

STATE OF CALIFORNIA

General Plan Guidelines

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GOVERNOR'S OFFICE OF PLANNING AND RESEARCH



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Director's Message

The Governor's Office of Planning and Research (OPR) is proud to announce the publication of the *2003 General Plan Guidelines*. These advisory guidelines serve as a valuable reference for cities and counties in the preparation of local general plans. It is our hope that the *General Plan Guidelines* will be useful not only to city and county planning staffs, but to elected officials, planning consultants, and members of the public.

The State Legislature declared in 1976 that "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." In all of its work, OPR attempts to encourage more collaborative and comprehensive land use planning at the local, regional, and statewide levels to achieve sustainable development goals of protecting the environment, maintaining a healthy economy, and ensuring equitable treatment of all people.

In addition to the *General Plan Guidelines*, OPR has recently published the *Municipal Service Review Guidelines*, which provide guidance for Local Agency Formation Commissions (LAFCOs) to address the delivery of municipal services at a regional level, in a manner that informs other LAFCO boundary-setting decisions. The *Municipal Service Review Guidelines* will be followed by *A Guide to the LAFCO Process for Incorporations*, which will assist LAFCOs in establishing new city boundaries. Finally, for the first time in twenty-five years, the *Environmental Goals and Policy Report* will provide the statewide framework that guides the infrastructure investments and comprehensive plans of state agencies and departments.

As the *General Plan Guidelines* enters its thirtieth year, I know you will find the 2003 edition to be an invaluable tool in the practice of local planning.



Tal Finney
Interim Director

October 2003
Sacramento, California

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Introduction

Each city and county in California must prepare a comprehensive, long term general plan to guide its future. To assist local governments in meeting this responsibility, the Governor's Office of Planning and Research is required to adopt and periodically revise guidelines for the preparation and content of local general plans (Government Code §65040.2).

The 2003 edition of the *General Plan Guidelines* supercedes all previous editions. Important changes since the 1998 edition include the following:

- ◆ Guidance for addressing environmental justice in the general plan.
- ◆ Guidance on developing optional water and energy elements.
- ◆ Expanded guidance on public participation in the development of the general plan.
- ◆ Revised and expanded housing element guidelines.
- ◆ Guidance on developing optional water and energy elements.
- ◆ Expanded guidance on consolidation of individual general plan elements.
- ◆ Suggested reporting formats for the annual general plan progress report.

The 2003 edition of the *General Plan Guidelines* is the first to incorporate an extensive public review process. OPR hosted a series of forums in early 2002 to gain preliminary input into the *General Plan Guidelines*. A preliminary draft of the revised *General Plan Guidelines* was available for public review from October through December, 2002. Two public hearings were held in Sacramento in December, 2002, with teleconference links to Eureka, Alameda, Bakersfield and San Diego. A second draft was released in July 2003 for a 30 day review period. The final document reflects many of the suggestions received by OPR during this process.

This document is arranged into the following chapters. Chapter 1 provides an overview of the general plan. Chapter 2 provides guidance on integrating environ-

mental justice into the general plan, and relates environmental justice to the broader issue of sustainable development. Chapter 3 outlines how to prepare or revise the general plan within the framework of planning law.

Chapter 4 elaborates on the statutorily required general plan elements, citing relevant court interpretations and Attorney General opinions. Chapter 5 discusses formatting options for the general plan and opportunities for element integration and consolidation. Chapter 6 offers suggestions on preparing selected optional elements and includes new guidance for energy and water elements.

Chapter 7 reviews the California Environmental Quality Act's integral role in the general plan process. Chapter 8 discusses the role of public participation in the general plan process.

Chapter 9 discusses a wide range of general plan implementation techniques and offers suggestions on how to prepare the required annual general plan implementation report.

Chapter 10 explains the local general plan's relationship to other statutory planning requirements, such as the California Coastal Act, the Seismic Hazards Act, and the federal and state Endangered Species Acts.

The *General Plan Guidelines* concludes with several appendices, a glossary, and a bibliography of both printed and on-line planning references.

The *General Plan Guidelines* is advisory, not mandatory. Nevertheless, it is the state's only official document explaining California's legal requirements for general plans. Planners, decision-making bodies, and the public depend upon the *General Plan Guidelines* for help when preparing local general plans. The courts have periodically referred to the *General Plan Guidelines* for assistance in determining compliance with planning law. For this reason, the *General Plan Guidelines* closely adheres to statute and case law. It also relies upon commonly accepted principles of contemporary planning practice. When the words "shall" or "must" are used, they represent a statutory or other legal requirement. "May" and "should" are used when there is no such requirement.

Milestones in California's Planning Law

- 1907** First Subdivision Map Act enacted.
- 1915** Cities authorized to create planning commissions.
- 1917** Initial zoning law enacted.
- 1927** Cities and counties authorized to prepare master plans (general plans).
- 1929** Adoption of master plans made mandatory for those cities and counties establishing planning commissions (based largely on the 1928 U.S. Department of Commerce Model Standard City Planning Enabling Act). Subdivision Map Act revised enabling local governments to require dedication of improvements.
- 1937** All cities and counties required to adopt master plans. Cities and counties authorized to prepare "precise plans" (similar to specific plans of today) to implement the master plan.
- 1953** Planning law recodified into Government Code §65000, et seq.
- 1955** Land use and circulation elements required in the general plan.
- 1965** Planning and Zoning Law reorganized. Cities and counties authorized to prepare "specific plans."
- 1967** Housing element required in the general plan (effective July 1, 1969).
- 1970** Conservation and open-space elements required in the general plan.
- 1971** Safety, seismic safety, noise, and scenic highway elements required in the general plan. Zoning and subdivision approvals required to be consistent with the adopted general plan.
- 1973** OPR issues first *General Plan Guidelines*.
- 1974** Subdivision Map Act recodified from the Business and Professions Code into the State Planning and Zoning Law within the Government Code.
- 1975** Legislature clarifies statute on general plans' internal consistency.
- 1980** Detailed content standards and adoption procedures added to the housing element requirement. Appeals court says public works must be consistent with general plans (*Friends of B Street*).
- 1982** Appeals court says land use and circulation elements must correlate (*Twaine Harte*).
- 1984** Planning statutes substantially revised, seismic safety and scenic highways elements dropped as required elements, seismic safety merged with safety element.
- 1990** California Supreme Court says zoning in conflict with the general plan invalid (*Leshner v. Walnut Creek*).
- 2001** Legislature requires *General Plan Guidelines* to include environmental justice.

This summary does not include other major planning and land use statutes that have been important in shaping local planning, such as the California Environmental Quality Act, the Williamson Act, the California Coastal Act, and the Cortese-Knox-Hertzberg Local Government Reorganization Act.