding opportunities.

Despite the option to adopt another jurisdiction's general plan or to jointly adopt provisions of a general plan among multiple agencies, each adopting agency must retain its sole and independent authority to make amendments to its general plan unless the government approves a joint powers agreement. In *Alameda County Land Use Association c. City of Hayward* (1995) 38 Cal.App.4th 1716, the appellate court overturned a memorandum of understanding (MOU) adopted by Alameda County and the cities of Hayward and Pleasanton to specify general plan goals and policies regarding the "Ridgelands Area." The MOU provided that any amendment to the applicable sections by one jurisdiction would not be effective unless "parallel amendments" were approved by the other two. The court held this arrangement to be an impermissible divestment of the police power, restricting the individual agencies' legislative authority to amend their general plan.