



City of Colusa, California

STAFF REPORT

DATE: May 6, 2026

TO: Planning Commission – Public Workshop regarding the Design and Preservation Rapid Assistance Team (D-PRAT) Idea Book

FROM: Jake Morley, Planning Consultant

AGENDA ITEM: Public Workshop regarding the Design and Preservation Rapid Assistance Team (D-PRAT) Idea Book

Recommendation: Staff recommends that the Planning Commission conduct a workshop and provide direction to the City Council on implementing the D-PRAT idea book.

BACKGROUND

The Design and Preservation Rapid Assistance Team (D-PRAT) is a pro-bono program supported by the American Planning Association (APA) Urban Design and Preservation (UDP) Division. D-PRAT's mission is to support under-resourced communities and organizations in their effort to collaboratively plan for the future with a focus on urban design of the public realm and preservation.

The City of Colusa applied to the D-PRAT program and indicated that they were seeking technical expertise to clarify opportunities and solutions for the city. Their objective was to ask the D-PRAT team to provide guidance on three areas within the city: activation of Main Street and Market Street, adaptive reuse of historic buildings, including the Chinatown area, and activation of Levee Park along the Sacramento River. UDP funded volunteers to travel and be in person for two days, on November 2nd and 3rd, 2025, with virtual volunteers supporting them throughout.

Over the two days, the D-PRAT team participated in a guided tour of Colusa focused on the Riverfront District, held workshops and stakeholder sessions with staff, the public, and property and business owners, and engaged local youth. D-PRAT concluded their time in Colusa with an open house, illustrating their initial findings and providing another opportunity to review concepts and offer additional feedback.

After a City Council presentation on March 18, 2026, D-PRAT submitted the Ideabook (Book) (See **Attachment A – D-PRAT Ideabook**) to the City.

SUMMARY:

The Book is broken down into three sections: 1) Preservation and Adaptive Reuse, 2) Streetscape and Public Realm, and 3) Riverfront Access & Activation. Each section contains a list of goals, followed by actionable ideas to unlock potential and advance goals. Overall the Book contains 53 implementation items, with varying degrees of cost and associated timelines (See **Attachment B - Implementation Matrix**). The items vary in staff time and implementation costs, with some requiring private investment and leadership and others requiring a public-private partnership.

Preservation and Adaptive Reuse

The efforts of this chapter focus on reactivating downtown Colusa while preserving the historic, cultural, and environmental qualities that define the community's unique character and its surrounding context. The plan identifies several downtown buildings with strong potential for adaptive reuse, along with opportunities for new development on vacant or underutilized sites that can strengthen the downtown fabric.

It envisions a public art walk that documents existing murals while offering guidance for future public art installations, and it outlines incremental steps to activate vacant spaces—including the lot behind the library and the alley connecting Market Street and Main Street—as near-term catalysts for revitalization.

Overall Goals

1. Build a stronger, more resilient downtown economy
2. Bring empty buildings and spaces back to life
3. Express what makes Colusa distinct
4. Create local stewardship for long-term revitalization

Streetscape and Public Realm

This chapter envisions a safe, connected, and people-centered downtown that blends mobility, culture, and community life. It focuses on improving pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure, reactivating alleys and plazas, and fostering lively spaces that support local business and social interaction. Through art, design, and inclusive public space, the project transforms streets into civic experiences rather than transit corridors.

Overall Goals

1. Create a safe and connected downtown
2. Foster a vibrant and inclusive public realm
3. Promote sustainability and long-term resilience

Riverfront Access & Activation

The primary goal of this chapter is to strengthen or create connections between downtown Colusa and the Sacramento River. The implementation strategy in the chapter relies on both better utilization of existing access points and the identification of underused opportunities for additional ways to climb the levee and reach the river. Individual proposals incorporate both design and programming improvements to provide greater opportunities for residents

and visitors to travel from downtown streets to the levee trail and the river.

