

PLANNING COSTS GUIDEBOOK

Last Modified: September 2, 2020

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Introduction

The requirements for many planning documents and actions are the same for every agency. What differs is the size of the community (both geographically and in population), the character of the community, and the extent of change contemplated in the update. Because of the differences in abilities, budget, and experience, every project is uniquely bid. Even so, there are some 'rules of thumb' that are used by agencies in preparing planning budgets.

How To Use This Guide

The numbers in this guide should be considered a range rather than absolutes. In a competitive environment, or with a firm who has a great deal of knowledge, estimates may be well below the ranges shown here. Alternatively, for an agency that expects a high level of public outreach, or has a complex project, estimates may be well above the high end of the range. With estimates that are outside of the range, the first reaction should be to learn more about how the estimate was prepared. While most other projects should fall within the ranges, the individual circumstances of each project can significantly affect the cost.

Variables

There are three main variables that can widely affect the cost, and that are partially independent of jurisdiction size. These are: accuracy of the base data, extent of public outreach, magnitude of change.

- **Base Data.** Every project relies upon data held by the agency or generated by the consultant. Even when data is available it is often out of date or needs substantial revision before it is useful. Depending on the level of staff involvement, generating reliable base data can increase the cost of a task by 25 – 70 percent depending on the project. Another source of cost is if significant new data becomes available during the course of the project and needs to be reflected in the analysis. This can involve rerunning of models, or significant changes in the conclusions.
- **Extent of Public Outreach.** For large efforts such as a General Plan or Development Code update, the outreach can exceed one-third of the total budget. Public outreach now covers both in-person and digital platforms. While the digital platform saves travel time, setup often takes more time, coordination with the agency is important, and it takes more staff to run a successful meeting.

- **Magnitude of change.** There is a significant difference in level of effort (cost) between a minor technical revision and a comprehensive effort where everything is being revisited, or significant change is sought. Higher level of scrutiny by the public or other agencies can result in more edits, additional meetings, and a longer time for review and adoption. Exhaustive review/edit cycles can significantly increase the cost, as can wordsmithing of the document by several reviewers.
- **Level of Environmental Review.** Depending on the extent and intent of the environmental analysis, the time and cost associated with CEQA compliance can significantly increase the cost of the planning action. Every lead agency is different and may have unique circumstances that affect the level of CEQA compliance. Even similar projects in adjacent cities could have different levels of analysis.

If a project is outside of the estimate range, most often it's one of the above variables that is different, or the agency is including more program elements than the title would suggest.

How this Guide Was Prepared

The Institute for Local Government (ILG) conducted a survey during summer 2019 and received 65 responses. The survey asked if the agency took on one of the following tasks and an estimate of the cost.

- Zoning Code
- Design Standards
- Accessory Dwelling Unit Ordinance
- Pre-Approved Accessory Dwelling Unit Plans
- Permit Tracking Software Purchase and Implementation
- Specific Plans
- Housing Element
- Fee Studies
- Inclusionary Ordinance
- Feasibility Studies
- CEQA Streamlining

Table 1 shows the number of agencies that responded, the average, low, and high cost of each task. Note that often agencies 'bundle' actions that occur simultaneously. For example, when asked for the cost of the Housing Element Update, some agencies included the cost of the SB 244 analysis, CEQA clearance, and the drafting of any new ordinances. Technically all part of their update, but the answer may result in a larger item cost in the table. The results of the ILG survey informed the cost estimates identified in Table 2, Estimated Consultant Costs for Select Planning Actions.

Table 1: ILG Survey Results

ACTION	#	AVERAGE	LOW	HIGH
<i>Zoning Code</i>	15	\$154,933	\$1,000	\$1,000,000
<i>Design Standards</i>	14	\$77,179	\$1,000	\$350,000
<i>ADU Ordinance</i>	24	\$31,592	\$1,200	\$160,000
<i>Pre-Approved ADU</i>	9	\$59,167	\$2,000	\$200,000
<i>Permit Tracking Software Purchase and Implementation</i>	17	\$209,771	\$3,000	\$1,000,000
<i>Specific Plans</i>	21	\$544,237	\$25,000	\$2,000,000
<i>Housing Element</i>	33	\$72,621	\$8,000	\$250,000
<i>Fee Studies</i>	9	\$98,500	\$10,000	\$434,500
<i>Inclusionary Ordinance</i>	8	\$71,813	\$10,000	\$200,000
<i>Feasibility Studies¹</i>	7	\$57,143	\$5,000	\$150,000
<i>CEQA Streamlining</i>	7	\$55,714	\$5,000	\$160,000

¹The survey did not include a definition of feasibility studies. Typically, these refer to updates to some form of infrastructure plan(s).

Staff time is seldom captured at the market rate which means that comparison to consultant costs is difficult. Staff time is seldom ‘free’ although some agencies consider the cost of staff fixed, and change priorities to meet the agency need. This guideline is based on an estimated cost by private consultants rather than agency employees. Realistically the actual costs are likely to be similar, with agency costs perhaps slightly higher when all benefits have been factored into the billing rate.

Project Cost Estimates

Costs are shown as a range allocated between small, medium, and large agencies. While size of the jurisdiction can be a factor, the costs are associated with the level of effort for the project. Large projects in small jurisdictions can cost more than a similar sized project in a large jurisdiction. The difference is often resources, staff experience, and community expectations.

When appropriate the estimates are divided into minor, moderate, and major. The deciding factor here is the extent of the project. A minor project ‘should’ take less effort than a ‘major’ project. This is obviously a judgement call and very subjective. What is or isn’t a major project varies by community. Generally, a minor project is amending existing text to meet state requirements, while a major update would substantially revise the document and perhaps the vision of the community. The level of environmental compliance will also affect the final cost. Table 2, Estimated Consultant Costs for Select Planning Actions, represents only outside consultant costs and does not include agency labor or overhead.

