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MARISA LANCHESTER  
STATE CAPITOL  
P.O. BOX 942849  
SACRAMENTO, CA 94249-0117  
(916) 319-3958

Assembly Local Government Committee Informational Hearing:  
Wednesday, March 12, 1:30 pm  
State Capitol, Room 447

## **“Introduction to the General Plan”**

### **AGENDA**

- I. Welcome
  - a. Welcoming remarks from Chair Juan Carrillo
- II. General Plan 101
  - a. Catherine Brinkley, VMD, PhD, from the University of California, Davis
- III. The General Plan at Work
  - a. Amanda Folendorf, County Supervisor for Calaveras County
  - b. Tom Pace, Director of Community Development for the City of Sacramento and Technical Advisor for the American Planning Association, California Chapter
  - c. Jennifer Jolley, Community Development Director for San Joaquin County
  - d. Omar Dadabhoy, Community Development Director for the City of Fountain Valley
- IV. Oversight of the Governor’s Office of Land Use and Climate Innovation
  - a. Natalie Kuffel, Deputy Director of Land Policy, Governor’s Office of Land Use and Climate Innovation
- V. Public Comment
- VI. Closing Remarks
- VII. Adjourn

## **Overview**

This background paper prepares the members of the Assembly Local Government Committee for the March 12, 2025 hearing titled, “Introduction to the General Plan.” Through this hearing, the Committee will provide Assemblymembers, staff, and the public with a foundational understanding of the General Plan, including its function, statutory goals, and the roles of government agencies at the local and state levels.

At the hearing, the Committee will first receive an overview of the General Plan. Leading this presentation is Catherine Brinkley, PhD, VMD, who currently serves as a professor in Human Ecology, Community and Regional Development at the University of California, Davis. Dr. Brinkley will also present the first state-level general plan database and search engine, an effort she led in partnership with the California American Planning Association, Governor’s Office of Land Use and Climate Innovation, California Air Resources Board, and California Environmental Justice Alliance.

Next, the Committee will hear presentations from local government representatives across the state on the practical application and functionality of the General Plan in real time. This panel, consisting of members from the American Planning Association-California Chapter, the League of California Cities, the California State Association of Counties, and the Rural County Representatives of California, will provide an overview of the key processes involved in updating the General Plan. This includes how updates to the General Plan are funded and how recent statutory requirements are implemented.

The third and final panel will introduce the Governor’s Office of Land Use and Climate Innovation (LCI), formerly the Governor’s Office of Planning and Research (OPR). The Committee will receive an overview of LCI’s role in long-term local planning, including an update on its effort to revise guidelines that advise local governments in implementing General Plan updates effectively.

## **What is a General Plan?**

A general plan serves as a local government’s blueprint for long-term growth and development, outlining policies and goals to shape the community’s future. Required by state law, every city and county in California must adopt a general plan that addresses key planning topics, known as elements. At a minimum, these include land use, circulation, housing, conservation, open space, noise, and safety. The general plan provides a foundation for zoning regulations, infrastructure investments, and public services, ensuring that development aligns with both local priorities and state requirements.

According to state law, “The general plan shall consist of a statement of development policies and shall include a diagram or diagrams and text setting forth objectives, principles, standards, and plan proposals” (Government Code, Section 65302). As communities evolve, general plans are periodically updated to reflect changing demographics, economic conditions, and environmental factors, making them a critical tool for sustainable and equitable development.

While state law mandates that general plans cover specific topics, cities and counties have broad discretion in their structure, content, and level of detail. General plans range from 200 to over 2,000 pages and vary significantly based on local conditions and priorities. This flexibility reflects the Legislature’s recognition that “the diversity of the state’s communities and their residents requires planning agencies and legislative bodies to implement [general plan law] in ways that accommodate local conditions and circumstances, while meeting its minimum requirements” (Government (GOV) Code, Section 65300.7).

## **History of General Plans**

The history of general plans in California dates back to 1927, when the California Legislature granted cities and counties the authority to establish planning commissions and adopt "master plans"—now known as general plans—to “conserve and promote the public health, safety, and general welfare” of their communities (Chapter 874, Statutes of 1927). Two years later, in 1929, adopting a master plan became mandatory for any city or county that chose to form a planning commission, in order to aid in zoning decisions (Chapter 838, Statutes of 1929). Twenty years later, the Legislature mandated counties to create planning commissions and to “prepare and adopt a comprehensive long-term general plan for the physical development of the city, county or region” (Chapter 807, Statutes of 1947). This law outlined categories a master plan could include, such as land use, conservation, recreation, streets and highways, transportation, transit, public services and facilities, public buildings, community design, and housing. The early linkage between planning commissions and general plans suggests a legislative intent to ensure that technical expertise, rather than purely political considerations, would guide long-term community planning.

