CHAPTER 3 PLANNING **BACKGROUND**

This chapter presents a summary of background information that may be useful in understanding the context of the goals and polices presented in subsequent chapters. The 1999 General Plan Existing Conditions Report, prepared as part of the General Plan Update Program, provides more information on the topics covered in this chapter and includes a bibliography.

A. Historical Context

El Cerrito was incorporated in 1917, with a population of approximately 1,500 residents. Over the years, the City grew slowly but steadily, with rapid growth beginning during World War II and extending through the 1950s. As the City became more established, it gave itself the title "City of Homes," reflecting its suburban residential character.

While there have been significant changes in El Cerrito over the years, the City's overall development pattern has remained relatively unchanged. The San Pablo Avenue Corridor remains the City's primary commercial district with the rest of the city largely dedicated to residential development and supporting uses, such as schools and parks.

El Cerrito's population peaked in the early 1960s, at approximately 25,400. Although the City has continued to develop, there has been a slight decline in the population since the 1960s, with an estimated 1998 population of 23,600. This decline has been due to limited land availability, demolition of some housing to make way for BART's development, and a declining average household size.

One of the most important factors in El Cerrito's history has been the strong tradition of citizen activism and involvement in city planning and decision making, dating back more than five decades. Citizen activism and coalition building resulted in the professionalization of City services in the 1940s; the construction of civic improvements in the 1950s; development and adoption of the City's first General Plan in 1967; and formation of the City's Redevelopment Agency in the 1970s.

B. Regional Setting

El Cerrito is part of the San Francisco Bay Area—a dynamic urban complex of 7,000 square miles, nine counties, 100 cities, and a population of more than 6 million, making it the fifth most populous metropolitan area in the United States. El Cerrito is a centrally located Bay Area community in the "East Bay" sub-region

composed of Alameda and Contra Costa counties (see Figure 2: Regional Location Map).

El Cerrito is in western Contra Costa County along the I-80 corridor. The City of Richmond lies to the west, north, and northeast of El Cerrito. The unincorporated Contra Costa County area of East Richmond Heights borders the north and northeastern parts of the city, and Wildcat Canyon Regional Park, owned and operated by the East Bay Regional Park District, lies to the east. The unincorporated Contra Costa County community of Kensington is to the southeast, and the City of Albany (in Alameda County) lies to the south, with Berkeley just beyond.

Several key points stand out in regard to El Cerrito's regional setting:

- El Cerrito's future is closely tied to that of the entire San Francisco Bay Area a region with a robust economy; an increasingly diverse population; and one of the country's highest costs of living. Regardless of the level of growth within its city limits, El Cerrito will be greatly affected by regional trends and events. Many of the issues addressed by the General Plan (traffic, economic development, air pollution, etc.), while having important local dimensions, are truly regional in scope.
- El Cerrito is blessed with a beautiful location and climate, enhancing the quality of life for its residents.
- El Cerrito is strategically located along major regional transportation routes, including Interstate 80 and the Richmond line of the Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART), providing important regional access for local businesses as well as residents.

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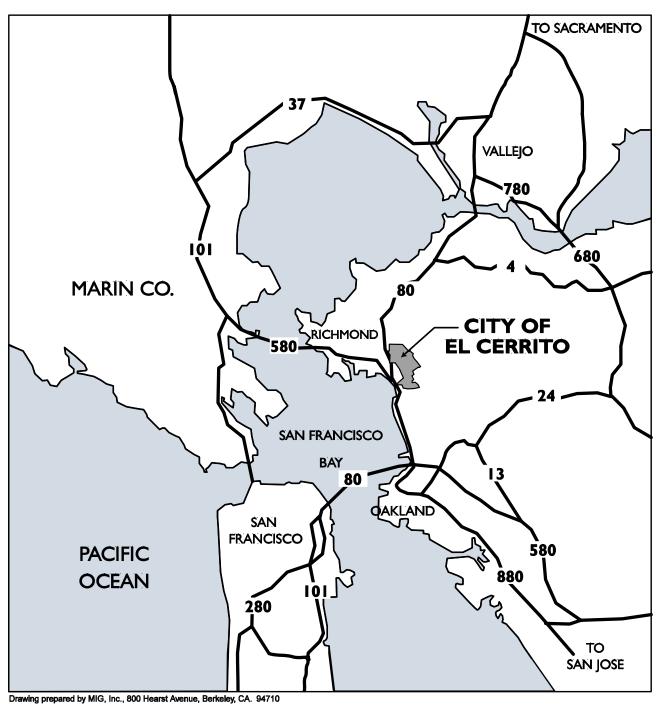


Figure 2 REGIONAL LOCATION MAP

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C. Community Profile

As El Cerrito enters the 21st Century, there are a number of current and projected trends that are affecting, or will affect, the City's development by creating demands for new housing, shopping, and recreational facilities.

