

# 1 Introduction

**The General Plan provides a shared vision for San Rafael's future, and a road map to make that vision a reality. It is rooted in a commitment by San Rafael residents and businesses to sustain the qualities that make San Rafael a great city today, and to pursue improvements that make the city more resilient, equitable, healthy, and attractive in the future. The Plan looks ahead 20 years to contemplate what kind of community we want to be. It provides the policies and actions to lead us there.**

San Rafael has a long history of city planning. The San Rafael Planning Commission was established in 1915 and the City's first zoning rules were adopted in the 1920s. Over the decades, the community has planned and built neighborhoods, commercial districts, parks, and community centers, as well as local streets and highways. Thousands of acres have been set aside as open space. The result is a livable, attractive city with a beloved downtown, distinct neighborhoods, and protected natural resources.

Since the early 1960s, four general plans have guided San Rafael's growth. The first plan was a reflection of its era, with visions of new freeways, bay fill, and large-scale suburban growth that would have transformed the city forever. By the early 1970s, the City's plans reflected a new ecological sensibility and an awareness of the importance of growing in harmony with nature. San Rafael continued to evolve, but in a more incremental and intentional way. Since the 1980s, the focus has been on enhancing and improving previously developed areas, rather than expanding outward.

San Rafael is a mature city today, but it is also a growing city. It is located in one of the most prosperous regions of the country, in a County renowned for its physical beauty and quality of life. Good planning is essential to manage change while protecting the qualities that make San Rafael special. The General Plan provides a tool for balancing growth and conservation. It does this while striving to create a community where all residents, regardless of their income or cultural background, can benefit from the opportunities the future may bring.

## What is a General Plan?

Every city and county in California is required to adopt a general plan for its future development.<sup>1</sup> The plan provides guidance for future growth and conservation and must meet specific Government Code requirements. By law, general plans must be comprehensive, long-range, and internally consistent. Plans must also address specific topics, referred to as "elements." These are:

- Land Use
- Circulation
- Housing
- Open Space
- Conservation
- Safety
- Noise
- Environmental Justice<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Government Code 65300 requires that every city and county "shall adopt a long-term general plan for the physical development of the city."

<sup>2</sup> The Environmental Justice requirement became effective on January 1, 2018.

## INTRODUCTION

State law provides flexibility in how the elements are organized what additional topics may be included. Cities and counties may adopt “optional” elements in addition to those mandated by the state. This allows each community to tailor their plans to address issues of local importance. Once an optional element is adopted, it carries the same legal weight as a mandatory element. No one element supersedes another.

San Rafael has adopted five optional elements in this General Plan and has expanded the scope of several of the State-mandated elements. The five optional elements are Community Design and Preservation, Neighborhoods, Community Facilities and Infrastructure, Arts and Culture, and Economic Vitality. The Conservation Element has been expanded to specifically address Climate Change, while the Safety Element includes an expanded discussion of sea level rise and resilience. The Open Space Element has been broadened to ~~cover specifically address~~ Parks and Recreation. The new State requirement for an Environmental Justice Element, is met through an Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Element that looks more broadly at equity, health, and governance issues in the city. Equity is also a theme that runs through the entire General Plan.

The Government Code includes special requirements for local housing elements. These elements must be updated every eight years on a cycle set by the State legislature and are subject to certification by the California Department of Housing and Community Development. State law also requires that housing elements meet rigorous standards for data, analysis, and maps, and as a result they are much longer than the other Plan elements. For readability, housing policies and programs are included in the body of the General Plan, but the data, analysis and maps are in appendices.

The San Rafael Housing Element was not updated as part of General Plan 2040, since the existing element covers 2015-2023. A General Plan amendment will be required when the 2023-2031 Housing Element is prepared, ~~likely~~ at the end of 2022.