Overall Goals

1. Access
2. Activity
3. Appreciation

Riverfront District

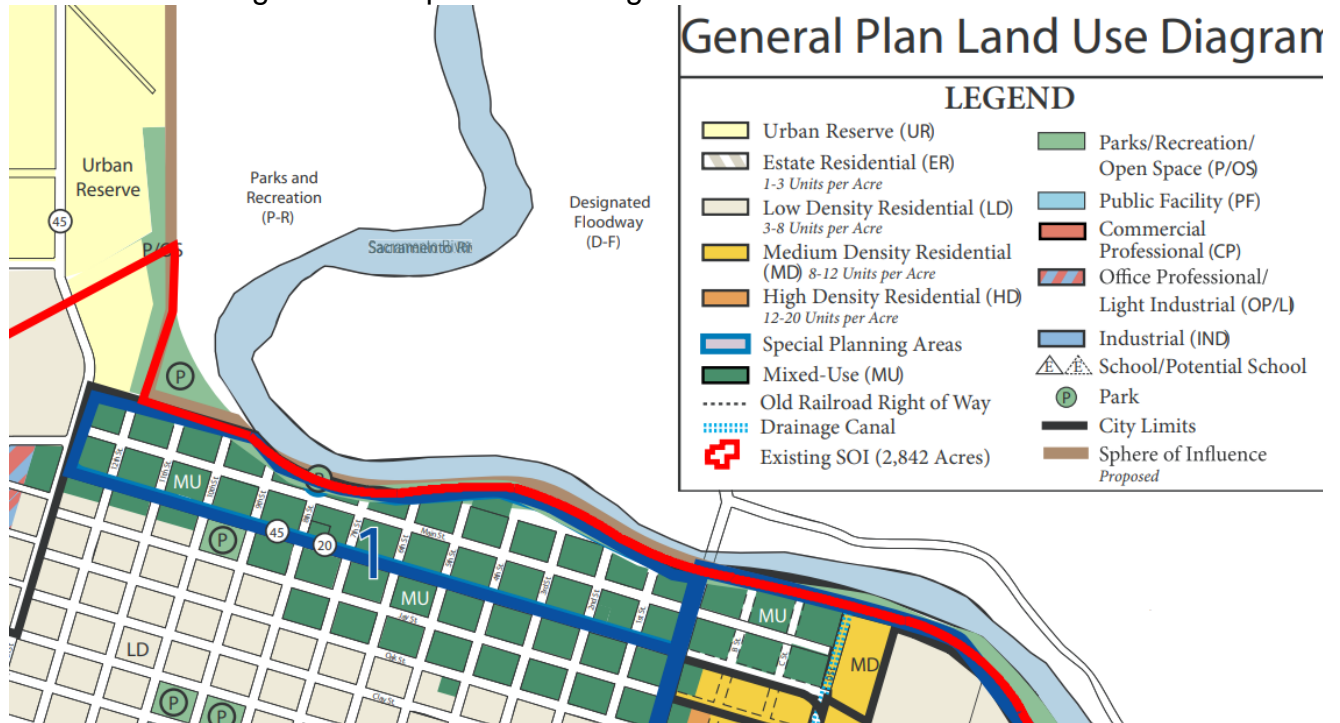
The Riverfront District is designated in the 2007 General Plan as a Special Planning Area (SPA No. 1). The City has 6 SPAs: Riverfront, Brookins Ranch, Colusa Crossing, Colusa Riverbend, Colusa Industrial Park, and the Airport Influence Area. The General Plan recognizes SPAs as unique planning areas that will provide substantial new growth and redevelopment opportunities for the City, while also presenting challenges that will require a comprehensive planning approach in conjunction with the City's efforts to improve infrastructure and services. The intent is that the SPA will be planned and ultimately developed through specific plans or planned developments.

SPA No. 1: Colusa Riverfront District - Colusa's Riverfront District is bounded by the Sacramento River to the north, 13th Street to the west, Oak Street to the south, and Bridge Street to the east. This SPA will be given special attention with regard to architectural design, orientation, and land uses. All new development and redevelopment projects proposed within this district will be subject to development standards and design guidelines that will constitute the Riverfront Plan. The Riverfront Plan will be prepared by the City and will be incorporated by reference into the City's Zoning Ordinance.

The area surrounding the Riverfront District effectively serves as the principal City center. It achieves this in part through the many historic buildings that occupy the historic downtown/riverfront area (a reminder of the City's origins) and in its varied retail and service establishments. Riverfront Plan development standards and design guidelines demonstrate the City's commitment to enhancing the area and promoting local and visitor-serving businesses.