- 1. The City's population has been relatively stable during the past two decades, growing by only a few hundred from the 1980 census figure of 22,731 to the 1998 estimate of 23,596 (California Department of Finance, Demographics Unit).
- 2. The average household size is declining, from 2.76 persons in 1970 to 2.29 persons in 1990, lower than the regional average of 2.61 in 1990. The January 1998 estimate of household size was 2.32 (California Department of Finance, Demographics Unit).
- 3. El Cerrito's population is getting older, with a significant decrease in the number of children in the community over the past several decades (children, age 18 and under, made up 36 percent of the population in 1960, decreasing to 16 percent in 1990). There has also been a marked increase in the number of seniors (55 and older), growing from 15 percent of the population in 1960 to 32 percent in 1990. (Note that in many cases, the figures in this Community Profile rely on the 1990 Census data because more current data are not available.)
- 4. El Cerrito's population is becoming increasingly diverse, with significant growth in the City's Asian populations. However, in the 1990 census the City had fewer foreign-born residents than the state average (20 percent as compared to 22 percent) and fewer residents speaking a language other than English at home (26 percent compared to 32 percent).
- 5. El Cerrito is a well-educated community, with 70 percent of people age 25 and over in the 1990 census having attended college (compared to 64 percent in Contra Costa County and 59 percent in Alameda County).
- 6. El Cerrito's average household income is lower than the county and regional averages (\$63,300 in El Cerrito; \$70,700 in Contra Costa County; \$66,900 in the Bay Area region). This is partially due to a higher than average percentage of seniors. (Based on 1995 estimates from the National Planning Data Corporation.)
- 7. Multiple-unit housing has increased in the city, and the percentage of owner-occupied units has decreased. Multiple-unit housing represented 19 percent of the City's housing stock in 1970 and 26 percent in 1997 (based on 1970 census data and January 1998 estimates from the California Department of Finance). Also, from 1970 to 1990, home ownership dropped from 70 percent of all units, to 66 percent (based on census data).

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D. Environmental Setting

The General Plan establishes policies to protect the City's environmental resources from the impact of development, and to protect residents and businesses from potential hazards resulting from natural and man-made environmental hazards. As a generalized, comprehensive planning document, the General Plan provides the framework and direction for development of more detailed studies, policies, and programs, such as preparation of the Hillside Natural Area Vegetation Management Plan; preparation of the Storm Water Master Plan, designation of Very High Fire Hazard Severity Zones, and development of the City's Fire Hazard Reduction Program.

Following are brief summaries of some of the key environmental factors and issues in El Cerrito. More detailed information is provided in the *General Plan Background Report* and the EIR for this Plan.

Topography

The topography of El Cerrito is characterized by a gently sloping plain in the western portion of the city (nearest the bay) and the west-facing slopes of the Berkeley Hills, which rise above the bay to an elevation of approximately 900 feet. The city is divided into two topographic regions: the lower elevations characterized by a traditional grid pattern of development and the higher elevations with steeper slopes and a development pattern prescribed by the contours of the land. The lower elevations cover the west and southwest portions of the city while the higher elevations cover the eastern and northern portions of the city.

Watersheds

There are eight major watersheds that drain through El Cerrito. As a result of the development history of the city, a large percentage of the creeks and drainage-ways in the city are located on or under private property. The open drainage facilities provide extremely valuable riparian habitat that is increasingly limited. The City has identified several creeks, such as Cerrito Creek, as significant natural resources that have the potential to become recreational amenities and, in some cases, to provide trail connections.

Open Space

The most significant open space in the planning area is the Hillside Natural Area, with additional open space areas provided by the Mira Vista Country Club, Sunset View Cemetery, Camp Herms Boy Scout Camp, eleven developed parks, the Ohlone Greenway, school playfields, and several "pocket parks." The city also borders the significant open space resources of Wildcat Canyon Regional Park. Protection and management of the Hillside Natural Area and other open space areas, including continued implementation of the Hillsides Natural Area Vegetation Management Plan in coordination with fire hazard reduction programs, will continue to be an important concern of the community.