## City, Sphere, and Planning Area: What's the Difference?

The General Plan references three different geographies:

- The **City of San Rafael**, which includes all properties within the City limits.
- The **Sphere of Influence**, a boundary established by the Marin Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCo) to identify unincorporated areas that may receive certain services from the City of San Rafael. The Sphere includes the unincorporated neighborhoods of Bayside Acres, California Park, Country Club, and Santa Venetia, as well as China Camp State Park and the San Rafael Rock Quarry. While the City of San Rafael has no intention of annexing these areas at this time, the County has concluded that it may be efficient for San Rafael to provide certain services here.
- The **Planning Area**, which includes land beyond the sphere of influence that is generally associated with San Rafael. This area includes Lucas Valley and Marinwood as well as agricultural and ranch land to the northwest and northeast of the city. The developed portion of Lucas Valley and Marinwood are also considered to be within an “Urban Service Area,” meaning they receive services typically associated with urbanized areas even though they are outside San Rafael’s Sphere of Influence.

Geography	Area (square miles)		
	Land	Water	Total
<b>City</b>	16.7	5.9	<b>22.6</b>
<b>Sphere of Influence</b>	23.0	17.0	<b>40.0</b>
<b>Planning Area</b>	30.2	23.8	<b>54.0</b>

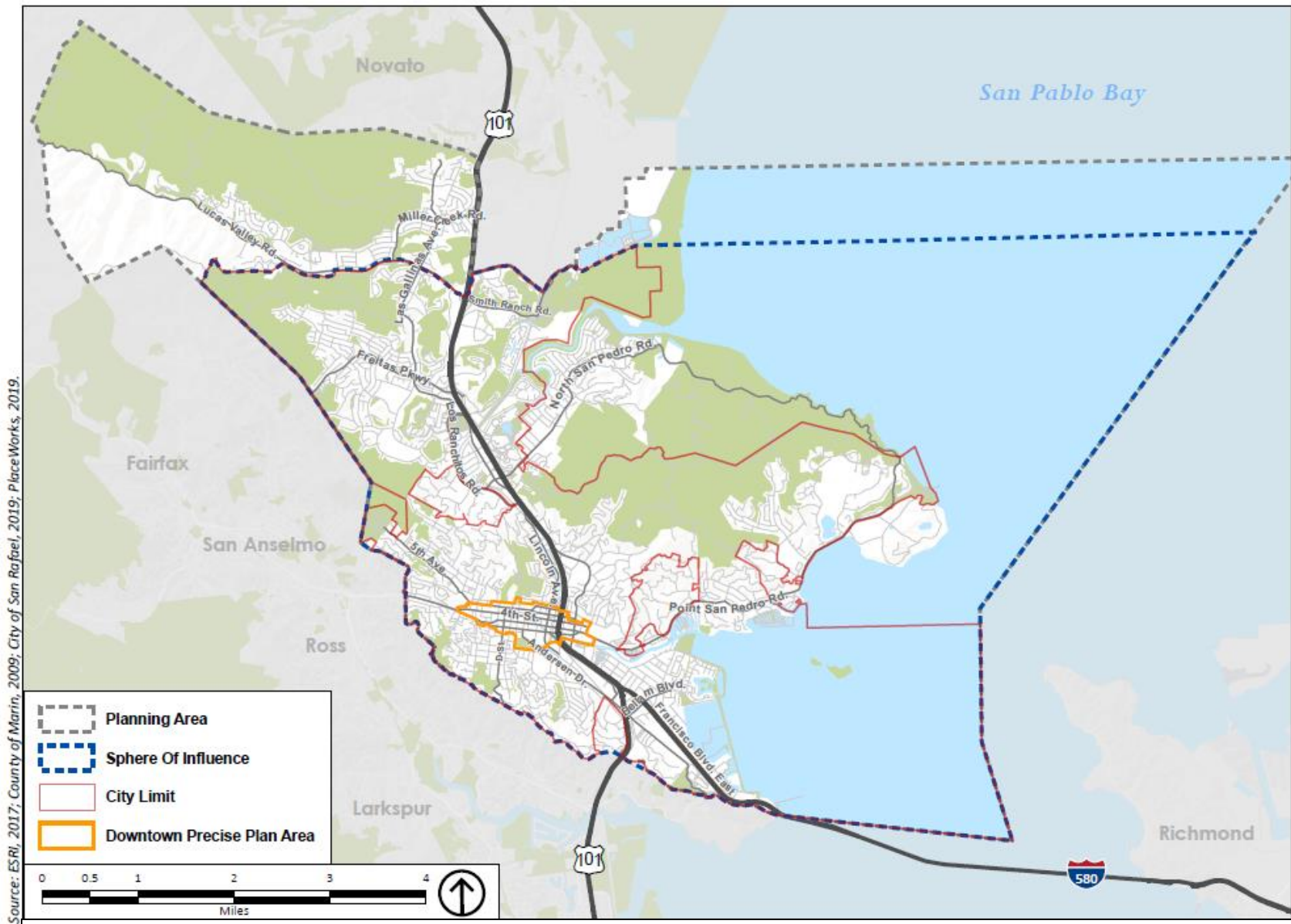
Source: City of San Rafael, 2020

As a “comprehensive” plan, the General Plan covers the entire City of San Rafael as well as areas outside the city limits that have a bearing on San Rafael’s future. This includes San Rafael’s “sphere of influence,” a legal boundary that covers unincorporated Marin County neighborhoods such as Santa Venetia, Los Ranchitos, and Country Club. It also includes several neighborhoods outside the sphere of influence that are closely associated with San Rafael, including Lucas Valley and Marinwood. The text box above explains the different geographies referenced by the Plan. Figure 1-1 shows the boundaries of these areas.

As a “long-range” plan, the General Plan looks ahead 20 years to 2040. This does not mean that the Plan is set in stone for the next 20 years. As explained later in this chapter, the Plan is designed to be periodically amended and updated. Major updates occur roughly every 15-20 years but can occur more frequently if needed. Amendments may occur throughout the planning period.

As an “internally consistent” plan, the policies and programs in each element rely on the same data and assumptions and support a shared set of guiding principles. California law requires that other local government programs are consistent with the General Plan. The City’s zoning and subdivision regulations, its capital improvement program, its precise plans, its development agreements, its housing programs, and its economic development activities, should all further the achievement of General Plan goals. Where appropriate, this Plan provides guidance on how other City programs and activities should be changed or strengthened to best implement local policies and ensure internal consistency. It also identifies new ordinances and programs to be developed.