Over the last three-quarters of a century, general plan requirements and guidelines have evolved to reflect shifting state and local priorities. Initially, general plans focused primarily on land use, zoning, and infrastructure. However, by the 1970s, environmental considerations became central with the passage of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), which required that general plans undergo environmental review to assess and mitigate potential environmental impacts. In the following decades, issues of housing affordability and equity led to more specific mandates ensuring that jurisdictions plan for housing needs across all income levels— a challenge that remains at the forefront of state and local policy today. Recent years have also brought increased focus on sustainability, climate resilience, and environmental justice. As the general plan requirements have evolved over the decades to reflect the current age, the initial goal of the 1927 legislature to allow local jurisdictions to “conserve and promote the public health, safety, and general welfare” of their communities, remains.

## **Elements Included in a General Plan**

The elements of the general plan are topics that are statutorily required to be addressed in each city and county’s general plan. These elements have changed over the years. As of 2025, there are seven mandatory elements required in all jurisdictions: land use, circulation, housing, conservation, open space, noise, and safety. An additional two elements, environmental justice and air quality, are required for jurisdictions that have disadvantaged communities, as defined by

Senate Bill (SB) 1000 (Leyva), Chapter 597, Statutes of 2016. It is important to note that a city or county may organize its plan in any way, so long as the following elements are incorporated:

Land Use: Designates the type, intensity, and general distribution of uses of land for housing, business, industry, open space, education, public buildings and grounds, waste disposal facilities, and other categories of public and private uses.

Circulation: Correlates with the land use element and identifies the general location and extent of existing and proposed major thoroughfares, transportation routes, terminals, and other local public utilities and facilities.

Housing: Assesses current and projected housing needs for all household income levels in the community. The housing element serves to identify sites to meet housing needs for all, inclusive of rental housing, prefabricated homes, and emergency shelters. The provisions in the housing element are more specific and directive than other elements, and contain detailed guidance and reviews.

Conservation: Addresses the conservation, development, and use of natural resources, including water, forests, soils, rivers, and mineral deposits. The conservation element shall consider the effect of development within the jurisdiction, as described in the land use element, on natural resources located on public lands, including military installations, and the movement of wildlife and habitat connectivity

Open Space: Details plans and measures for the long-range preservation and conservation of open-space lands, including land dedicated for the preservation of natural resources, the managed production of resources, agriculture, outdoor recreation, public health and safety, and space in support of the mission of military installations.

Noise: Identifies and appraises noise problems within the community and forms the basis for land use distribution determinations.

Safety: Establishes policies and programs to protect the community from risks associated with seismic, geologic, flood, and wildfire hazards, as well as from other concerns such as drought. The safety element also addresses evacuation routes, military installations, peak load water supply requirements, and minimum road widths and clearances around structures.

There are two elements that are required in certain instances:

Environmental Justice: Requires cities and counties with disadvantaged communities to identify goals, objectives, and policies to reduce pollution exposure, improve air quality, promote public facilities, improve food access, advance access to housing, and increase physical activity in identified disadvantaged communities.

Air Quality: Requires the cities and counties within the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District to integrate strategies to improve air quality and minimize exposure to toxic air pollutant emissions in its land use, transportation, and air quality plans. Cities and counties that have

identified disadvantaged communities, as defined by SB 1000 (Leyva), Chapter 587, Statutes of 2016, must also incorporate air quality into their general plans.

Other optional elements identified by the community—such as health, equity, community development, water, climate change, and resiliency—can be incorporated into general plans or used as guiding frameworks for their development.

### **The Role of the Office of Land Use and Climate Innovation (LCI)**

The California Governor’s Office of Land Use and Climate Innovation (LCI) serves as the state’s comprehensive planning agency. LCI plays a critical role in shaping long-range land use policies, administering state planning grants, developing and maintaining the General Plan Guidelines (GPG), collecting General Plan Annual Progress Reports (APRs) from local jurisdictions, and providing technical assistance to cities and counties preparing general plans.

