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# Introduction

## Planning Healthy, Equitable, Resilient, and Economically Vibrant Places

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**“By far the greatest and most admirable form of wisdom is that needed  
to plan and beautify cities and human communities.”**

—Socrates

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The general plan is more than the legal underpinning for land use decisions; it is a vision about how a community will grow, reflecting community priorities and values while shaping the future. To assist local governments in preparing general plans and the public in participating in that process, the [Governor’s Office of Planning and Research \(OPR\)](#) periodically revises guidelines for the preparation and content of local general plans ([Gov. Code § 65040.2](#)).

This 2017 edition of the General Plan Guidelines (GPG) contains significant changes to the 2003 General Plan Guidelines. For mandatory and common optional elements of the general plan, the GPG sets out each statutory requirement in detail, provides OPR recommended policy language, and includes online links to city and county general plans that have adopted similar policies. Each chapter contains a sample selection of policies. Users can also click the links provided for more detailed policies and plans. All of the referenced policies as well as additional policies are compiled in [Appendix A](#). For ease of use, the new GPG is text-searchable, and provides sample policy language for local governments to use or adapt. The update contains new resources and templates for cities and counties to use in considering themes, structures, and policies for their general plans, including new compendiums on [infill development, renewable energy, and mitigation for conversion of agricultural land](#). As more resources and data sources become available, they will be added and linked to these General Plan Guidelines. The new online platform will allow OPR to add updated text, links, and information directly to the GPG, and announce any additions through the GPG listserv and on the OPR website. The GPG is a resource to help planners accomplish their respective community’s priorities and vision while meeting larger state goals, increasing community collaboration, and potentially improving competitiveness for funding opportunities.

As of 2015, more than half of local jurisdictions have general plans that are over 15 years old. Often, this is because the process of adopting a general plan has become too time-consuming and costly. In order to streamline the process and reduce costs, this comprehensive update of OPR’s GPG provides free online tools and resources, promotes increased use of online data, and includes templates, sample policies, and links to more information. The [General Plan Mapping Tool](#) draws data sets from multiple sources, allowing users to incorporate local, regional, and statewide data into local general plans. Local jurisdictions may pull from and modify provided policies and templates, analyze consistent data through the tool, and craft general plans at a lower cost and with less uncertainty. These new resources will increase efficiencies in the development of general plan updates for communities of all sizes throughout the state.

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### **NEW in the 2017 General Plan Guidelines suite of tools:**

- Updated and expanded sections on [visioning](#) and [community engagement](#)
- New sections on [healthy communities](#), [equitable and resilient communities](#), [economic development](#), and [climate change](#)
- [GPG Mapping Tool](#), enabling free, easy access to helpful data for cities and counties
- Links to additional online tools and resources
- Recommended policies in cut and paste format, with examples of adopted policy language
- Reformatted sections on the mandatory elements, including a new section on environmental justice
- [Expanded equity and environmental justice section](#)
- Infill compendium
- Renewable energy compendium
- Model template for mitigation of agricultural land conversion

The term “element” refers to the topics that California law requires to be covered in a general plan ([Gov. Code § 65302](#)).

There is no mandatory structure or maximum number of elements that a general plan must include. Once added into the general plan, each element, regardless of statutory requirement, assumes the same legal standing, and must be consistent with other elements ([Gov. Code § 65300.5](#)). The general plan is the perfect space for innovation, reflecting the unique character of each community. The format and content of general plans can vary between jurisdictions. Planners must address mandatory elements, but they have discretion to organize general plans by values (core concepts that the community