**Figure 1-1:  
General Plan Boundaries**

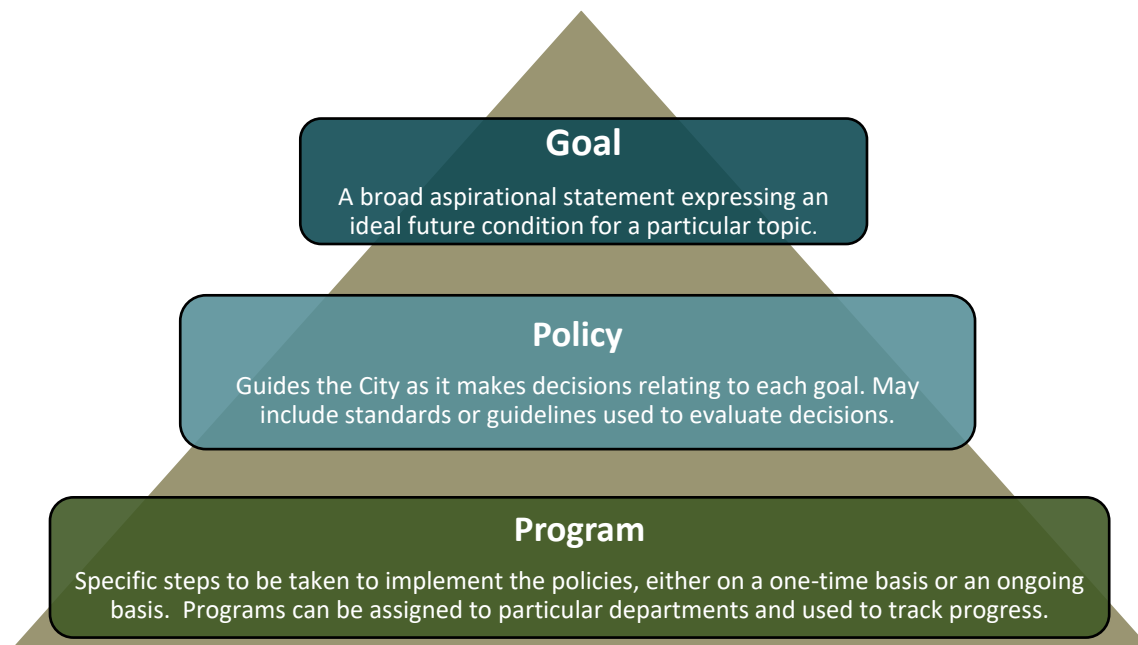
## How to Use the General Plan

The General Plan is intended for use by all members of the community. Residents may consult the Plan to see what changes are planned in their neighborhoods and to become more familiar with how development applications are evaluated. Businesses may use the Plan to better understand the City's strategies for economic vitality and plans for growth and investment. City staff, Boards and Commissions, and the City Council use the General Plan to make important decisions about budgets, capital improvements, future development proposals, and local regulations. Other agencies, such as the school districts and local service providers, use the General Plan to inform their own long-range plans and programs.

The essence of the Plan lies in its goals, policies, and programs. These are declarative statements which set forth the City's approach to various issues. As shown in the diagram below, there is a hierarchy between these terms. Goals are broad aspirational statements. Policies are statements of principle or approach related to the goal. Programs are specific actions or procedures to carry out the policies. The sequence of goals, policies, and programs in each element do not indicate a particular priority, unless otherwise stated.

Policies typically start with a verb, which indicate whether they are mandatory or advisory (e.g., "Require" or "Encourage"). The use of advisory policies is important to maintain flexibility in the General Plan and balance competing objectives. General Plan policies must be internally consistent, but there may still be inherent tension between its statements. It is not the intent of the General Plan to predetermine every city decision, but rather to help guide the process. As appropriate, the Plan's policies include parameters for resolving potential conflicts. Ultimately, decisions must be made on a case by case basis.

The programs in the General Plan provide a "road map" for implementing the General Plan. An **Implementation Appendix** has been included in the Plan to recap all of the programs in the document and identify a responsible party, timeframe, and resources for each program. In some cases, specific metrics have been created ~~The Appendix can be used~~ to track progress on the Plan and measure its outcomes. This is helpful for annual reporting and to update progress as programs are implemented. Updates to the Appendix may be made without a formal amendment to the General Plan.



## Relationship to Other Plans and Programs

The General Plan provides a framework for other plans focused on particular topics or geographic areas within San Rafael. It captures the direction provided by these plans in broad terms through its policies and programs. [This is illustrated graphically in Figure 1-2.](#) Key topical plans integrated into the General Plan include the Climate Change Action Plan (2019), the Local Hazard Mitigation Plan (2018), the Bicycle and Pedestrian Master Plan (2018), the Parking and Wayfinding Study (2018), and the Wildfire Prevention and Protection Action Plan (2019). Plans for various special districts and utilities also were consulted. Key geographic area plans include the station area plans for Civic Center and Downtown (2012), the Canalfront Design Plan and Guidelines (2009), the Downtown Precise Plan ([2021 discussed below](#)), and neighborhood plans prepared over the last several decades. These plans are not part of the General Plan per se, but they have informed and shaped its policies.

Similarly, General Plan 2040 identifies specific topics and geographic areas where new plans will be needed in the future. For example, it recommends a Park and Open Space Master Plan, a Sea Level Rise Adaptation Plan, additional social equity planning, and plans for the North San Rafael Town Center and the Southeast San Rafael/Canal area. As these plans are prepared, they should advance the guiding principles of the General Plan and help achieve its goals.

The link between the General Plan and Downtown Precise Plan is particularly important. The two plans were prepared concurrently and are intended to complement and support each other. The Precise Plan focuses on the part of San Rafael where the most substantial changes are planned over the next 20 years. It is cross-referenced throughout [the General Plan 2040](#) and a summary of its recommendations is included in the Neighborhoods Element. The Precise Plan itself should be consulted as specific projects within the 265-acre Downtown boundary are proposed.