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Rare and Endangered Species

Four "special status" species potentially inhabit the upper hillsides of El Cerrito: two plant species—Santa Cruz tarplant (Holocarpha macradenia) and San Francisco owl's clover (Orthocarpus floribundus); and two animal species—Monarch butterfly (Danaus plexippus) and Alameda whipsnake (Masticophis lateralis euryxanthus).

Soils, Geology, and Seismicity

The Hayward Fault passes through El Cerrito, generally following the route of Arlington Boulevard. The city is also potentially subject to ground-shaking from a major earthquake on the San Andreas Fault, located about 18 miles away. According to earthquake predictions made in 1990 by the Working Group in California Earthquake Probability, there is roughly a one-in-four chance of a large earthquake (magnitude 7 or greater) occurring in the next 30 years (beginning in 1990) along the northern segment of the Hayward Fault and the same chance of such an earthquake on the peninsula segment of the San Andreas Fault. The Working Group will announce its new predictions for the Bay Area in October 1999. The area immediately adjacent to the Hayward Fault has been designated as a special study zone, which imposes some additional development restrictions.

From a geologic and geotechnical standpoint, the primary concerns in El Cerrito are (1) slope stability, (2) earthquake ground shaking, (3) fault ground rupture, and (4) liquefaction potential. According to the Tri-Cities Seismic Safety Study (Bishop 1973), virtually all of the upland areas of El Cerrito have a moderate to high landslide risk. The highest risk for groundshaking is in the flatter areas, which have shallow alluvium. The greatest risk of ground rupture is along the fault trace. Several small areas along Baxter and Cerrito creeks are identified as having a high liquefaction potential.

Fire Hazards

El Cerrito's intermix of urban housing and wildland areas increases the community's risk of loss from a devastating fire. The City's Fire Hazard Reduction Program addresses hazard reduction in the Very High Fire Hazard Severity Zones of the city, requiring that property owners take special precautions with their properties, including vegetation management, to reduce the risk of fire.

Areas Prone to Flooding

A number of large storms have caused drainage problems and flooding in the past in El Cerrito. Recent completion of the first phase in the City's storm drain master plan program has addressed the highest priority sites and significantly reduced localized flooding issues in the city. During the past year of heavy rains (1997-98), only three sites had drainage-related flooding problems. The only portion of El Cerrito located in a FEMA Flood Insurance Zone is the area located west of San Pablo Avenue and south of Central Avenue. Flooding is generally caused by the relatively low ground elevations and high tides in this area, coupled with hydraulic restrictions in the existing downstream channels located in Richmond between El Cerrito and San Francisco Bay.

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Noise

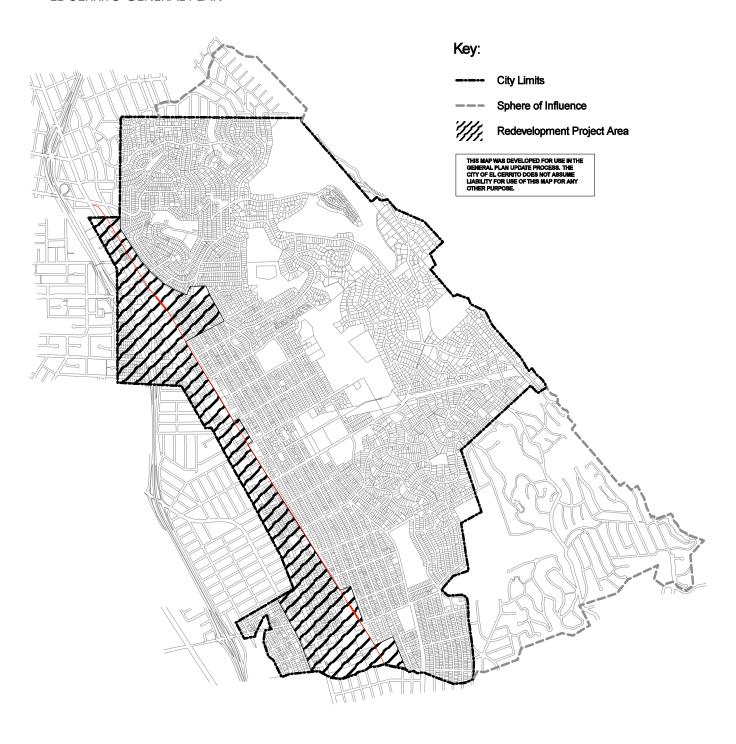
The major noise sources in the City of El Cerrito are vehicular traffic (especially along Interstate 80 and San Pablo Avenue) and BART trains. These noise sources are generally annoying, but have the most significant impact on nearby noise-sensitive uses such as schools and libraries, convalescent homes, churches, residential facilities, and outdoor recreation areas.