The GPG serve as an essential “how to” resource for local governments drafting or updating their general plans. It details statutory requirements for both mandatory and optional elements, offers LCI-recommended policy language, and provides links to examples from existing general plans. Additionally, the GPG provides guidance for community engagement and outreach. The most recent edition, released in 2017, focused on four key policy themes: climate change, economics, healthy communities, and equitable opportunities. The 2017 GPG also introduced a General Plan Mapping Tool, allowing jurisdictions to integrate local, regional, and statewide data into their planning efforts at no cost. In 2020, LCI released further guidance on incorporating the Environmental Justice element into general plans [SB 1000 (Leyva), Chapter 587, Statutes of 2016].

Each year, by April 1, all jurisdictions must submit separate General Plan and Housing Element APRs to LCI and the Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD). The General Plan APR provides an overview of the jurisdiction’s progress in implementing its general plan over the previous year. LCI uses these reports to update the Directory of California Planning Agencies and to analyze key trends and policies shaping planning efforts across the state.

### **Updating the General Plan**

*The Legislature finds that the diversity of the state’s communities and their residents requires planning agencies and legislative bodies to implement this article in ways that accommodate local conditions and circumstances, while meeting its minimum requirements.*

*GOV § 65300.7, added by Stats.1980 Ch. 837*

While there is no specific requirement for the General Plan to be updated regularly, it is intended that the General Plan and its elements comprise an integrated, internally consistent and compatible statement of policies for the local agency. Since it serves as a long term planning tool and all elements are equally important, the General Plan attempts to project conditions and needs across the community for myriad issues, each with different timeframes. For example, the housing element must be updated every five or eight years, in accordance with the schedule set by the HCD for that jurisdiction. The safety element is statutorily required to be updated upon

revision of the housing element. In contrast, sewer, water and road systems are designed with a 30- to 50 year lifespan. So, how does a local agency create a planning document that satisfies regional needs, engages the public, and is flexible enough to withstand the test of time for at least a few years?

It starts with the community. Community engagement is a core component of any change to the General Plan. When cities and counties update the General Plan or one of its elements, they are required to hold at least two public hearings before adopting the change, one by the planning commission and another by the legislative body. Government Code section 65351 requires that during the preparation or amendment of a General Plan, the planning agency must provide opportunities for community input through public hearings and any other means the planning agency deems appropriate. Specifically, Government Code section 65351 requires that the planning agency “provide opportunities for the involvement of citizens, California Native American tribes, public agencies, public utility companies, and civic, education, and other community groups.”

Another step in amending or updating the General Plan is to undergo environmental review. CEQA requires cities and counties to study the potential impacts to the environment when the General Plan is changed. While a general plan EIR does not need to be as detailed as project specific EIR, the lead agency must still analyze the effects the proposed change imposed on the environment and must consider mitigation measures and alternatives identified in the EIR to reduce impact to the environment. In order for the proposed changes to be adopted, the lead agency must conduct at least one scoping meeting and the EIR must be circulated through the State Clearinghouse for review by relevant state agencies.

Community outreach, consultation with tribes and government agencies, and undergoing environmental review can be costly to local governments. The availability of general purpose planning grants is limited. There are, however, federal and state funds for particular planning issues, such as housing, transportation, and habitat. These planning processes can be incorporated into the general plan process in order to leverage resources. Though, that may still be not enough to fund a general plan update.

In 2002, the Legislature changed state law to allow development fees to include “costs reasonably necessary to prepare and revise the plans and policies that a local agency is required to adopt before it can make any necessary findings and determinations” (Gov. Code § 66014). This change makes it clear that an update of the general plan and related planning documents may be a recoverable expense and that a local government may impose fees on development to recoup that cost. A local agency may attempt to time updates to the General Plan and its elements when there are scheduled changes to the General Plan. For example, the local government may opt to update the circulation element in alignments with the housing element schedule and safety element. These strategies reduce redundancies and help maximize staff time and resources.

The figure below provides data on times since each element was updated.