Finally, the General Plan is considered a “project” under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), since it accommodates growth and change and includes policies that may impact the environment. The General Plan EIR is considered a “Program EIR”—it evaluates the impacts of a particular pattern of development (e.g., a “program”) over a 20-year time horizon rather than the impacts of single project on a single site. This evaluation is based on the housing and employment forecasts for the next 20 years, the proposed land use map (and other plan maps), and the policies and programs in General Plan 2040. The EIR also evaluates the impacts of the Downtown Precise Plan.

Future projects that are consistent with the growth assumptions and land use designations in the General Plan/Downtown Precise Plan may rely on the EIR for its analysis of impacts on specific topic areas. This is referred to as “tiering”. Tiering does not entirely relieve these projects of environmental review requirements, but it may streamline the process. Traffic studies, geologic studies, biological studies, and other analyses may still be required to evaluate more localized, site specific impacts.

## The Update Process

The San Rafael General Plan [2040 Update](#) is the product of a [threefour](#)-year process that engaged residents and businesses throughout the city. The City Council authorized the Plan Update in 2017, starting the process by retaining a project manager and approving a detailed work program for the project. One of the premises of the work program was that the basic content of General Plan 2020 should be carried forward. The prior Plan has worked well in guiding San Rafael’s growth and continues to represent the City’s values.