Future development of the Riverfront District will largely occur as new infill projects and redevelopment. Projects will be expected to improve the aesthetic character and economic health of this historic district. Expansion of existing uses will be encouraged to include high-density residential units. Vertical expansion will be expected to maximize the use of and scenic views from this premium land, while increasing commercial vitality and creating affordable live-work housing opportunities.

General Plan - Figure 2.4 – Special Planning Areas



The Riverfront District is listed on the General Plan Land Use Diagram as Mixed-Use (MU). The MU District applies to four specific areas within the City, each area intended to emphasize a mix of land uses, tailored to each respective locale, generally providing for a pedestrian-oriented live/work/play environment, where the business community, residents and visitors mingle in a dynamic setting, walking from offices to restaurants to shops to home.

The General Plan notes that it may use Specific Plans or other comprehensive documents, as appropriate, as planning tools to further define the land-use mix and provide additional use guidelines.

In this instance, the Riverfront District is listed as:

Main Street Mixed Use District – The Main Street Mixed Use District extends east to west between 13th Street and D Street, and north to south from the Sacramento River to Market Street. Preservation of historic features, building design, streetscape design, Signage, and the use of creative parking strategies (with less restrictive parking requirements) would be integral components of development in this area along Main Street. This MU district is generally characterized by vertically and horizontally integrated retail, office-professional, and medium-to-high intensity commercial uses. Visitor-serving uses are encouraged in this district, including lodging, conference centers, arts and craft studios, wine tasting facilities, antique stores, newsstands, and fresh produce stands as permitted by the Zoning Ordinance. The FAR within the Main

Street Mixed Use District will range from a minimum of .5 to a maximum of 2.0.

The Riverfront district is zoned C-G – General Commercial, intended for use where general commercial facilities are necessary for public services and conveniences. Appendix A – Article 10 of the Colusa Municipal Code (CMC) outlines a variety of land uses that are permitted within the C-G- General Commercial zoning district. The CMC also allows land uses in the C-N Neighborhood Business District, R-4 General Apartment District, R-3 Neighborhood Apartment District, R-2 Two Family Residence District and the R-1 Single Residence District to be applied and permitted within the C-G General Commercial zoning district. Because of this, the mix of land uses within the C-G General Commercial zoning district is among the largest of the City's zoning designations. It should be noted that residential land uses in the C-G – General Commercial zoning district do require the issuance of a Major Use Permit.

Staff Recommendations for Initial Implementation

The ideas outlined in the Book are expansive and provide for implementation over several years, if not longer. Some ideas, such as public murals on private structures, could last longer depending on funding sources and public and private participation. Other ideas can be a “one and done” to start a process, or are Capital Improvements that would need design, funding, and execution.

Many of the ideas do not fall within the realm of local jurisdictions but rather private enterprises, for example, the opening of a breakfast/brunch restaurant, food hall, fish market, or grocery store (1.h, 1.i, 1. j, and 1.k). But with that said, one-way local jurisdictions can advance private enterprises is to ensure the local Municipal Code is crafted to remove barriers and attract private investment and opportunities, or that public improvements are in place, and that the city has the capacity to serve.

Based on General Plan Goals, Policies, and Action items, staff time and funding, and with the idea of building momentum from the Book, the staff has developed the following list of items that could be implemented gradually.

Historic District (Idea 5.a – Historic District Establishment): The creation of a National Registration District, which would allow individual property owners to register their structures on the National Register of Historic Places. This federal designation would allow owners of income-producing properties:

- Receive a 20 percent federal income tax credit for qualified rehabilitation expenses.
- Open property owners to grants and funding.
- Allow the freezing of property taxes for 10 years following rehabilitation.
- Provides registered structures protection from federal projects.
- Allows owners to utilize the State Historic Building Code, which offers more flexibility.

In short, the program would promote the long-term preservation and maintenance of qualifying structures.