**Table 1: Time Since Last General Plan Element Update (in years)**

Required Element	Average (years)	Median (years)	Mode (years)
Land Use	11.6	10.0	1.0
Circulation	12.0	11.0	11.0
Housing	3.2	1.0	0.0
Conservation	14.2	12.0	11.0
Open Space	14.2	13.0	16.0
Noise	14.4	13.0	16.0
Safety	10.2	8.0	1.0
Environmental Justice*	5.3	2.0	1.0
Air Quality**	13.1	13.0	16.0

\* Environmental justice elements became a requirement in 2018 under SB 1000 (Leyva, Chapter 587, Statutes of 2016). The legislation amended Government Code section 65302, subdivision (h), to require that all jurisdictions with disadvantaged communities include this element upon the next general plan update or revision of two or more elements concurrently.

\*\* An air quality element is mandatory for jurisdictions within the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District (SJVAPCD), though several jurisdictions outside of the district had air quality elements as well. Thirty-two jurisdictions (26 cities and 6 counties) responded to this question.

Source: LCI’s 2023 Annual Planning Survey Report, pg. 10

### **Recent Legislation**

AB 98 (Carrillo), Chapter 931, Statutes of 2024, established warehouse standards, required local agencies to update their circulation elements to include truck routes, and required the South Coast Air Quality Management District to collect air pollution data near operational logistic use developments in the Counties of San Bernardino and Riverside.

AB 1886 (Alvarez), Chapter 267, Statutes of 2024, clarified that a housing element or amendment is not considered substantially compliant with housing element law until the local agency has adopted a housing element that the HCD determined is in substantial compliance with housing element law, as specified.

AB 1889 (Friedman), Chapter 686, Statutes of 2024, required the conservation element of a local general plan to consider the impact of development on the movement of wildlife and habitat connectivity. Required a city or county, upon the next revision of one or more general plan elements on or after January 1, 2028, to update the conservation element to, among other things, identify and analyze wildlife passage features to ensure that planned development does not undermine the effectiveness of those features.

AB 2023 (Quirk-Silva and Alvarez), Chapter 269, Statutes of 2024, introduced rebuttable presumptions regarding the substantial compliance of a jurisdiction's housing element, particularly focusing on the accuracy and realism of the land inventory included in the housing element. The goal is to ensure that identified sites are viable for development, thereby facilitating the construction of needed housing units.

AB 2597 (Ward), Chapter 572, Statutes of 2024, amended the timeline for local governments to appeal proposed regional housing needs allocation (RHNA) plans and revised the statutory housing element adoption deadline for jurisdictions within the Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG) by providing an additional six months to Los Angeles and Imperial Counties and jurisdictions within those counties.

AB 2667 (Santiago), Chapter 277, Statutes of 2024, made changes to the housing element and the APR related to the requirement to affirmatively further fair housing (AFFH).

AB 2684 (Bryan), Chapter 1009, Statutes of 2024, required a city or county to update the safety element of its general plan to address the hazard of extreme heat upon the next revision of one or more elements of the general plan on or after January 1, 2028.

AB 821 (Grayson), Chapter 748, Statutes of 2023, required a local agency to approve developments that are consistent with its general plan but not the applicable zoning ordinance, or to make the zoning ordinance consistent with the general plan within 180 days, and provided a legal remedy to ensure compliance.

AB 2339 (Bloom), Chapter 654, Statutes of 2022, added additional specificity to where emergency shelters must be zoned in a city's housing element and amended the "no net loss" policy in housing element law to factor in the portion of the regional housing need that the local government failed to accommodate through rezoning in the prior planning period.

AB 2653 (Santiago), Chapter 657, Statutes of 2022, authorized the HCD to reject the housing element portion of a planning agency's APR if the report is not in substantial compliance with the law.

AB 2094 (Rivas), Chapter 649, Statutes of 2022, required cities to include progress towards meeting their share of regional housing needs for extremely low-income (ELI) households in their APR submitted to the HCD.



SB 932 (Portantino), Chapter 710, Statutes of 2022, required the circulation element of a general plan to include specified contents related to bicycle plans, pedestrian plans, and traffic calming plans, and to implement those plans.

SB 1425 (Stern), Chapter 997, Statutes of 2022, required every city and county to review and update its open-space plan by January 1, 2026.

AB 215 (Chiu), Chapter 342, Statutes of 2021, provided HCD with additional enforcement authority for local agency violations of specified housing laws, and increased public review for housing elements.

AB 787 (Gabriel), Chapter 350, Statutes of 2021, authorized cities and counties to receive credit towards their regional housing need for the conversion of above moderate-income units to moderate-income units.

