

General Plan

Description

There's no better way to get involved in making your city or county truly climate-friendly than by influencing its General Plan.

What is a General Plan?

The General Plan is a vision of how a community will grow and reflects community priorities for shaping the future. The Governor's Office of Planning and Research (OPR) recently released an update to its [General Plan Guidelines](#). Since California law requires every city and county to periodically update its General Plan, the General Plan is considered by many to be the Constitution for land-use decisions at the local level. General Plans must be equitable, inclusive, and community-driven. In order for a jurisdiction to adapt and thrive in the face of the climate crisis, its General Plan needs to set goals that are not just incremental, but ambitious and transformative.

Unlike other plans (strategic plans, climate plans, etc.), the General Plan and its elements have legal standing, so a jurisdiction must abide by the policies and associated zoning code or be subject to legal challenges. Amendments to General Plans are allowed by law only four times per year.

According to [OPR's 2019 Annual Planning Survey](#), over the past five years, policies, programs, and ordinances to promote climate mitigation—reducing greenhouse gas emissions—have increased dramatically. With the passage of Senate Bill (SB) 379, the State also expects to see more jurisdictions address climate adaptation in the near future (adaptation to climate change refers to adjustment in natural or human systems in response to actual or expected climate impact, which can be extreme events such as flooding or wildfire, or slow-moving or gradual impacts like changes in annual average temperature or sea level rise).

What are the required elements of a General Plan?

Like a blueprint, just as any building must have an entrance, roof, walls, etc. so too a General Plan must contain certain “elements” that group together the many factors that guide a city's growth. The mandatory elements for all jurisdictions are land use, circulation, housing, conservation, open space, noise, and safety. Jurisdictions that have identified disadvantaged communities must also address environmental justice in their community, including air quality. Communities across California are adopting policies to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions and adapt to the impacts of climate change, but not all cities are taking the steps necessary to reduce our climate impact.

Incorporate Environmental Justice: Throughout California, low-income communities and communities of color have experienced a combination of historic discrimination, negligence, and political and economic disempowerment. These decisions have resulted in low-income communities and communities of color experiencing a disproportionate burden of pollution and health impacts, as well as disproportionate social and economic disadvantages such as poverty or housing instability. It is critical that General Plans prioritize the needs of disadvantaged communities through developing a full

Environmental Justice Element ([SB1000](#)) or by including environmental justice principles throughout. General Plans must center equity in the development of environmental strategies by prioritizing the needs of climate-vulnerable communities, responding meaningfully to their leadership in designing solutions, and leveraging resources to ensure equity-focused outcomes are tied to each strategy.

Prioritize Nature-Based Solutions to Climate Adaptation: Nature-based solutions for climate harness the power of nature to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and also help us adapt to the impacts of climate change. They are win-win solutions that involve protecting, restoring, and sustainably managing ecosystems to address society's challenges and promote human well-being. Natural infrastructure projects provide more durable solutions, reduce the risk of wildland fires and flooding from rising seas and stronger storms, provide clean drinking water and fresh food, and improve air quality while promoting climate change resilience and supporting the ecological systems upon which we all depend.

Prioritize Efficient Land Use: In order to meet new Regional Housing Needs Assessment (RHNA) housing allocations, reduce GHG emissions, and keep existing and future residents safe from climate impacts, General Plans should pursue infill development opportunities and encourage the construction of higher-density, mixed-use projects around existing public transit infrastructure, schools, parks, neighborhood-serving retail, and other critical services.

Resources

- [Cal OES Adaptation Planning Guide](#)
- [What is a General Plan and how can it impact the climate?](#)
- [Land-Use Map: A Tool to Fight Climate Change](#)
- [Cool CA Local Government Toolkit](#)
- [Georgetown Adaptation Clearinghouse](#)
- [SB1000 Environmental Justice Toolkit](#)
- [Green Your City's Blueprint: Creating a Climate-smart City Plan](#)
- [OPR General Plan Guidelines](#)
- [Local Policies for Environmental Justice](#)
- [ResilientCA](#)
- [CA Air Resources Board Climate Action Scoping Plan](#)

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Date Created

October 13, 2022

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playbook-guest