Colusa Municipal Code Updates (Idea 1.a – Zoning Code Changes): The Book suggested modifications to the Municipal Code to allow taller structures within the Riverfront District and to provide options to reduce off-street parking requirements. Other ideas discuss the use of vacant structures, particularly the second floor, to provide housing units (1.a – Artist in Residency Hub, 1.o – Housing). Currently, the CMC requires approval of Major Use Permits and, depending on the scale of the structural improvement, the installation of off-street parking. Such requirements can be viewed as impediments and obstacles to the rehabilitation of buildings that could otherwise generate rental revenue and housing opportunities.

Levee Park Capital Improvements: Throughout the Book, it mentions ongoing improvements and upgrades to the existing infrastructure at Levee Park to create interest and attract visitors to the area. Utilizing existing infrastructure as a starting point that could benefit from color, lighting, or additional landscaping (2.a – Improved Stair Access – Lighting and Visual Engagement and 4.a – On-Site Improvements). Educational signage on the levee, as well as wayfinding within the business area to help pull movement around the area (2.f – Gateway Signage/Wayfinding). Keeping visitors in the area longer with an improved trail experience and creation of views and connectivity throughout the city to the levee (1.a – Improve Trail Experience & Safety, 1.b – Create Zones for Recreation, Ecology & Scenic View, 1.c – Connect the City to the Levee and 1.c – Asphalt Art & Cultural Marker).

Design Guidelines: A suggestion for the creation of guidelines for new and remodeled structures (4.a – Design Guidelines Development). The physical standards would ensure future projects respond to the scale and character of the downtown and its attributes. Clear guidelines can provide predictability and reduce costs for developers, while delivering better user experience for the public and visitors.

GENERAL PLAN:

The following General Plan Goals, Policies, and Action are applicable to a variety of the ideas outlined in the Book:

Goal LU-7: To create an economically vibrant Riverfront District that reflects the cultural and historical significance of the area

Policy LU-7.1: The City shall strive to preserve and strengthen the Riverfront District and ensure that this historic area remains the community’s civic and commercial focus.

Policy LU-8.1: The City shall retain the predominance of historic single-family homes in the historic residential core while allowing mixed dwelling types that reflect historical building practices, including multifamily structures, accessory apartments, and flexible setbacks.

Goal LU-10: To promote an expanding and increasingly diversified local economy that will meet the employment needs of local residents and strengthen the local tax base.

Policy LU-10.1: The City shall make every effort to attract new jobs-producing businesses that will maximize economic benefits to current and new residents and businesses.

Policy LU-10.3: Cultural, civic, entertainment, specialty retail uses, and open-air markets shall be located in the downtown and adjacent areas

Goal CCD-1: To ensure the preservation and enhancement of Colusa's unique community character and vitality within its neighborhoods and business districts.

Policy CCD-1.1: New development and rehabilitation of existing development shall comply with a Design Review Ordinance that supports preservation and enhancement of Colusa's community character and promotes economic vitality within the planning area

Implementing Action CCD-1.1.a: Design Review Ordinance: The City will adopt a Design Review Ordinance that will establish a process to consider a wide range of design issues with development projects. These include such things as open space and natural features, pedestrian and traffic circulation, building scale and massing, architectural history and details, signs and advertising features, landscaping, site lighting, and utility connections. The Design Review process will provide the public with an opportunity to review and comment on all development projects requiring a permit before the Design Review Board makes a final decision on the project.

Policy CCD-2.1: The City shall encourage site and building design that respects the natural resources of Colusa, as an enhancement to the environmental, aesthetic, and social benefits of the community.

Policy CCD-3.11: As existing areas redevelop and change over time, improved connections for vehicular, bicycle, and pedestrian access shall be considered as part of the overall site design.

Goal CCD-4: To retain and strengthen the role of the historic Downtown as the central focus of community gatherings.

Policy CCD-4.2: The City shall encourage a combination of uses in the Downtown to include retail, office, and entertainment uses (e.g., movie and performing arts theaters) that serve the daily and occasional needs of residents.

Policy CCD-4.3: The City shall encourage a vertical mix of uses with residential and office above retail.

Policy CCD-4.4: New development in the Downtown and Riverfront District shall be designed to reflect the scale, pattern and historic character of the existing areas.

Goal CCD-5: To capitalize on the Riverfront District's proximity to the Sacramento River to become a unique public gathering area appealing to residents and visitors alike.

