

# ***CHAPTER 1 A GUIDE TO THE GENERAL PLAN***

## **A. Key Principles**

El Cerrito is a City with numerous positive attributes – great location, pleasant climate, stable residential neighborhoods, good transit and highway access, numerous park and recreational facilities, and involved citizens. Today, the City is in a position to reinforce its established residential areas with dynamic commercial areas that provide needed tax revenues, shopping opportunities, and locally created jobs.

This General Plan is our vision for achieving more balanced residential, commercial, and civic uses within the city. The process of preparing this General Plan took place in 1998 and 1999 as the City embarked on a program to bring its 1975 General Plan up to date so that it could better meet future challenges. This process resulted in the following ten key principles designed to improve the quality of development and the long-term fiscal health of the City so that it can remain an attractive place to live and work:

1. No major changes in land-use patterns are expected to occur.
2. Emphasis will be on quality of development.
3. Incentives, if used, will have clear criteria and limits.
4. Emphasis will be on impacts of development, not on the type of development itself.
5. Increased residential development, where allowed, must be done with care in order to enhance neighborhoods.
6. New development in the San Pablo Avenue Corridor will be encouraged to take place in mixed-use activity centers that may extend up selected perpendicular streets in order to allow a more pedestrian friendly environment.
7. The preservation and enhancement of natural features – trees, creeks, natural open space areas – and historical features will be a high priority for the City.
8. The City should have distinct destination areas, including commercial areas, a civic center and community meeting places.
9. Development should contribute to the fiscal health of the City while minimizing adverse impacts.
10. Access should be improved by balancing automobile use with improved transit, bicycle, and pedestrian opportunities.

## B. Organization of the Plan

The General Plan is organized into chapters, with several appendices containing technical or explanatory materials:

- Chapter 1 (this chapter), A Guide to the General Plan, provides an introduction to the General Plan and a brief summary of how it was developed.
- Chapter 2, Strategic Approach, focuses on the small number of strategic actions that will ensure the achievement of this General Plan's primary goals and policies.
- Chapter 3, Planning Background, summarizes background information on the City of El Cerrito, which is useful in understanding the context of the General Plan.
- Chapter 4, Community Development and Design, addresses land use, community design, housing, and growth management. The section on land use contains the future land use plan map and a description of the land use categories used in the plan.
- Chapter 5, Transportation and Circulation, addresses the movement of people and materials by transit, automobiles and trucks, bicycles, and walking.
- Chapter 6, Public Facilities and Services, deals with three topics: parks, recreation and open space, non-residential civic and community facilities, and public services and infrastructure.
- Chapter 7, Resources and Hazards, addresses natural and historic resources in its first major section. The natural resources discussion includes wildlife, air quality, and storm runoff. The second major section addresses hazards – geologic hazards, fires, flooding, and noise.
- Chapter 8, Putting the Plan to Work, addresses how the Plan can be used as an effective management tool to achieve its goals.

Chapters 4 through 7 set forth goals and policies that address specific planning issues. These goals and policies are preceded by a discussion of relevant background information and trends, and followed by implementation strategies.

The appendices contain additional information, including a glossary of planning terms. The list of appendices is contained in the table of contents.

## C. What is a General Plan

### *Purpose and Approach*

The El Cerrito General Plan sets forth the City's policies regarding the types and locations of future land uses and activities. It describes the desired character and quality of development as well as the process for how development should proceed.

While this General Plan can address many City issues, factors beyond El Cerrito's control have significant influence over its future land use and development patterns:

- Market forces play an important role in determining what types of uses are economically feasible and, therefore, built.
- Land use and transportation decisions in other cities and counties, and by state and regional agencies, affect El Cerrito.
- Our system of property rights places certain limitations on what cities can do in prescribing future land uses.
- California environmental law requires that we designate land uses in accordance with available infrastructure capacity (streets, sewer, water, natural resources, etc.).

Thus in creating this General Plan, El Cerrito went through a process that ascertained the community's values for future land uses and activities, and balanced these values with market factors, city revenues, environmental constraints, and private property rights.

The El Cerrito General Plan reflects the aspirations and values of El Cerrito's residents and their elected representatives. The City Council and Planning Commission will use the Plan in considering land use and planning-related decisions. City staff will use the Plan on a day-to-day basis to administer and regulate land use and development activity. Citizens can use the Plan to understand the City's approach to regulating development, protecting resources, and upholding community values.

## ***Goals, Policies, Implementing Measures, and Strategies***

The El Cerrito General Plan is based on the key principles described in the first section of this chapter. Those key principles provide the foundation for the Plan and strategic direction for the goals, policies, and implementation strategies that form the core of the Plan.

The following definitions will help readers understand and distinguish between these important components of the General Plan:

- ***Goals*** are general statements of values or aspirations held by the community. Because goal statements are general in nature, they tend to have broad community support and are not typically controversial.
- ***Policies*** are more precise expressions about how a particular goal will be interpreted or implemented. Policies may include guidelines, standards, maps, or a combination of these components:
  - ***Guidelines*** are policy statements that provide a set of detailed instructions about how to conduct some aspect of land use regulation.

- **Standards** are policy statements that include a specific, quantified measure of performance.
- **Maps** are graphic expressions of policy, typically showing geographic base data and thematic information.
- **Implementing Measures** are actions the City takes to put the goals and policies into practice. These might include ongoing programs sponsored by the City (e.g., road maintenance); discrete, time-specific actions (e.g., widen the sidewalks in a particular area); or further planning actions (e.g., develop a design plan or enact an issue-specific ordinance).
- **Strategies** are a compilation of implementing measures, intended to focus efforts on a limited set of action items that are essential in realizing the vision expressed in the General Plan. Because of their importance, these strategies are presented in a separate chapter, Chapter 2, of this Plan.

