

Memo: City Council Discussion Item

Topic: General Plan Update

Date: 3/5/2024

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Purpose: The City of Colusa City Council adopted *The City of Colusa General Plan* and certified the General Plan Update Master Environmental Impact Report (MEIR) on October 30, 2007. The General Plan when adopted was written for a 20-year time period, which means that in 2027 the plan would be out of date. We wanted to bring this to discussion now, as we assess that it will take some time to dedicate funding, and put together a team to begin this work, and to allow the City Council and Planning Commission ample time and opportunity to dedicate resources and funding to this endeavor.

If a the City's general plan becomes out of date, several consequences could arise, including:

1. **Ineffective Planning:** An outdated general plan may not accurately reflect current conditions, community needs, or development trends. This can lead to ineffective land use decisions and planning policies that do not align with the present realities of the city.
2. **Legal Challenges:** Failure to update the general plan in accordance with state law or local ordinances could leave the city vulnerable to legal challenges. This may result in lawsuits from developers, community groups, or other stakeholders who feel that their interests are not adequately addressed in the outdated plan.
3. **Loss of Funding Opportunities:** Many funding opportunities, grants, and state assistance programs require cities to have an up-to-date general plan in place. An outdated plan may disqualify the city from accessing these resources, limiting its ability to fund important infrastructure projects, affordable housing initiatives, or other community development efforts.
4. **Stagnation or Inefficient Growth:** Without a current general plan guiding growth and development, a city may experience stagnation or inefficient growth patterns. This can lead to sprawl, traffic congestion, environmental degradation, and other negative impacts on quality of life.
5. **Lack of Community Engagement:** Updating the general plan provides an opportunity for community engagement and input. An outdated plan may fail to reflect the current values, priorities, and aspirations of the community, leading to a lack of public trust and participation in the planning process.

Overall, keeping the general plan up to date is crucial for ensuring that cities can effectively manage growth, protect community interests, and plan for a sustainable future.

How long does it take to conduct an General Plan, EIR and Zoning Code Update?

Here's a general breakdown of the timeframes for each of these processes:

1. General Plan Update:

- Preparation Phase: This phase involves data collection, analysis, stakeholder engagement, and goal setting. Depending on the extent of community involvement and the complexity of issues, this phase can take around 6 months to 2 years.
- Drafting Phase: Developing the draft General Plan document typically takes several months to a year, depending on the scope and scale of the plan.
- Environmental Review: The General Plan update may require environmental review under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), which can take several months to complete.
- Approval and Adoption: Once the draft plan and environmental review are complete, the plan must be reviewed by relevant agencies, commissions, and the public before being approved and adopted by the local governing body. This process can take several months to a year.

2. Environmental Impact Report (EIR):

- The preparation of an EIR involves assessing the potential environmental impacts of the proposed General Plan update and analyzing alternatives to mitigate those impacts.
- The timeline for preparing an EIR can vary depending on the complexity of the project and the extent of environmental analysis required. It typically ranges from 6 months to 2 years.

3. Zoning Code Update:

- Like the General Plan update, the process of updating the Zoning Code involves data collection, analysis, stakeholder engagement, and drafting.
- Depending on the scope of the update and the level of community involvement, this process can take several months to a year or more.

Many of these work scope items can be done concurrently, however we believe that the City should allow at least 1 1/2 years to accomplish this work. This puts the adoption of the project safely prior to the current GP expiration.

Benefits of a General Plan Update and Corresponding Environmental Impact Report and Zoning Code Update

General Plan Basics

The purpose of a general plan is to guide land use planning decisions. Under state law, subdivisions, capital improvements, development agreements, and many other land use actions must be consistent with the adopted general plan.

In counties and general law cities, zoning and specific plans are also required to conform to the general plan. In addition, preparing, adopting, implementing, and maintaining the general plan serves to identify the community's land use, circulation, environmental and economic goals and policies as they relate to future growth and development.

The general plan is made up of a collection of "elements," or topic categories. The State currently lists nine elements as mandatory:

Land Use	Circulation	Housing
Conservation	Open Space	Noise
Safety	Environmental Justice	Air Quality

Communities may include other elements that address issues of local concern, such as economic development, community character, or urban design. Communities can also organize their general plan anyway they choose, so long as the required topic categories are addressed.