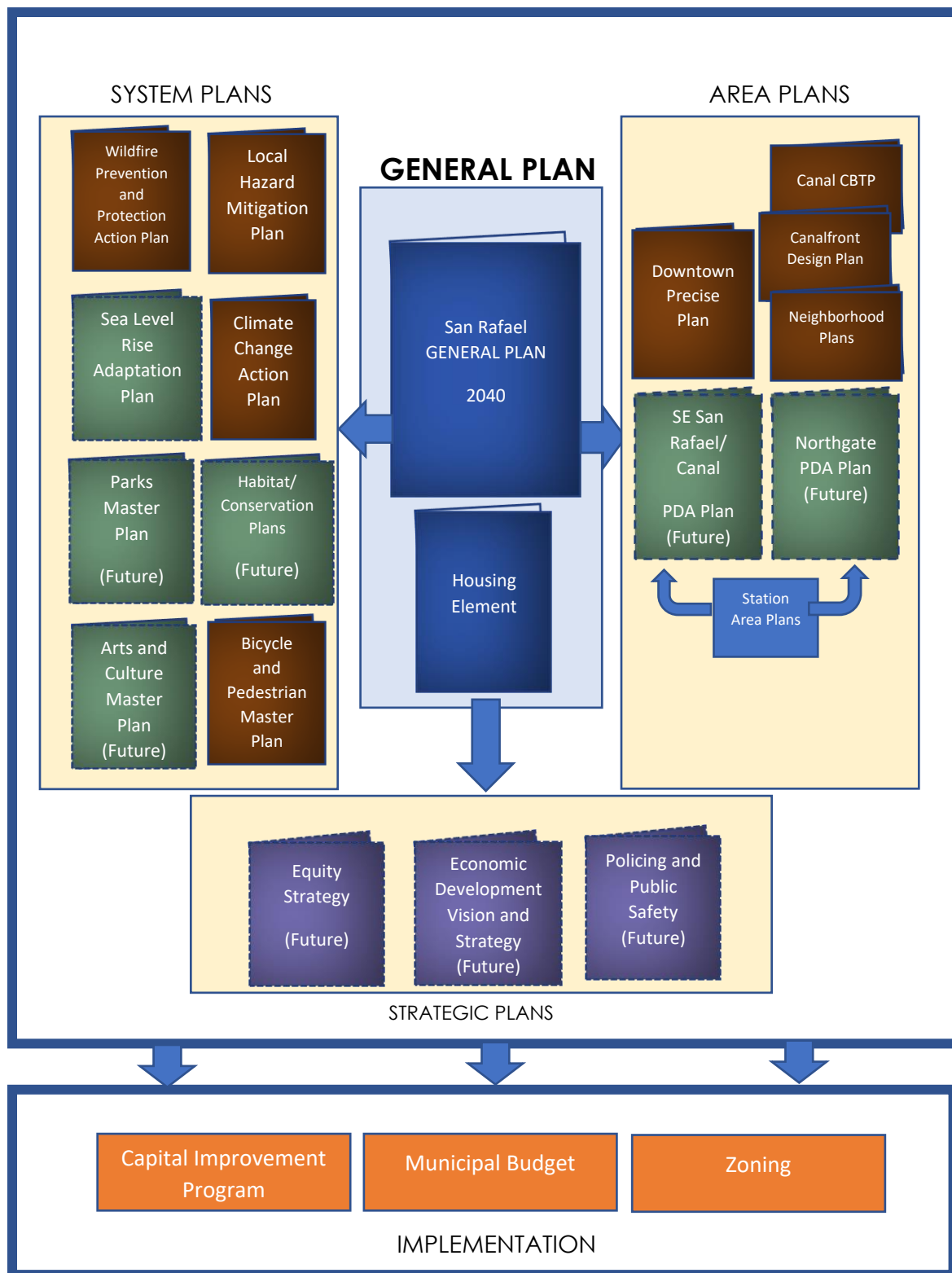




Photo from Marin Independent Journal

## Planning in a Pandemic

As the 2040 General Plan Update entered its final phase, an aggressively contagious coronavirus infected millions of people across the globe. In mid-March 2020, the County of Marin and the State of California ordered non-essential businesses to close and issued a shelter-in-place order for residents. The months that followed saw a gradual re-opening of businesses and return to work for some residents, along with considerable uncertainty, economic disruption and loss of jobs, and a public health crisis unprecedented in the last century. Work on General Plan 2040 continued through this period, with meetings moved to virtual platforms and communication protocols adapting to a “new normal.”

The publication of this Plan comes at a time when the long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the ways we live, work, travel, and socialize are unknown. The immediate priority has been is to care for the sick, reduce infection rates, and address the devastating social and economic impacts of the virus. It will take many months and even years to fully comprehend and recover from ~~respond to~~ this emergency.

The pandemic has upended our lives and accelerated some of the changes that are anticipated by this General Plan. More of us are working from home, shopping on-line, and reducing our driving. Unfortunately, the pandemic has also laid bare the inequities described in this Plan, with disproportionate impacts on lower-income essential workers and persons of color. As of August 1, 2020, Latino residents represented 16 percent of Marin County’s population and 76 percent of its COVID-19 cases.

The pandemic highlights the importance of a good long-range plan to guide us forward. The General Plan provides an expression of San Rafael’s underlying values, which remain unchanged despite the unexpected events of the last yearseveral months. The policies in this Plan provide a critical anchor for recovery and are intended to unify and align our community. The Plan provides important new direction on resilience, equity, housing, transportation, and our economy, making it more relevant than ever. New policies have been added to acknowledge the current crisis. More guidance will likely be needed as the situation evolves.



