

# THE GENERAL PLAN

## **The General Plan in California; What is it?**

California planning and zoning law requires both cities and counties to prepare and adopt a "comprehensive, long-range general plan" which shall serve as a guide in land use decisions. The General Plan is considered the jurisdiction's "Constitution" and must be internally consistent. Most General Plan changes require California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) analysis. The functions performed by a City's General Plan are many and complex, but they can be grouped under three principal categories:

1. First, the plan is an expression of what a community wants. It is a statement of goals, a listing of objectives, and a vision of what might be. It educates the public as to the opportunities, problems and constraints facing the community.
2. Second, the plan, once prepared, serves as a guide to decision making. It provides the means and continuity for guiding and influencing the many public and private decisions that create the future city.
3. Third, the plan in California represents the fulfillment of a state legal requirement, and provides legal support for those actions that are taken to implement the plan.

How, one might ask, can a single document fulfill such broad and complex functions. The answer, of course, is that the plan document by itself does not do the job.

The General Plan performs its roles,-- and its benefits to the community are derived,-- through the process of preparing the plan, and the use of the plan after its preparation. All of the jurisdiction's actions must conform to the General Plan. It is implemented through other forms of land use regulation, including zoning and the Subdivision Map Act, and through other actions such as development of a Capital Improvement Program. The California Legislature has identified seven "elements" that it believes every city and county must include in its general plan. These "mandated" elements are: Land Use, Circulation, Housing, Conservation, Open Space, Noise and Safety.

Moreover, most cities and counties add optional elements to the basic set of seven state-mandated elements. Because optional elements have the same force and effect as required ones, their adoption can expand a local government's authority. Coronado has chosen to adopt ten "permissive" elements into its General Plan addressing such issues as Community Design, Parking and Transportation.

So in essence, the General Plan is a statement of policy goals which defines the way a community desires to grow in the future and the priorities it assigns to environmental, social and economic values. The Plan also provides legal support for government's implementation of these goals.

## **What is the Use of the General Plan?**

General plans are only a means to an end. The “end product” is the assuring of better long-range planning so that “change”, when it occurs, has positive results for a community. As such, the issue is not just implementing General Plan ideas, but also the placing of ideas beneficial to the community into the General Plan. Therefore, while the General Plan should reflect the current desires of the community, it can also be used to help formulate these community goals. The Plan can be used as a tool by the City Council to educate the public as to the opportunities, problems and constraints facing the community,-- to solicit solutions,-- and to form coalitions for change. Placing an idea into the General Plan publicizes it, exposes it to public scrutiny, and validates it.

The Coronado General Plan notes that:

It is the fundamental goal of the Coronado City Council and the function of this “General Plan Policy Document” to preserve and improve Coronado primarily as a beautiful, pleasant residential community in which to live, work, shop, and pursue leisure-time activities.

## **What are the Contents of a General Plan?**

The Legislature has identified in Government Code Section 65302 seven elements that it believes every city and county must include in its general plan. These “mandated” elements are:

The land use element designates the general distribution, location, and extent (including standards for population density and building intensity) of the uses of land for housing, business, Industry, open space, education, public buildings and ground, solid and liquid waste disposal facilities, and other categories of public and private uses. (Adopted 1986, updated 1996; Chapter A)

The circulation element identifies the general location and extent of existing and proposed major roads, highways, railroads and transit routes, terminals, and other local public utilities and public facilities. (Adopted 1995; Chapter E)

The housing element consists of standards and plans for the improvement of housing and the provision of adequate sites for housing to meet the needs of all economic segments of the community. (Adopted 1995; Chapter G)

The conservation element provides for the conservation, development, and use of natural resources, including water, forests, soils, rivers, lakes, harbors, fisheries, wildlife, minerals, and other natural resources. (Adopted 1994; Chapter N)

The open-space element details plans and measures for the preservation of open space for natural resources, for the managed production of resources, for outdoor recreation, and for public health and safety. (Adopted 1994, updated 1996; Chapter M)

The noise element examines noise sources yielding information to be used in setting land use policies for compatible uses and for the development and enforcement of a local noise ordinance. (Adopted 1974, updated 1999; Chapter L)

The safety element establishes policies and programs for the protection of the community from flooding, fire, seismic and geologic hazards. (Adopted as "Public Safety and Seismic Element of the General Plan" 1974; Chapter K)

Some elements, like land use, encompass a number of issues, while others, like noise, focus on a single topic. The requirements for the seven elements also overlap; several issues, such as the regulation of open space, are mentioned more than once. Because local conditions vary, the relevance and importance of each issue specified in the law differ from community to community. A general plan needs to address each specified issue only to the extent it pertains to the jurisdiction. Additionally, a number of special requirements affect the general plan. The California Coastal Act, for instance, directs all cities and counties lying within the Coastal Zone to include special coastal provisions in their general plans.

