

THE GENERAL PLAN PROCESS

The Governor's Office of Planning and Research (OPR) recommends a seven-step approach whenever a city or county amends its General Plan, one or more elements are prepared or modified, or the plan is completely revised.

The appropriate legislative body initiates the process but may delegate day-to-day oversight to a committee or planning commission. (see *Fact Sheet #8*)



University of California
Agriculture and
Natural Resources

September 2007

Step 1: Establish a Work Program—Who does what when, and how much will it cost?

The work program should define the responsibilities of each department and/or individual and define the roles of any consultants—most new plans or comprehensive revisions make at least some use of consultants.

In addition, the work program should allow opportunities for community participation. State law mandates that the planning agency provide for the involvement of citizens, public agencies, public utility companies, and civic, educational, and other community groups through public hearings or other appropriate means.

The work program should contain a budget and establish a schedule for completing the work: most plan revisions take approximately two years & cost an average of \$845,000 for counties and \$255,000 for cities, paid for out of the general fund.

Because environmental review is fundamental to the planning process, environmental documents should be prepared concurrently with the General Plan.

Step 2: Formulate Goals—What kind of future do we want?

Initial goals may be articulated by the legislative body or through a public visioning process.

During this step, a community will define a vision of its preferred future, evaluate the important local and regulatory issues to be addressed by the plan, and note the assumptions it is making.

Step 3: Collect and Analyze Data—Who are we? What facilities do we have?

Planning staff will gather information about

- “green” infrastructure such as water, habitat, forest, and open space.
- physical infrastructure like schools, fire stations, roads, and water treatment plants.
- demographic information about population size and composition, and the distribution of low-income and minority populations.
- housing stock and needs for all income levels and special populations (the disabled, the elderly, large families, female-headed families, etc.).
- economic conditions such as employment, market demand, and fiscal impacts.
- existing commitments, policies, and regulations under previous plans and applicable state and federal regulations.





The University of California prohibits discrimination or harassment of any person in any of its programs or activities. (Complete nondiscrimination policy statement can be found at http://danr.ucop.edu/aa/danr_nondiscrimination_and_affir.htm)

Direct inquiries regarding the University's nondiscrimination policies to the Affirmative Action Director, University of California, ANR, 1111 Franklin St., 6th Floor, Oakland, CA 94607, (510) 987-0096.

**University of California
Agriculture and
Natural Resources**

Step 4: Refine Goals—What are the possibilities?

All this information will invariably lead a community to revise its goals and objectives. From here, a community will begin to formulate possible policies and alternative plan proposals. Public participation during this step is essential to ensure that resulting options accurately reflect community values.

Step 5: Analyze Alternatives—Which version of the future looks best to us?

In this step, the idea is to compare and contrast possible futures. Each alternative should examine three major areas:

- An economic impact assessment tries to quantify the relative economic efficiency of the different proposals.
- A social impact assessment focuses on individuals and groups of people within the community in an attempt to identify and evaluate changes to people’s well-being and/or quality of life under the various scenarios.

An environmental impact assessment seeks to identify the potential significant environmental effects of the proposed alternative. (See the *CEQA Fact Sheet #12 for details.*)

Step 6: Adopt a Plan—Is this plan the one?

The lead planning agency will select a preferred plan—one of the alternatives or a synthesis of parts of several alternatives—and submit a draft plan to the public and legislative body for review. The draft must also be referred to various regional and state agencies. A majority of the total membership of a planning commission must recommend that a plan be approved before it can be forwarded to the city council or board of supervisors.

These elected bodies must hold at

least one public hearing before making a decision. The city council or board of supervisors must certify that it has considered the information contained in the final environmental impact report prior to adopting the proposal. The legislative body may then vote to adopt the plan, or it may be adopted by initiative or referendum, in which case residents will be able to vote for or against it.

Step 7: Implement the Plan—How are we doing?

The General Plan should identify local agencies responsible for implementing the plan and describe a formal process for regularly monitoring the plan. State law requires the planning agency to deliver annual reports to the legislative body on the plan’s status, progress, and implementation.

Later . . . Amending the General Plan

Once adopted, a GP is not written in stone. The most common way a plan is revised is through an amendment, usually in response to a privately initiated development project.

In general, local governments may not amend any one of the mandatory elements more than four times in a calendar year. Each amendment may include more than one change. Many local governments group together several proposals, review them individually, and analyze their cumulative impact. Thus, you may hear references to a county’s quarterly “winter,” “spring,” “summer,” or “fall” amendments.

When amending, local governments must follow the same public notice and hearing procedures required when adopting a plan. Or the amendments may be made by ballot initiative or referendum. Any amendments are subject to environmental review.

Written by Delaine Fragnoli and Holly George
<http://ucanr.org/landusefactsheets>