In December 2017, the City Council appointed a 24-member Steering Committee, along with 22 Alternates, to guide the process. The Committee was intended as a “sounding board” that would consider new policies as they were developed. Members represented different stakeholder groups and were asked to periodically report back to these groups on the Plan’s progress.

The Committee convened 25 ~~“official”~~ meetings between January 2018 and June 2020. Each meeting was formally noticed, open to the public, and included time for public comment. The meetings included staff and guest presentations on multiple topics, followed by Committee discussions. Electronic polling devices were occasionally used to allow Committee members to vote on key policy choices.

In 2018, the Steering Committee developed Guiding Principles, reviewed existing conditions data, and discussed major growth and development issues. In 2019, the Committee reviewed “audits” of the existing General Plan and provided feedback to staff on new and revised policies, maps, and programs. In early 2020, the Committee provided feedback on working draft elements of the Plan as they were prepared.

Committee meetings were lively and passionate. The group represented a multitude of viewpoints and did not agree on every point. There were ~~overarching~~ concerns about the fiscal impacts of Plan policies and programs, the loss of local control related to recent State housing laws, and the best response to traffic congestion, affordable housing needs, wildfire hazards, and climate change. The General Plan reflects the diversity of views expressed by the Committee and highlights areas where more dialogue may be needed in the future.

As the General Plan got underway, the City of San Rafael applied for—and was awarded—a grant to prepare a “Precise Plan” for Downtown San Rafael. A Request for Proposals was issued in Summer 2018 and a consulting team was retained in December. At the same time, the City retained consultants for its transportation and economic analyses, and an environmental impact report covering both the General Plan and the Downtown Precise Plan. The General Plan 2040 Steering Committee was tasked with serving as the vetting body for the Precise Plan as well.