**Figure 1: Examples of General Plan Layout**

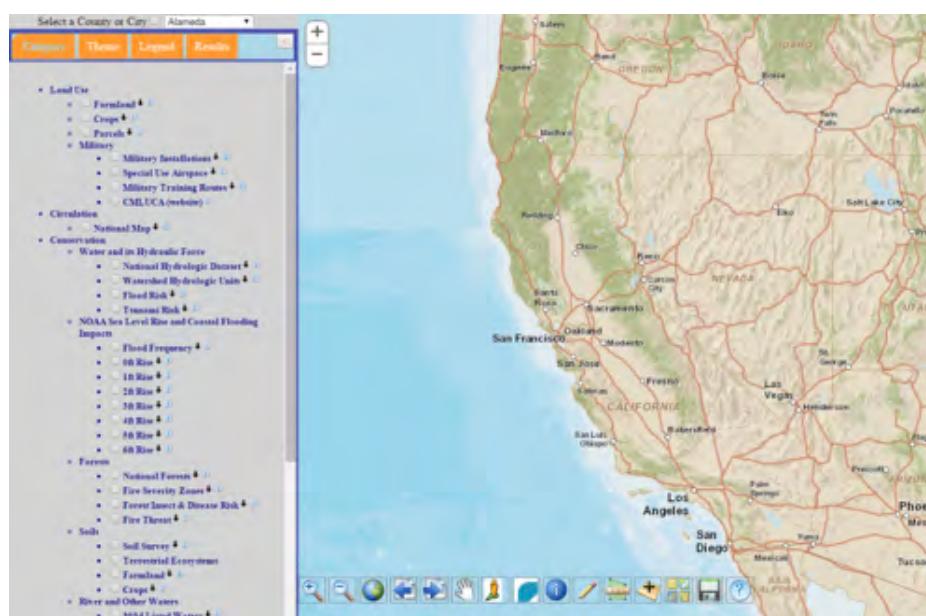


wants to enhance or uphold), themes (overarching issues identified by the community as important), challenges or goals identified through community engagement, or even by the elements themselves. Cities and counties may create new models of organizing their general plans, based on the needs and priorities identified during public engagement. [Riverside County](#), for example, included a healthy communities element in its general plan update. The [City of Fullerton](#) structured its general plan around four focus areas, identified through community engagement, and addressed all of the elements through those focus areas. The [City of Sacramento](#) framed its general plan around sustainability and livable communities, and focused each of the required elements – as well as additional elements – around those goals. The [County of Marin](#) created a separate, easy to read summary of its 2007 countywide plan, featuring model strategies and metrics related to climate change, social equity, and other themes. OPR designed the GPG to assist every city and county in accordance with its local jurisdiction's unique vision, using whatever structure best achieves the goals of the community.

The 2017 GPG update includes a free [General Plan Mapping Tool](#). The tool incorporates the requirements for the mandatory elements as well as themes and provides Geographic Information Systems (GIS) resources for city and county planners to use when drafting a general plan.

The tool provides access to data (varying as available from county, city, and parcel-level information) to help inform decision-making processes and enhance public participation. The mapping tool uses a platform specifically designed for general plans.

**Figure 2: The General Plan Mapping Tool**



## Recommendations and Sample Language

OPR has included recommendations and sample policy language to provide cities and counties with information, data, examples, and ideas to consider in their general plan. These recommendations may not fit the needs of every city and county or every circumstance. Rather, these recommendations represent a toolbox of options, allowing jurisdictions to use them as they are, modify them as appropriate within statutory requirements, or consider them as examples to inform their own policies.

According to state law,

“Decisions involving the future growth of the state, most of which are made and will continue to be made at the local level, should be guided by an effective planning process, including the local general plan, and should proceed within the framework of officially approved statewide goals and policies directed to land use, population growth and distribution, development, open space, resource preservation and utilization, air and water quality, and other related physical, social and economic development factors.” ([Gov Code § 65030.1](#))

The following text box describes the statutory state planning priorities of the [Governor’s Office of Planning and Research Environmental Goals and Policy Report](#), as they appear in [Government Code section 65041.1](#). The GPG aims to help achieve goals consistent with both documents by recommending practices and policies for cities and counties to incorporate locally.

### STATE PLANNING PRIORITIES

#### **California Government Code section 65041.1**

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).

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- (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.

This GPG document is advisory. Nevertheless, courts periodically refer to the GPG to interpret planning law. For this reason, the GPG closely adheres to statute and current case law. It also relies upon commonly accepted principles of contemporary planning practice. The following words are used to indicate whether a particular subject in the GPG is mandatory, advisory, or permissive:

- (a) “Must” or “shall” identifies a mandatory statutory requirement that all public agencies are required to follow.
- (b) “Should” or “suggest(ed)” identifies guidance provided by OPR based on policy considerations contained in California’s planning laws.
- (c) “May” or “can (could)” identifies a permissive recommendation that is left fully to the discretion of the local governments involved.