A general plan has three defining features:

General. A general plan provides general policy guidance that will be relied on to guide future land use and resource decisions.

Comprehensive. A general plan is comprehensive in nature, covering a range of topics, such as land use, housing, economic development, infrastructure, public safety, recreation, natural resources, and much more.

Long-Range. A general plan provides guidance on reaching a future envisioned 20 or more years in the future. To achieve the vision, a comprehensive plan includes goals, policies, and actions that address both immediate and long-term needs.

A general plan update allows for civic engagement with the public, agencies (school district, County, utility providers, etc.), stake holder groups (farmers, downtown business owners, major employers) and with City services and departments to identify issues, create assumptions and formulate goals.

The general plan, once finalized and adopted, creates the vision for the City on how and where it wants to grow, what that growth should look like, and how that growth will benefit the city for long term economic benefit and prosperity.

Environmental Impact Report

A key part of the general plan update is the level of California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) review the general plan receives. Typically, this review results in an Environmental Impact Report (EIR), the highest level.

An EIR is an appropriate document to produce because general plans typically result in a potentially significant environmental impact through the implementation of the plan. The EIR evaluates existing environmental resources in the vicinity of the city and its planning area, analyzes potential impacts on those resources due to the general plan update and if necessary, identifies mitigation measures that could avoid or reduce the magnitude of those impacts.

EIRs are intended to provide an objective, factually supported, full-disclosure analysis of any environmental consequences associated with a proposed project, which may have the potential to result in significant, adverse environmental impacts.

One benefit of an EIR, is that future projects, that are found in compliance with the general plan, have the potential benefit of being “tiered” from the EIR. Meaning, the analysis and conclusions previously made in the EIR can be utilized in the review of future projects. This can result in a CEQA exemption or a initial study level of review, in which a portion of the document points back to the EIR, while specifics related to an impact are only discussed, reviewed and analyzed. **This can also result in projects moving through the process in a more efficient and cost effective manner.**

Municipal Code and Zoning Update

Following the adoption of the updated General Plan and the certification of the CEQA document, a municipal code update takes place.

Where the general plan is general, the zoning ordinance update specifies how each individual zoning designation can be used to achieve the wide range and long-term policies, action and visions as set forth in the general plan. A new code also allows for a city to reflect current land uses and development practices and trends, and to create a user-friendly code.

Essentially, the zoning code serves as an effective tool in achieving the kind of development that a city wants and can support.

Why It Matters

A robust general plan update benefits local communities by promoting better projects, creating predictability for the applicant, residence, and elected officials. Although often difficult to fully quantify, a general plan can:

1. **Attracting Investment:** A well-structured general plan can signal to investors that the city is committed to growth and development, making it more attractive for businesses to invest in the area. This can lead to job creation and increased economic activity.
2. **Efficient Land Use:** A general plan can help ensure that land is used efficiently, which can lead to increased property values and tax revenues for the city. It can also help prevent sprawl and promote more sustainable development patterns.
3. **Infrastructure Planning:** A general plan can help identify infrastructure needs and prioritize investments in transportation, utilities, and other critical infrastructure. This can lead to improved efficiency and reduced costs for residents and businesses.
4. **Economic Diversification:** A general plan can help identify opportunities for economic diversification, such as promoting new industries or supporting small businesses. This can help make the local economy more resilient to economic shocks. A general plan can significantly reduce costs and time for developers looking to invest in the City. As an update can attract investment by providing clarity and a potential reduction in the CEQA timeline, allowing developers to take full advantage of current economic and market conditions.
5. **Quality of Life:** A general plan can help improve the quality of life for residents by promoting amenities such as parks, open space, and cultural facilities. This can help attract and retain a skilled workforce, which can in turn attract businesses and investment. Can ensure that impacts from new development are fully mitigated and that long-term burden or cost are not placed upon the city unmitigated.
6. **Sustainability:** A general plan can help promote sustainability by encouraging energy-efficient development, promoting public transportation, and protecting natural resources. This can lead to long-term cost savings and a healthier environment.
7. **Regulatory Certainty:** A well-defined general plan can provide regulatory certainty for developers, which can reduce uncertainty and risk and encourage investment in the city. Provides predictability for land developers who wish to construct new projects in the City, by providing clear vision of growth, with goals and action items.