A comprehensive community engagement strategy was launched in Spring 2018 and continued through Plan adoption. This included a project website ([www.sanrafael2040.org](http://www.sanrafael2040.org)), with an interactive platform where registered users could weigh in on policy issues and options. More than 350 residents subscribed to the site and over 2500 comments were received. The project website was updated monthly and became a public repository for Plan documents, meeting agendas and minutes, and links to related topics, events, and studies.

A series of community workshops took place in October 2018 at the City’s community centers. About 100 residents participated, with real-time electronic polling used to solicit feedback. Pop-up workshops were held throughout 2018 and 2019, with booths at the San Rafael Downtown Farmers Market and the Downtown Art Walk. In May 2019, the City convened a Downtown Design Charrette, attracting several hundred people over a three-day period. Small group discussions and “focus groups” also took place.

Much of the engagement strategy involved direct outreach to community and neighborhood associations. The General Plan team appeared at the regular meetings of more than a dozen neighborhood groups, providing information about the project and responding to questions. Roughly 20 organizations completed surveys on local planning issues, providing valuable guidance as the Neighborhoods Element of the Plan was drafted. Numerous presentations were made to stakeholder groups (artists, environmental organizations, food security, business organizations, students, concerned resident groups, etc.) and other local agencies. The City also solicited input directly from residents, including a “Call for Amendments” to the General Plan in Spring 2019. Application forms were developed and provided to property owners and other parties seeking General Plan Map changes.



## Community Engagement in General Plan 2040

The community engagement process included multiple formats. Clockwise from top left, (a) General Plan 2040 Steering Committee meeting in March 2018; (b) General Plan Public Workshop at the Terra Linda Recreation Center in October 2018; (c) Farmers Market Pop-Up workshop in Summer 2019; (d) Downtown Plan Design Charrette at Whistlestop, May 2019; (e) Steering Committee meeting via Zoom in June 2020; (f) Students from Laurel Dell Elementary redesign Fourth Street through a collaborative program hosted by Y-Plan and San Rafael Youth in Arts, Fall 2019.

City Boards and Commissions were kept apprised of the Plan and were also invited to participate. Several study sessions were convened with the Planning Commission, the Design Review Board, the Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Committee, the Park and Recreation Commission, and the Citizens Advisory Committee on Economic Development and Affordable Housing. The City Council participated extensively, both through periodic progress briefings and through policy study sessions, particularly on transportation and housing issues. The Draft Land Use Map was vetted with the City Council and Planning Commission prior to its publication.

A focused engagement program was developed to involve Spanish-speaking residents in General Plan 2040. Nearly one in five San Rafael residents have limited English proficiency, with Spanish being the predominant other language spoken. Initial attempts to hold Spanish language workshops attracted few attendees, leading the City to initiate an education and outreach program in partnership with the Canal Alliance. A core group of a dozen stakeholders discussed Plan concepts and issues in Spanish and reached out to more than 140 Spanish-speaking community members to discuss the future of the city.

Finally, the community was engaged in the process through public hearings. Following release of the Plan, public hearings before the Planning Commission and City Council were conducted. Opportunities to provide oral and written comments on the General Plan, Downtown Precise Plan, and EIR were provided and the documents were revised in response. [Ten Planning Commission hearings were convened between September 2020 and June 2021.](#)

## Summary of **General** Plan Elements

The General Plan includes 15 chapters and several technical appendices. The first two chapters provide the context for the Plan:

1. **Introduction** describes the General Plan process and introduces the reader to the document.
2. **Framework and Guiding Principles** provides the context for the General Plan, including data on the city and a summary of the issues influencing San Rafael's future. The chapter includes guiding principles that underpin the entire Plan.

The remaining 13 chapters are the Plan's "elements." The elements are organized in four sections, as described below.