OPR updated the GPG in coordination with a number of other tool, policy, and program update efforts to ensure references to external tools support the intent of the GPG. Some examples of these concurrent updates include the following:

- AB 32 Scoping Plan Update
- Cal-Adapt
- California Climate Adaptation Planning Guide
- California Coastal Commission Local Coastal Plan guidance
- California State Energy Efficiency Collaborative GHG and climate tools
- General Plan Mapping Tool
- Safeguarding California Plan
- State Hazard Mitigation Plan
- SB 244(2011), SB 743(2013), SB 379(2015), SB 1000(2016)
- California Statewide Housing Assessment
- California State Wellness Plan

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- California Strategic Growth Council
  - California Water Plan
  - CEQA Guidelines Update
  - Cool California and the Funding Wizard
  - Environmental Goals and Policy Report

The GPG also includes new sections on environmental justice, healthy communities, equity and resilience, economic development, and climate change; as well as compendiums on infill development, renewable energy, and agricultural land conservation.

## How to Use These Guidelines

The General Plan Guidelines are intended to be user friendly and practical for planners, decision makers, and the general public. The GPG and the [General Plan Mapping Tool](#) can be used to frame conversations around planning, evaluate data and identify priorities, research formats and policies from similar communities, and enhance capacity for fiscally constrained departments and organizations working to update general plans. Each chapter of the GPG lays out the requirements contained in statute, connections to other requirements, additional considerations, and related data and policies to consider. Each mandatory element also includes a completeness checklist to assist communities in meeting statutory requirements. Recognizing the vast diversity of California's communities in size, demographics, geography, economics, and resources, the GPG present examples in various jurisdictions whenever possible.

### **Statutory Requirements**

This document provides textboxes containing the statutory language that creates a legal obligation to address each of the required elements in a general plan. These textboxes can be found in the chapters corresponding to each of the elements. The information following the statutory language contains OPR's recommendations for meeting the requirement. Each statutory reference is hyperlinked to the full text of the Government Code for easy access.

### **Requirement Description**

This section includes considerations, resources, data, and other information for developing general plan policies. Many elements are interrelated, so tables in each requirement description section note linkages between elements. This section also includes additional information through hyperlinks, which lead to examples and resources.

### **Recommended Data**

Each section also includes recommendations for data that jurisdictions may wish to use to examine and determine specific needs and policies. Tables identify the data according to the potential intent of analysis. Where the recommended data is available, tables provide direct links to the [General Plan Mapping Tool](#). As the GPG is reviewed and updated, additional data links will be added. Because the same data may be useful for multiple analytical purposes, some data link to multiple sections of the guidelines. The recommended data are not exhaustive but can serve as a starting point for considering the specific needs of a community and for identifying further information needed to help inform decisions related to those needs.

## Parts of a General Plan

(for more detailed descriptions and examples, see [Appendix E](#))

**Development Policy** – a general plan statement that guides action, including goals and objectives, principles, policies, standards, and plan proposals.

**Diagram** – a graphic expression of a general plan’s development policies, particularly its plan proposals, which must be consistent with the general plan text ([Gov Code § 65300.5](#)).

**Goal** – a general expression of community values and direction, expressed as ends (not actions).

**Objective** – a specified end, condition, or state that is a measurable intermediate step toward attaining a goal.

**Principle** – an assumption, fundamental rule, or doctrine guiding general plan policies, proposals, standards, and implementation measures.

**Policy** – a specific statement that guides decision-making and helps implement a general plan’s vision.

**Standards** – a rule or measure establishing a level of quality or quantity that must be complied with or satisfied.

**Plan Proposal** – describes the development intended to take place in an area. Plan proposals are often expressed on the general plan diagram.

**Implementation Measure** – an action, procedure, program, or technique that carries out general plan policy. Each policy should have at least one corresponding implementation measure.

## Recommended Policies

The government code directs OPR to provide land use policy advice. In order to do so, the GPG includes both general plan policy recommendations and links to external resources that provide policy guidance. Where possible, links are provided to the sample policies, case studies, and external reports.