***Key to Goal and Policy Identifications***

- Chapter 4      LU = Land Use  
                    CD = Community Design
- Chapter 5      T = Transportation
- Chapter 6      PR = Parks and Recreation  
                    CF = Community Facilities, other than recreation  
                    PS = Public Services
- Chapter 7      R = Natural and Historic Resources  
                    H = Hazards

***Updating the General Plan***

Periodically, California cities must update their general plans to conform to changes in State law and other legal requirements, and to reflect changes in the land development patterns since the last plan was adopted. In addition, conditions and assumptions, which form the basis of any plan, can change due to changes in population, economy, development in surrounding cities, and other factors.

The General Plan adopted in 1975 presented a coherent and logical approach to development in the City. It has served the community well and, together with the numerous useful ideas presented during public meetings, has been the basis for the update process that produced this General Plan.

Since the preparation of the 1975 General Plan, many changes have occurred that affect it. For example:

- The computer revolution has created new businesses and new demands for land uses that could not have been anticipated in 1975. Also, there has been a reduction in traditional manufacturing and industrial uses.
- Retail trends have changed the way people shop, including the decline of the classic commercial strip and the rise of “big boxes” (like Target and Home

Depot), factory outlets, and places where people simply go for something to do—where shopping becomes entertainment.

- Traffic on Interstate 80 and San Pablo Avenue has increased dramatically. New high occupancy vehicle lanes and on/off ramps on Interstate 80 create new challenges and opportunities for managing traffic on our local streets.
- The City's financial management has faced new challenges, particularly from tax-limitation measures such as Propositions 13 and 4. The result is a greater emphasis on revenue-generating land uses (i.e., commercial uses) to support vital City services and facilities, such as police, fire, and parks and community centers.
- New residents and businesses have joined the El Cerrito community, bringing new ideas and values that need to be taken into account along with those of long-term residents and businesses.

For these reasons, and more, it was essential that the General Plan be updated—as it will be necessary to update the Plan again in the future as trends and developments that cannot be foreseen continue to change El Cerrito's economy, population, and environmental context.

This General Plan continues the major themes of the 1975 General Plan, but places more emphasis on design quality and implementation. The changes made to the 1975 General Plan are intended to:

- Bring the Plan into conformance with current state law.
- Ensure internal consistency.
- Respond to issues raised by City residents in the public participation process.
- Address shortcomings in the 1975 Plan identified by City staff.
- Align the Plan's policies with the key strategies for addressing major issues, as set forth in Chapter 2, to ensure that the City is in a position to respond to challenges and strategic opportunities.

These changes will help ensure that El Cerrito's General Plan remains a viable, effective tool for the next 20 years. However, none of the revisions result in a significant departure from the direction and policies set forth in the previous General Plan, nor will they result in significant changes in the amount, type, or rate of development in the City.

The El Cerrito Housing Element, adopted by the City Council in August 1991, is not included in the current update program because the regional fair-share allocations will not be available until July 2000. However, the existing housing policies have been incorporated into the relevant sections of the Plan, and the Housing Element in its entirety has been included in Appendix A.

### ***Impact of Plan Adoption***

Once adopted, the General Plan is the basis for land use and other municipal decisions. The plan itself is not a regulation – for implementation, it relies on tools such as the zoning ordinance, subdivision ordinance, design review, capital improvement program, and a variety of special purpose ordinances and programs. These implementation measures are briefly described and related to General Plan policies in subsequent chapters.

In accordance with California law, the City’s zoning ordinance and other implementation tools must be consistent with the General Plan. This means that the zoning ordinance will need to be reviewed after adoption of this Plan to ensure consistency. During the preparation and public review of zoning ordinance amendments, topics such as building height, densities, and allowed uses will be discussed for specific parcels. The general rule is that the zoning ordinance can be more restrictive than the General Plan, but cannot allow a greater level or completely different type of development than that described by the policies and standards in the General Plan.

## **D. Process for Developing this General Plan**

### ***Public Participation***

The El Cerrito General Plan was developed through a three-phase process, consisting of issue exploration, alternatives analysis, and policy development. The City Council and Planning Commission provided overall direction, with the assistance of a Process Team of citizen representatives who worked closely with the consultant team and City staff to guide the public process for updating the Plan.

The first phase, the “Exploration” phase, consisted of a number of exercises to gauge the opinions of residents and business people. That phase ended with a joint meeting of the City Council, Planning Commission, and Process Team to provide direction for the “Alternatives” phase of the process. This phase consisted of a second round of neighborhood workshops that provided the basis for development and assessment of alternative development strategies, leading to development and selection of a “preferred strategy.” The preferred strategy then provided the basis for the third phase of the process: preparation of the draft General Plan.

Key documents produced in the update process included the Existing Conditions Working Paper, Alternatives Assessment Report, draft General Plan and draft Environmental Impact Report (EIR). The Existing Conditions Working Paper was updated to become the Existing Conditions Report, serving as a background resource to the General Plan and EIR. The draft General Plan was reviewed in public discussion and hearings by the Planning Commission and City Council, and refined before adoption.

### ***Environmental Review***

As noted above, the General Plan process has included the preparation of an EIR pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act. Descriptions of the environmental setting and the specific public actions resulting from the General Plan are included in the body of individual sections of the Plan. These sections, supplemented by additional information in the Existing Conditions Report, provide the description of the General Plan update process and its environmental setting for the EIR.

The EIR provides the project summary, impact analysis, and associated mitigation measures. It also addresses other mandated components of an EIR for a General Plan. Following circulation of the draft El Cerrito General Plan and Draft EIR, responses were prepared for the comments received, and the Final EIR was certified prior to adoption of this updated General Plan.