AB 1304 (Santiago), Chapter 357, Statutes of 2021, expanded the ways in which local agencies must affirmatively further fair housing (AFFH) in their housing elements.

AB 1398 (Bloom), Chapter 358, Statutes of 2021, required expedited rezoning for local jurisdictions that fail to adopt a legally compliant housing element within 120 days of the statutory deadline.

AB 1409 (Levine), Chapter 481, Statutes of 2021, required cities and counties to update their safety element to identify evacuation locations.

AB 671 (Friedman), Chapter 658, Statutes of 2019, required a local government to include a plan in their housing element to incentivize and promote the creation of accessory dwelling units (ADUs) that can be offered at an affordable rent for very-low, low-, and moderate-income households.

AB 747 (Levine), Chapter 681, Statutes of 2019, required cities and counties in the safety element of the general plan to identify evacuation routes and their capacity, safety, and viability under a range of emergency scenarios.

SB 99 (Nielsen), Chapter 202, Statutes of 2019, required the safety element of the general plan, upon the next revision of the housing element on or after January 1, 2020, to identify any residential developments in any hazard area that does not have at least two emergency evacuation routes.

AB 3194 (Daly), Chapter 243, Statutes of 2018, made a number of changes to the Housing Accountability Act related to a housing project's consistency with zoning standards and the general plan.

SB 1035 (Jackson), Chapter 733, Statutes of 2018, required climate adaptation and resiliency information contained in a general plan to be regularly updated.

SB 1333 (Wieckowski), Chapter 856, Statutes of 2018, applied specified provisions in the Government Code pertaining to local planning and zoning requirements to charter cities.

AB 879 (Grayson), Chapter 374, Statutes of 2017, made a number of changes to housing element law, and directed HCD to complete a study evaluating the reasonableness of local fees charged to new developments.

AB 1397 (Low), Chapter 375, Statutes of 2017, made a number of changes to housing element law by revising what may be included in a locality's inventory of land suitable for residential development.

SB 35 (Wiener), Chapter 366, Statutes of 2017, created a streamlined, ministerial approval process for infill developments in localities that have failed to meet their regional housing needs assessment (RHNA) numbers. SB 423 (Wiener), Chapter 778, Statutes of 2023, extended the sunset on SB 35 to January 1, 2036.

SB 166 (Skinner), Chapter 367, Statutes of 2017, required a local government to accommodate its remaining unmet housing need at all times throughout the housing element planning period.

SB 732 (Stern), Chapter 434, Statutes of 2017, allowed a city or county to develop an agricultural land component of their open-space element, or a separate agricultural land element, in return for priority consideration for funding provided by the Department of Conservation.

AB 2685 (Lopez), Chapter 271, Statutes of 2016, required a local planning agency staff to collect and compile public comments and provide them to each member of the legislative body prior to the adoption of the housing element.

AB 2208 (Santiago), Chapter 460, Statutes of 2016, added, for purposes of the requirements of housing element law, to the list of the types of sites that a local government can identify as suitable for residential development in the housing element.

SB 1000 (Leyva), Chapter 587, Statutes of 2016, required cities and counties to address environmental justice in their general plans.

AB 644 (Wood), Chapter 402, Statutes of 2015, removed the requirement that a county make specified findings pursuant to the Subdivision Map Act for an area located in a state responsibility area or a very high fire hazard severity zone, in certain instances.

AB 1251 (Gomez), Chapter 639, Statutes of 2015, allowed for the creation of a greenway easement, which must be considered when assessing land values for the purposes of property taxation, and allowed the open-space element of a general plan to include greenways.

SB 379 (Jackson), Chapter 608, Statutes of 2015, required local governments to incorporate climate change adaptation and resiliency strategies into the safety elements of their general plans.

## Further Reading

Banginwar, A., Antonio, D., Lopez, M., Poirier, L., Ghosh, S., Dettmann, M., & Brinkley, C. (2023, January 6). General Plan Database Mapping Tool (v3.0) [Data set]. Zenodo. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7508689>. Available at: <https://plansearch.caes.ucdavis.edu/>

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Perry, A. R. (1971). The Local "General Plan" in California. San Diego Law Review, 9(1), 1. Available at: <https://digital.sandiego.edu/sdlr/vol9/iss1/3>