

PLANNING FOR CHANGE IN A CHANGING WORLD



Ten Strategies for Successful General Plan Reviews and Housing Element Updates

Suggestions for Local Governments in San Mateo County

**Housing Leadership Council of San Mateo County
Sustainable San Mateo County
SAMCEDA
Silicon Valley Leadership Group
Greenbelt Alliance**

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To: **Local Government Officials, Commissioners, and Staff
Throughout San Mateo County**

From: **Housing Leadership Council of San Mateo County
Sustainable San Mateo County
SAMCEDA
Silicon Valley Leadership Group
Greenbelt Alliance**

Re: PLANNING FOR CHANGE IN A CHANGING WORLD

As organizations concerned about San Mateo County’s future economic, environmental, and social well-being, we are writing this joint letter:

1. To express our belief that the upcoming round of local general plan reviews and housing element updates may be among the most important of our lifetime,
2. To briefly identify some of the major changes and challenges we will be facing in the coming years that need to be responsibly addressed in our local land use plans,
3. To suggest criteria to measure the success of our local planning efforts, and
4. To offer some suggestions regarding how to make these important planning activities successful

Our organizations encourage you to take these planning activities very seriously because the collective outcomes of your individual planning activities will affect San Mateo County’s environment, economy, quality of life, and social well-being for both current and future generations.

We would be pleased to provide you with whatever additional assistance we can to help assure the success of these important efforts.

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Strategy #1:

Take These Once-a-Decade Planning Opportunities Very Seriously

An essential element of successful general plan reviews and housing element updates is the awareness of how important and relatively rare they are.

Although, in theory, housing element updates occur once every seven years, due to delays in the process that commonly occur, they typically take place only once a decade. General plan reviews occur even less frequently than that – often occurring only once every 15 years or more.

Given the major changes and challenges we will be facing in the coming years and decades, and the urgent need for us to begin addressing them as soon as possible, this next round of general plan reviews and housing element updates may be the most important in our lifetimes.

Consequently, it is critical that they be done responsibly and well, because the opportunity to do them again may not occur for another decade.

Planning for a better future, for both current and future generations, is one of the most important and long-lasting functions of local governments. It is imperative, therefore, that it be undertaken for the right reasons and with the right attitudes.

Although periodic updates of local general plans and the housing elements of those general plans are required by State law, it would be important that we update them even if there were no such legal requirements.

We live in a rapidly changing world in which the failure of our local communities to plan for and adapt to changing conditions can adversely affect our economy, our environment, and our social well-being – both within and beyond our local communities.

So, when we revise our local general plans and/or housing elements, it is important that we do so with a great sense of responsibility to ourselves and to future generations – not just to fulfill legal obligations under state law or not just because our current plans may be “out of date.”



Strategy #2:

Prepare for Changing Conditions

Planning without context is merely wishful thinking. Effective planning needs to take place with a conscious awareness not only of current conditions, but also of the changes and challenges that lie ahead.

We will be experiencing major changes and serious challenges in the coming years and decades. Among the major changes we will be facing – and need to be planning for – will be:

- Population growth,
- The aging of our population,
- Global warming, and
- The end of cheap oil.

The following is a brief summary of some of these coming changes:

Population Growth

Over the next twenty years, the Bay Area's population is projected to grow by 2 million people, more than a 25% increase. That is equal to adding two more cities with the current population of San Jose. The vast majority of the housing to accommodate our growth will be – and should be – accommodated through reuse of lands within existing urban areas.

Determining how and where our future housing development should occur in order to best meet current and future social, economic, and environmental needs is a major planning challenge that we must address responsibly during our upcoming general plan review and housing element updates.

Our Aging Population

By the year 2030, one-fourth of our county's residents will be over the age of 65 – the largest percentage of seniors ever in our county's history.

A significant percentage of them will be unable or unwilling to drive an automobile – in a county whose land use patterns currently make most of its residents automobile-dependent.

The future quality of life of our growing senior population will be directly impacted by the decisions we make in our upcoming housing element updates and general plan reviews.

Global Warming

By 2050, global warming may raise the level of San Francisco Bay by at least a foot and a half, and will have had a wide variety of other negative impacts on communities, our environment, and our quality of life.

If we do not immediately begin reducing our greenhouse gas emissions in many different ways, including modifying our existing land use patterns to reduce total vehicle miles traveled, the consequences for current and future generations will be even more severe.

Our housing element updates and general plan reviews can be important tools for addressing the challenges posed by global warming.

The End of Cheap Oil

Cheap oil – the foundation and lifeblood of our suburban, automobile-dependent land use patterns and lifestyles for the past fifty years – will become increasingly more expensive as the world's demand for energy continues to grow and the supply of high quality, easy-to-extract oil diminishes.