**Our Built Environment** addresses the built form of the city and strives to sustain and create great places.

3. The **Land Use Element** provides overall guidance on the use of land, including growth and development policies and policies for specific uses. This Element includes the San Rafael 2040 General Plan Map.
4. The **Neighborhoods Element** identifies five planning areas in San Rafael and includes more specific land use policies for each area. It applies citywide policies to specific places and neighborhoods in the community.
5. The **Community Design and Preservation Element** focuses on creating and maintaining a strong sense of place in San Rafael, and enhancing the appearance of streets, buildings, and public space. It also addresses the preservation of historic resources.

**Our Natural Environment** addresses protection of the natural environment, resilience to environmental hazards, and the impacts of climate change.

6. The **Conservation and Climate Change Element** addresses San Rafael's natural resources, including wetlands, creeks, hillsides, wildlife and plant life, minerals, air and water quality, and trees. It also includes policies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and address global climate change.
7. The **Parks, Recreation, and Open Space Element** guides planning for parks, delivery of recreational services, and management of natural open spaces in the city.
8. The **Safety and Resilience Element** addresses the potential for earthquakes, landslides, erosion, flooding, and wildfire, including policies to minimize future losses of life and property. The element also addresses sea level rise, emergency preparedness, and hazardous materials.
9. The **Noise Element** includes policies and programs to reduce the impacts of excessive noise in the community.

**Connecting the City** addresses the systems that connect us to one another, both physically and socially.

10. The **Mobility Element** covers transportation and circulation. It addresses all modes of travel in the city and provides guidance on issues such as parking, safety, and congestion management.
11. The **Community Services and Infrastructure Element** addresses services such as schools, libraries, police, fire, as well as infrastructure such as water, sewer, drainage, and telecommunication facilities.
12. The **Arts and Culture Element** recognizes the power of the arts to connect residents, improve social equity, grow the economy, and celebrate San Rafael's cultural diversity.

**Opportunity for All** strives for a more just city, where all residents have access to a good job, secure housing, quality services, and a healthy environment.

13. The **Economic Vitality Element** strives to maintain economic diversity and fiscal health, sustain San Rafael as a good place to do business, and improve work opportunities for local residents.
14. The **Equity Diversity and Inclusion Element** includes policies to reduce income inequality, increase housing security, ensure environmental justice, and provide a greater voice for lower income residents in local government.
15. The **Housing Element** address the provision of housing for all economic segments of the community, particularly lower income and special needs households. As noted earlier, the Housing Element included in this volume is the 2015-2023 Element. It will be replaced by an updated Housing Element before January 31, 2023.

**Appendices** are included to supplement the General Plan. They are not adopted as part of the Plan and may be modified without a formal General Plan Amendment. The Appendices include an Implementation Matrix covering all Plan actions, a sea level rise adaptation report, the Housing Element technical report, and other background data that is referenced in the body of the General Plan.



## Implementing and Amending the Plan

The General Plan will be implemented collectively by the City Council, City Boards and Commissions, City staff, San Rafael residents, and local business owners. Decisions by the City Council and its representatives must be consistent with [its Plan](#) goals and policies. Implementation takes place in many ways, including local zoning regulations, future plans and studies, municipal code changes, partnerships, budgets, capital improvement programming, annual work programs, and standard operating procedures, among others. Some of the programs listed in the General Plan are already in effect, but the Plan also proposes new programs and changes to existing programs. Because of resource limitations, some of these changes may take place sooner than others.

The Plan is intended to be a living document that changes as the community changes. Not every change can be anticipated. This is more evident now than at any point in our history, as technology and current events constantly reshape our lives. The City prepares an annual report on the General Plan for Planning Commission and City Council review. Amendments to the Plan may be recommended through this process. A more comprehensive review occurs roughly once every five years. [The annual report and five-year review provide opportunities to measure progress on Plan implementation. Metrics have been developed where feasible so that progress can be quantified.](#)

State General Plan Guidelines recommend that general plans be periodically updated to ensure that they remain relevant. Changes may also be required to respond to new State laws, new City plans and policies, physical and demographic changes, and unforeseen opportunities or challenges. Plan Amendments may also be proposed in response to private applications for specific properties or areas. Amendments may occur up to four times a year and require public hearings before the Planning Commission and City Council. The amendment process is defined by City Resolution 8379 (1991).