Planning Area

The City of El Cerrito encompasses approximately 2,390 acres within its city limits. However, the City's Planning Area also includes the neighboring areas of Kensington and portions of East Richmond Heights, both in unincorporated Contra Costa County. See Figure 3 for a map showing the boundaries of the city and its planning area. In these areas, the County in formal consultation with the City controls land use issues. The General Plan, in accordance with State law, must address land uses and other planning issues in these areas, particularly as they relate to and potentially impact adjacent uses and activities within the city.

In El Cerrito, the Planning Area is coterminous with the City's Sphere of Influence, as defined by the Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCo). While the inclusion of Kensington and portions of East Richmond Heights within the Sphere of Influence indicates that these areas may eventually be annexed or served by the City, it is not expected that the status of either area will change within the 20-year planning horizon of this General Plan. It should be noted that El Cerrito provides fire services, under contract, to Kensington.

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Drawing prepared by MIG, Inc. 800 Hearst Avenue, Berkeley, CA 94710

Figure 3 PLANNING BOUNDARIES

E. Economic and Fiscal Conditions

Like many cities in California, the City of El Cerrito has been experiencing financial difficulties, most of which are beyond the control of the City. These financial difficulties are mainly due to a declining revenue base that has several causes: the State government's shifting of a portion of the local share of property tax revenues to the Education Revenue Augmentation Fund (ERAF); the recession in the early 1990s; and the 1996 loss of the Emporium store, one of the City's largest sales tax revenue generators.

As in many other cities, these difficulties have created new challenges for El Cerrito as it strives to balance its General Fund operating budget (the City ahs adopted a two-year budget cycle), requiring reductions in many City programs and services. They also create challenges for the General Plan as it charts a course for the City's development and related activities in the coming 20 years. While the City has launched separate efforts to address long-term budget and public service issues (e.g., Project Listen, Neighbor to Neighbor, and the Services for the 21st Century Program), the General Plan will influence projected fiscal conditions in several ways. First, it will affect the supply of available funds by influencing the type of development from which the City receives sales and property tax revenues. Second, it will affect the demand for these funds by establishing levels and priorities for City services and facilities.

Typically the Redevelopment Agency is used to assemble small parcels that would otherwise be uneconomic to develop. It can also be used to provide amenities to the community that the private sector is not willing to provide. The process should strive to be as cost-effective as possible and have community support. A project that is highly cost-effective may override neutral support by the community, while a project that has very strong community support may override minimal cost-effectiveness.

Economic Development

The General Plan includes land use policies that enhance and encourage economic development to assist the City in generating additional property and sales taxes and other revenues. Specifically, it supports City efforts to aggressively pursue the redevelopment and revitalization of core commercial areas, including El Cerrito Plaza, the Del Norte BART station area, and the retail strip along all or portions of San Pablo Avenue.

Public Service Standards

The General Plan establishes service standards for major municipal services, including police, fire, and parks and recreation. Each adopted service standard implies a certain commitment of City resources to maintain those standards. The projected costs of maintaining adopted service standards will need to be covered either from existing General Fund revenue sources or from new voter-approved revenue sources. The desired level of service standards and their affordability will directly affect the long-term fiscal condition of the City.

Implementation Priorities

The General Plan establishes policies that will guide the City's development over the next 20 years. To ensure that the Plan is an effective tool, it sets forth consistent, coherent policies and establishes consistent priorities for the City (as set forth in the Implementation Priorities in Chapter 1 and in Chapter 8, Implementation Summary).

F. Projections and Planning Assumptions Projected Population Growth

The Association of Bay Area Governments (ABAG), a voluntary association of Cities and Counties in the San Francisco Bay Area, projects modest population growth in El Cerrito in the coming 20 years, with growth rates well below the county and regional averages. This is primarily because the city is already largely built out. By 2020, it is projected that the population in the City's planning area (including Kensington and a portion of East Richmond Heights) will have reached 31,900—an increase of 2,400 from the 1995 estimate of 29,500, and an average annual growth rate of less than a third of one percent (ABAG, *Projections 98*).