While we are hopeful that technological changes will play important roles in helping us to adapt to this coming reality, we need to acknowledge and address the fact that our current land use patterns and their resulting automobile dependency constitute a major vulnerability for our economy and our quality of life as energy costs continue to rise.

We can address this challenge by using our general plan reviews and housing element updates to locate future housing development where it will be closer to jobs, where it will support public transit usage, and where it will contribute to creating more walkable and bikeable urban neighborhoods.

Individually, each of these four changes – population growth, the aging of our population, global warming, and the coming end of cheap oil – is sufficiently important that it should be cause for us to seriously review and revise our housing and land use policies. Collectively, they present an overwhelming reason to do so.



Strategy #3:

Establish Responsible Criteria for Measuring Success

There are many different ways of measuring the success of a general plan review and/or housing element update. The typical standard for determining success is simply whether the revised plan is better than the existing one.

As we prepare for the serious challenges of the future however, the standard “it’s better than the old plan” criterion may not be adequate. Evaluation criteria related to the challenges we face may be needed.

We would like to suggest one such criterion that we believe may be especially important.

Will implementation of our revised general plan or updated housing element constructively contribute to achieving a net reduction in total vehicle miles traveled within the region below current levels, while accommodating our reasonable share of the region's future population growth?

Achieving the goal of reducing total vehicle miles traveled below current levels is critical both to slowing global warming and to reducing the negative impacts of rising oil prices on our local and regional economies. It can also serve as an indicator of how successful we are at creating or expanding walkable, bikeable neighborhoods that enhance transit viability and reduce automobile dependency.

If your revised plan meets this criterion, it will be simultaneously providing social, environmental, and economic benefits and will be making a substantial contribution to meeting the challenges of population growth, global warming, the aging of our population, and the coming end of cheap oil.



Strategy #4:

Develop a Compelling, Long Term Vision to Guide Planning and Decision Making

While we face serious, even daunting, challenges in the years ahead, we must face them with a spirit of optimism and determination to confront and address them effectively.

Just as our business community on the Peninsula has repeatedly demonstrated its ability to reinvent itself, to adapt to new challenges, and to create new and better products and technologies, we need to foster within our civic life a similar creative spark to imagine and build communities that successfully adapt to the changes and challenges we are facing.

It has been said that the future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams. The same is likely to be true for cities as well.

Consequently, developing early in your planning process a compelling, responsible, widely-shared, long term vision of your city's desired future can plan important roles in guiding the revision of your general plan and its subsequent implementation.



Strategy #5:

Build Community Support for Well-Planned Change

The prospect of change within local communities often engenders resistance. While resistance to change may be inherent in the human species, resistance to changes in land use and development can generally be traced to one or more of the following factors:

- A failure to see the need for change (or the consequences of failing to change)
- A failure to see the benefits of change
- A failure to see the potential for change (especially within “built out” communities)
- A sense of powerlessness to direct the nature of the change

Successful planning for the changes needed to meet the challenges that lie ahead must acknowledge and seek to effectively address all four of these factors. Community education, dialogue, and meaningful involvement are key ingredients for successful planning involving change.

A common shortcoming of local planning efforts is that they fail to spend enough time in the early stages of their planning processes providing the community with information about the changes and challenges that lie ahead - and the consequences of failing to plan for them.

Without this essential informational foundation to build upon, local planning activities can become embroiled in unnecessary controversy focused on maintaining the status quo – which often is both an unrealistic and an irresponsible option.

All stakeholders in our upcoming general plan reviews and housing element updates need to understand that failing to plan for change won't prevent change from happening. And unplanned change is likely to have more negative impacts on the community than well-planned change.

Stakeholders, particularly in neighborhoods most likely to be affected by change, need to be provided with meaningful opportunities to participate in directing the location and nature of that change so that it addresses their legitimate concerns and so that, hopefully, they will come to support it, rather than oppose it.



Strategy #6:

Recognize the Critical Importance of Local Decisions Regarding How and Where We House Our Future Population

While the major challenges of population growth, our aging population, global warming, and the end of cheap oil may seem unrelated, they have one important element in common – they are directly related to the cumulative impacts of the decisions we make in our individual communities about how and where we house our future population.

These decisions, which lie almost exclusively within the province of local government authority, will affect our economy, our environment, and our social well-being – now and for generations yet to come.

The basic blueprints that guide our local communities as we make these important decisions are our city general plans. It is through our general plans and their housing elements that we establish the foundation for these decisions. And that is why the current or upcoming round of city housing elements and general plan reviews is so vitally important to our future.