Moreover, most cities and counties add optional elements to the basic set of seven state-mandated elements. Because optional elements have the same force and effect as required ones, their adoption can expand a local government's authority. Coronado has chosen to adopt the following "permissive" elements into its General Plan:

The scenic highway element prescribes the development, establishment, and protection of scenic highway corridors. (Adopted 1999; Chapter O)

The public buildings element details the disposition and plans for the City's public buildings. (Adopted 1985; Chapter B)

The recreation element outlines the community's recreational needs and resources. (Adopted 1991; Chapter C)

The parking element establishes parking opportunities, goals and policies. (Adopted 1987, updated 1996; Chapter D)

The transportation element provides various ways to facilitate the City's traffic circulation and citizen mobility through alternative modes of transportation. (Adopted 1987; Chapter F)

The community design element notes what is and what could be in Coronado's urban form, focusing on opportunities and goals for the City's different sub-areas. (Adopted 1986, updated 1996; Chapter I)

The disaster preparedness element publicizes and provides legal support for the City's disaster preparedness plan. (Adopted 1991; Chapter J)

The local coastal element summarizes the relationship of the Coronado Local Coastal Program to the City's General Plan. (Adopted 1987; Chapter P)

The historic preservation element identifies policies and programs that could conserve historic structures and sites. (Adopted 1999, Chapter H)

The bay element notes the regulatory agencies that govern the various activities that are permitted in each portion of the City's bay waters. (Adopted 1994; Chapter Q)

### **How is the Format of the Coronado General Plan Different from those of most other Cities?**

The Coronado General Plan is expanded into a more comprehensive document than the General Plans maintained by most Cities. This document, the "**Comprehensive Plan**", is organized into three distinct segments/ documents:

1. The "Data Document/Master Environmental Assessment" serves as the data source and data analysis for the "General Plan Policy Document", as an environmental setting section for the "Master Environmental Impact Report" for the General Plan Policy Document, and as a "Master Environmental Assessment" that can be incorporated by reference into subsequent project-level California Environmental Quality Act documents to reduce the bulk and cost of such documents;
2. The "General Plan Policy Document" serves the dual objectives of presenting the policies, plan proposals, standards, and implementation program of the General Plan, and composing the "project description" required for the General Plan Master EIR; and
3. The "Environmental Assessment Document" serves as the discussion of effects, mitigation measures, alternatives, et cetera, necessary to complete the Master EIR.

The City's existing General Plan Policy Document consists of the above noted seven mandated elements and the ten permissive elements. The first portion of the Comprehensive Plan was written by a consultant for the City in 1995, and the third portion has yet to be written.

### **Use of the General Plan**

General plans are only a means to an end. The "end product" is the assuring of better long-range planning so that "change", when it occurs, has positive results for a community. As such, the issue is not just implementing General Plan ideas, but also the placing of ideas beneficial to the community into the General Plan. Therefore, while the General Plan should reflect the current desires of the community, it can also be used to help formulate these community goals. The Plan can be used as a tool to educate the public as to the opportunities, problems and constraints

facing the community,-- to solicit solutions,-- and to form coalitions for change. Placing an idea into the General Plan publicizes it, exposes it to public scrutiny, and validates it.

However, the General Plan can only lead the community so far. Concepts or policies in the Plan cannot get too far ahead of the general predisposition of the community's citizens. There has to be a constituency in the community for the concepts in the Plan that will provide sufficient support for them to be adopted, retained and implemented. If this constituency does not exist, it must be created. Such a constituency may already be latent in the community, and need only to be activated; or it may be something that will have to be generated from scratch from likely segments of the community. Coalition building requires a problem or an opportunity,-- recognition that such a problem or opportunity exists,-- feasible solutions,-- and leadership. The best way to build a coalition is to demonstrate how the self-interest of each prospective participant is tied to the solution of the problem or to the community taking advantage of the noted opportunity. Coalitions can also be built on fear;-- not only of what can happen, but of what might not happen. That is, fear that one's interests might be ignored if one is not part of the coalition.

However formed, the health of a coalition is dependent upon leadership;-- and *leadership is a lonely and dangerous occupation*. Leadership requires the ability to affect public perceptions and to shape the public agenda. Leadership requires credibility,-- good positioning and timing,-- adequate planning and preparation,-- and the ability to act quickly and in a focused manner. These traits are interrelated and interdependent. For example, credibility requires the inclination and ability to seek and listen to public input,-- good positioning and planning,-- and a history of successful projects. Time is always of the essence,-- for the public attention span is short and carrying costs are usually high. Therefore, one must always be seeking trends and feedback to find opportunistic projects that can achieve overriding objectives. For the pendulum of public opinion can easily swing, and being on the right side of that swing is the difference between success and failure.