Policy CCD-5.2: The City shall encourage commercial uses that provide both daytime and evening activities along the Riverfront District.

Policy CCD-5.3: The City shall encourage buildings in the Downtown and Riverfront district that feature outdoor use areas, such as plazas and open-air seating in cafes and restaurants

Goal CCD-7: To create a strong sense of entry into the City along the primary corridors of State Routes 20 and 20/45 and along key secondary entrances into the City

Policy CCD-7.2: The City shall encourage development of attractive community entry features at key entry points along Highways 20 and 20/45.

Goal CCD-8: To create landmarks and focal points at strategic locations throughout the City.

Policy CCD-8.1: The City shall encourage the design and incorporation of community landmarks, including public art (sculptures, murals and/or other monuments) at strategic locations within neighborhoods, parks, and commercial areas in the historic Downtown and Riverfront District.

Policy CCD-8.3: Public art and other design features such as fountains and monuments shall be used to enliven the public realm in the historic Downtown and Riverfront District.

Goal CCD-9: To apply the use of signage and lighting in a manner that will enhance the aesthetic character of the community.

Policy CCD-9.2: Pedestrian-oriented signage shall be encouraged so that signs may be easily and comfortably read as pedestrians stand adjacent to the business.

Goal CCD-10: To preserve and enhance the character of historic Colusa, including the residential, downtown and Riverfront areas.

Policy CCD-10.1: The City will encourage and promote the preservation, restoration, rehabilitation, and adaptive reuse of downtown structures in a manner that preserves and enhances their historic character to the greatest extent feasible.

Policy CCD-10.3: The City shall require high-quality architecture that preserves the historic integrity within the historic Downtown. "Franchise architecture" that detracts from the unique and distinctive setting of the downtown shall be discouraged.

Policy CCD-10.4: Building renovations of historic structures shall complement the character of existing historic architecture in the Downtown

Policy CCD-10.8: The City shall ensure that deteriorated architectural features are repaired rather than replaced whenever feasible.

Goal CCD-17: To ensure that the distinctive qualities and character of a building and its environment are not destroyed.

Goal CIR-9: To reestablish Colusa’s waterfront as a regional destination for both recreational and commercial water transportation activities.

Policy CIR-9.1: The City shall provide a boat ramp, public access, and support facilities, as needed, on the waterfront in order to allow residents of the City and region to enjoy water-oriented recreation, public transportation and commercial opportunities on the Sacramento River.

Goal PRC-1: To preserve, protect, and enhance an interconnected system of significant open space areas, including lands with sensitive local resources, to the maximum extent feasible.

Policy PRC – 4.2: The City shall preserve identified cultural and historic landmarks and buildings and ensure that new development, redevelopment, alterations, and remodeling projects are sensitive to the historic context.

Policy PRC-4.3: The City shall encourage the preservation, enhancement, and conservation of historic and older neighborhoods through its direct actions.

Goal HSG-1: To provide a continuing supply of affordable housing to meet the needs of existing and future Colusa residents in all income categories.

Policy 1.6 – The City shall promote more intensive residential development of vacant and underutilized land contiguous to existing development, particularly within walking distance of downtown Colusa, in order to reduce the cost of off-site improvements and create a compact City form.

Policy HSG- 1.8 – The City shall encourage adaptive reuse of vacant commercial structures in the Riverfront District for housing, as part of the mixed-use development envisioned in this area.

PUBLIC CONTACT AND ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW

A public hearing notice was published in the Pioneer Review on May 1, 2026, and a notice was also placed within City Hall.

The review of the Ideabook and the giving of City Council direction on which items to implement are exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to Section 15306 – Information Collection, as these items lead to an action that a public agency has not yet approved, adopted, or funded. If implementation items are acted upon, those items would be subject to future CEQA review and analysis.

BUDGET IMPACT

Implementation of ideas has a wide range of potential budgetary impacts, with some, such as targeted updates to the Colusa Municipal Code, potentially included under existing contracts. Other implementation ideas involve broader capital investments, such as signage and public art. Other measures suggest hiring additional staff to manage and implement programs. While other ideas would require private/business investments.

ATTACHMENTS

- A. D-PRAT – Idea Book (at front counter and provided to each Commissioner)
- B. Matrix implementation