Strategy #7:

Plan to Become Intelligently More Urban

There is a fundamental, inescapable reality that needs to be explicitly taken into consideration in our local housing element updates and general plan reviews.

San Mateo County is at a transition point from being a predominantly lower density, suburban place to becoming a somewhat more urban place.

This evolution is a reality that must be recognized and addressed directly and responsibly. Although many of us, no doubt, would prefer to keep San Mateo County as it is (or was), that is not a realistic option. Nor is it a responsible one for future generations.

Just as innovation, imagination, and change have continually driven our region's successful economic evolution, so too must they drive the physical evolution of our communities.

Change is a continuing presence in all dynamic, successful communities. The challenge lies in knowing what, where, and how to change – and what, where, and how not to – and proactively planning to make our communities in the future even better than they are today.

As we seek to address, through our land use planning and decision making, the various changes and challenges that lie ahead of us, we need to embrace the notion that we must become intelligently more urban.

Becoming intelligently more urban means, among other things:

- Focusing on livability, not just density
- Focusing on placemaking, not just planning
- Focusing on neighborhood-level planning, not just individual, site-specific, development projects
- Focusing on increasing opportunities for walking, bicycling, and other alternative forms of mobility that reduce our dependence on the automobile, not just on transit-oriented development.
- Identifying and focusing planned changes in those areas within our communities where it is most appropriate, and protecting those where it is not
- Planning for the needs of our population as it is and will be, not as it once was
- Reviewing and revising development standards and review procedures to facilitate development of pedestrian-oriented, environment-friendly, urban neighborhoods

By acknowledging and responsibly planning for our more urban future, we can make significant progress toward effectively meeting the challenges that lie ahead.



Strategy #8:

**Plan for Livable, Green, Urban Neighborhoods
– Not Just Denser Housing**

Meeting the challenges that lie ahead will require, among other things, that we build much more housing at higher densities in appropriate locations within existing developed areas.

But our planning challenge is more complex than that. Simply building more housing at higher densities will not solve all our problems – and may actually make some of them worse.

Instead, we must envision, plan for, and create livable, green, urban neighborhoods that complement existing development within our communities.

These neighborhoods must incorporate all the elements of “livable,” “green,” “urban” places.

This means that we need to plan for and develop, in appropriate locations, urban density neighborhoods that are attractive, vibrant, convenient, diverse, safe, healthy, nurturing, and sustainable places that creatively integrate our built and natural environments.

A community that offers residents and workers an attractive place to spend their time with easy access to food, shopping, and services, breeds a vibrant, lively community and reduces the need to drive.

Green neighborhoods are also powered by renewable energy, have resource efficient buildings, and rely on healthy, green building principles. Building green neighborhoods will relieve pressure of high gas prices, reduce vehicle emissions, reduce energy demand, and reduce need for costly road and infrastructure improvements.

The demand for green urban neighborhoods is overwhelming supply. Young professionals, smaller families, and our aging residents seek a green, urban lifestyle in increasing numbers.

Creating such neighborhoods should be a high priority for our cities' General Plan Reviews and Housing Element Updates.



Strategy #9:

Plan for a Diverse Community

As we prepare our housing element updates and conduct our general plan reviews, it is important that we do so with a realistic picture of the kinds of housing we will need not just now but also in the future.

In particular, we need to recognize that current demographics are vastly different than they were back in the days when “Ozzie and Harriet” families with both parents and two children living together in a single family home were the norm. Such households now comprise only a minority of all households.

Today, fewer than one third of the households in our county have school age children. And demographers project that, as our population continues to age, the percentage of households with children will be even less in the future than it is today.

Although planning for households with children must remain an important component of our housing element updates and general plan reviews, it should not overshadow the need to meet the housing needs of the two-thirds of our households that do not have school age children.

Similarly, although this is a very affluent area, many workers who are critical to our region’s economic and social well-being have great difficulty affording housing in reasonable proximity to where they work. Responsible local planning needs to provide increased housing opportunities for all income levels.



Strategy #10:

Make It Easier to Implement the Revised Plan

Developing plans that responsibly prepare our communities for the conditions and challenges that lie ahead is not sufficient, in and of itself. We need also to facilitate the implementation of these revised plans.

The challenges posed by population growth, the aging of our population, global warming, and the end of cheap oil cannot be successfully met simply by putting more words in our general plans or different colors on land use plan maps – they will require actual, on-the-ground changes in land development.

Consequently, if we truly believe in our revised plans and want to see them implemented, we must also re-examine the processes by which development proposals are reviewed and approved within our individual communities, and the development standards they must meet.

Our goal should be to make it easier to get good development proposals approved that conform to our revised plans, and not put them through the same time-consuming, contentious, and expensive review and approval processes as proposals that don't conform to our revised plans.

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