Adopted state programs described in the draft [Environmental Goals and Policy Report](#) – an overview of the state’s environmental goals and the key steps needed to achieve them – provide the basis for many of the policy recommendations. OPR also examined current academic publications and conducted extensive outreach to local governments, community, and advocacy groups in building policy recommendations. Cross-cutting recommendations include consideration of [equity](#), [health](#), and [climate](#) issues within jurisdictions, communities, and regions. With thoughtful planning based on such considerations, California will foster a future that has a strong economy, thriving built and natural environments, and a healthy, prosperous citizenry.

GPG policy recommendations focus on four key themes.

1. **Climate Change:** In California, climate change has been the subject of multiple Executive Orders and legislation. It is a high priority subject for any general plan update. [EO B-30-15](#) established interim emissions reduction targets for 2030; [EO S-03-05](#)

established long-term targets for 2020 and 2050; and EO S-13-08 established climate change adaptation and resilience as a priority. Further state goals include reduction of petroleum use by up to 50 percent by 2030, and an increase of renewable energy to 50 percent by 2030 through the [Clean Energy and Pollution Reduction Act of 2016](#). California has set greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions reduction requirements in numerous sectors including land use and transportation planning (Assembly Bill 32, the Global Warming Solutions Act of 2006 (Nunez), hereafter referred to as [AB 32](#); Senate Bill 375, the Sustainable Communities and Climate Protection Act of 2008 (Steinberg), hereafter referred to as [SB 375](#); Senate Bill 743, the Transit Oriented Development Act of 2013 (Steinberg), hereafter referred to as SB 743). The [AB 32 Scoping Plan](#) includes sections on local government and the importance of local action to help achieve statewide climate goals. Additionally, the [Safeguarding California Plan](#), [Cal-Adapt](#), [Climate Change Handbook for Regional Water Planning](#), and the [California Climate Adaptation Planning Guide](#) provide guidance for resilience and adaptation efforts. OPR's GPG recommendations focus on how the general plan can achieve GHG emissions reductions, increase resiliency to climate change impacts, and lead to healthier and more prosperous communities.

**2. Economics:** Policies related to all elements of the general plan greatly affect economic opportunity, development, and stability. Decisions regarding land use and circulation have direct and indirect fiscal implications for local economies, and, in turn, economies of urban and rural centers affect the health, climate, and equity of communities. As with all general plan topics, even if addressed in a separate section, economic development must link and integrate with other elements in order to be successful.

**3. Healthy Communities:** In 2012 the Governor issued Executive Order B-19-12 and created the Governor's [Let's Get Healthy California Task Force](#). Chronic disease, such as obesity, diabetes, cancer, heart disease, and asthma affect quality of life and productivity. In addition, social, economic, and environmental factors where people live, work, and play affect their health and well-being. The Task Force identified

**A general plan allows a community to envision its future growth and development**



Image by Urban Advantage, Ferrell Madden Lewis

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the creation and expansion of healthy communities to be one of three major focus areas for the promotion of overall health improvement. Because planning offers one important way to improve the community's health, OPR offers recommendations for jurisdictions interested in incorporating health-supporting policies into their general plan.

**4. Equitable Opportunities:** Planning decisions affect the entire community, and the entire community must be allowed equal access to the public process ([Gov Code § 11135](#)). From determining proximity to localized noise or air pollution, to providing healthy grocery options, to creating access to employment and education opportunity, planning and policy affect everyone. Incorporating equity into all aspects of planning will ensure that residents of a city or county benefit from reduced GHG emissions, climate change adaptation policies, active transportation options, and healthy communities with access to economic opportunity for all. OPR's recommendations for equity incorporate statutory requirements for environmental justice guidance ([Gov Code § 65040.12\(c\)](#)) into an expanded focus on equity throughout the general plan.

Additionally, based on statewide goals, the update includes model guides and best practices related to [infill development](#), [renewable energy](#), and [mitigation of agricultural land conversion](#).

Readers should note that the recommended policies are simply recommendations, intended to provide a starting point from which local governments can craft unique policies reflecting the priorities and circumstances of their communities. The GPG aims to create a suite of tools for communities to utilize in updating their general plans. By providing information, resources, and data on statutory requirements as well as non-statutory considerations relevant to planning, the GPG can help diverse community members work together towards a shared vision for their future growth.