Projected Population Change in El Cerrito, 1995-2020								
							Growth	Annual
							Increment	Rate of
	1995	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020	1995-2020	Change
								1995-2020
El Cerrito ¹	29,500	30,000	30,600	31,100	31,500	31,900	2,400	0.31%

Note: (1) Includes Kensington and a portion of East Richmond Heights
Source: Association of Bay Area Governments, December 1997; Economic and Planning Systems,

Projected Income and Employment Growth

The economic health and prosperity of El Cerrito and its residents have been, and will continue to be, integrally linked to other communities in the Bay Area. While population and job growth in the next 20 years will shift to outlying areas such as Solano, Marin, and Napa Counties, inner Bay Area communities that choose to accept growth will remain well-positioned to take advantage of the region's continued economic prosperity.

While El Cerrito has one of the lowest unemployment rates in the near East Bay (due in part to its higher proportion of retired residents), most El Cerritans travel outside of El Cerrito for work. This will continue to be the case in the next 20 years, with the majority of jobs located in other East Bay cities and in San Francisco.

Most of the jobs located in El Cerrito are in the retail and service sectors, with the City's top employers being retail stores with national names. While the number of

jobs in El Cerrito is projected to increase at a lower rate than in past years, it will slightly outpace growth in the number of employed residents. The service sector is expected to continue as the City's largest employment sector, and will lead job growth in the city through the year 2020. (ABAG, *Projections 98*)

El Cerrito's average household income is projected to grow moderately in the coming 20 years, but at a slower-than-average rate when compared with other communities in Contra Costa and Alameda counties. (ABAG, *Projections 98*)

Projected Housing Needs

Based on current trends, ABAG has projected a demand for a total of 1,110 new housing units in the El Cerrito planning area (includes Kensington and a portion of East Richmond Heights) by the year 2020. (ABAG, *Projections 98*) If the housing tenure characteristics that have historically existed in El Cerrito continue into the future, owner-occupied housing (single-family, condominiums, and cooperatives) will account for an estimated 666 units, while rental housing will account for 444 units. The supply of available land, however, especially for single-family homes, may not be able to provide this mix of housing.

Also, because El Cerrito is located in one of the most expensive housing markets in the country, housing affordability is a constant issue. Although homes in El Cerrito are less expensive than in some nearby cities, it has lower mean household incomes than do either Contra Costa or Alameda counties as a whole. If home values were to escalate sharply, many people who can now afford to live in El Cerrito would need to look elsewhere.

Projected Commercial Development Trends

Retail sales in El Cerrito declined gradually between 1990 and 1996 despite an increase in the number of stores. This likely reflects the closure of several large establishments and the rise of smaller independent stores in the older strip centers. With large retail spaces such as the Emporium, Woolworth, and Food Bowl stores lying vacant, the overall retail vacancy is estimated to be about 9 percent.

A great deal of residents' spending appears to be bypassing El Cerrito stores in favor of retail centers in other cities. About half the estimated spending potential of El Cerrito residents is not being captured by El Cerrito retailers. In particular, apparel, leisure, and specialty retail appear to be underrepresented in El Cerrito relative to the spending potential of residents.

Nonetheless, the retail picture in El Cerrito appears to be improving. While older strip centers and the El Cerrito Plaza are struggling against competition from newer centers, the north end of town has experienced a great deal of development activity oriented toward the freeway interchange and Del Norte BART station.

El Cerrito's office market is relatively undeveloped, despite its favorable location, good freeway access, and BART service. This is partly due to the City's reputation as a "bedroom community" and competition from what is seen as a more

entrepreneurial atmosphere in nearby West Berkeley and Emeryville, where office markets are currently expanding.

Assumptions Regarding Future Development

Increasing the revenues to the City, especially from sales tax, is a very high priority. However, while the demand for both commercial and residential land uses is expected to remain strong, the limited supply of available land is a major constraint.

Residential development will largely be limited to intensification and improvements on existing parcels. Multi-family housing, if appropriately designed and marketed, could prove successful in some areas along and near San Pablo Avenue. Most new retail development is expected to occur along the San Pablo Corridor within the Redevelopment Project Area. Larger office developments, if they occur, will likely be located in proximity to one or both of El Cerrito's two BART stations.

Future growth is expected to be limited to small in-fill opportunities and reuse of existing sites, mostly in the area along the San Pablo Corridor. Such projects tend to be more complex and less profitable to implement, and thus less attractive to developers. To attract development that is consistent with the City's vision for the San Pablo Corridor, the City may need to take a proactive role in the development process.

However, many City residents have significant concerns about the impact of various types of development, particularly on traffic and the economic health of the City. Development efforts will need to respond to these concerns and show that economic growth need not be inconsistent with, and in fact may be necessary for, improving the residential character of the City and making it a more rewarding place to live.