Table 2, Estimated Consultant Costs for Select Planning Actions

	AGENCY			<i>Notes</i> Unless Specified, CEQA is Separate
	<i>Small</i> <50,000	<i>Medium</i> 50,001 - 100,000	<i>Large</i> > 100,000	
Zoning Code				
<i>Focused Zoning Code Update for Compliance with State Law</i>	\$10,000	\$20,000	\$50,000	Revisions to add ADU, change procedures, add/delete uses. No property zoning changes.
<i>Moderate Amendment</i>	\$20,000	\$50,000	\$100,000	Adding new zone district, rezoning property. Minor up-zoning to a few properties.
<i>Comprehensive Zoning Code Update</i>	\$125,000	\$250,000	\$500,000	Complete revision of the zoning code, may include graphics and some form-based elements. Not a form-based code.
Form Based Code	\$75,000	\$125,000	\$300,000	Depends on area, extent of design
Land Use Element (solo)				
<i>Minor Update</i>	\$5,000	\$15,000	\$25,000	Wording changes, no map changes. No outreach beyond required public hearings.
<i>Moderate Update</i>	\$10,000	\$25,000	\$50,000	A few map changes that would increase slightly over existing designation, vast majority of element unaffected. Targeted outreach to stakeholder groups. Town-all style outreach, no changes to vision statement.
<i>Major Overhaul</i>	\$50,000	\$75,000	\$125,000	Comprehensive review of map, additional visioning, significant and sustained outreach.
VMT Threshold Adoption for CEQA	\$25,000	\$45,000	\$70,000	Varies depending on data, meetings, existing conditions.

	AGENCY			Notes Unless Specified, CEQA is Separate
	<i>Small</i> <50,000	<i>Medium</i> 50,001 - 100,000	<i>Large</i> > 100,000	
Circulation Element Update (solo)				
<i>Minor Update</i>	\$5,000	\$15,000	\$25,000	No new roadways, introducing road diet, ATP.
<i>Moderate Update</i>	\$10,000	\$25,000	\$50,000	Change in Roadway Standards, elimination or addition of roadway.
<i>Major Overhaul</i>	\$50,000	\$75,000	\$125,000	New roadway/interchange.
Housing Element				
<i>Minor Update</i>	\$85,000	\$100,000	\$150,000	Change to reflect state law, no rezoning, site inventory with only minor survey.
<i>Moderate Update</i>	\$120,000	\$150,000	\$250,000	Redesignation/rezoning increasing by type (medium to high), or change from more intensive use (commercial to high density)
<i>Major Overhaul</i>	\$200,000	\$250,000	\$300,000	Extensive changes, redesignation/rezoning, challenging site inventory, currently non-compliant.
SB 244				
<i>Identify</i>	\$4,000	\$5,000	\$7,000	Depends on Number of Communities
<i>Analyze</i>	\$6,000	\$8,000	\$10,000	Depends on Number of Communities
<i>Amend Land Use Element</i>	\$5,000	\$7,000	\$9,000	No engineering analysis/report
Safety Element				
<i>Minor Update</i>	\$10,000	\$15,000	\$25,000	Recent LHMP, recent safety element, minor update to policies.
<i>Moderate Update</i>	\$25,000	\$35,000	\$50,000	Significant re-write of existing conditions, climate change, and element goals, policies, and implementation programs to bring to compliance. Search for Data, GIS layers.
<i>Major Overhaul</i>	\$50,000	\$75,000	\$100,000	Existing Safety Element >20 years old, no current LHMP, complete re-write of element.

	AGENCY			<i>Notes</i> Unless Specified, CEQA is Separate
	<i>Small</i> <50,000	<i>Medium</i> 50,001 - 100,000	<i>Large</i> > 100,000	
<i>Climate Change Vulnerability Assessment - Moderate Update</i>	\$10,000-\$15,000	\$10,000-\$20,000	\$10,000-\$30,000	Existing local or regional VA available in stand-alone climate plan, LHMP, or other plan that can support a new VA with the addition of hazards, populations, assets, or other data to tailor it to the community, meet requirements.
<i>Climate Change Vulnerability Assessment - Full preparation</i>	\$15,000-\$25,000	\$25,000-\$60,000	\$50,000-\$150,000	Full VA needs to be prepared. Could include modeling.
<i>General Plan Update</i>	\$250,000	\$1,500,000	\$3,000,000+	

The costs for planning actions in Table 3, Other Planning Actions change based on the level of effort rather than population. Due to the rising costs of comprehensive general plan updates, many agencies are opting to prepare a targeted or moderate update. In this context, a targeted effort would involve minimal change to reflect state law. A moderate project may change several elements and introduce a new policy / program into the overall General Plan. A comprehensive update to the General Plan would replace most of the elements with substantially revised versions. Everything from the level of outreach to the CEQA compliance method and supporting studies is based on the level of effort which in turn affects the cost.

Table 3, Other Planning Actions

OTHER PLANNING ACTIONS	TARGETED	MODERATE	COMPREHENSIVE	
Environmental Justice	\$15,000	\$25,000	\$60,000	Data and Draft Text Only. Costs can be significantly higher depending on public outreach strategy.
	Minor	Moderate	Major	
Fee Studies				
<i>Update</i>	\$15,000	\$50,000	\$150,000	Variables include: Capital Improvement Program, Outreach, Extent of Update (new fee vs. update)
	Small	Medium	Large	
Housing Feasibility Studies	\$15,000	\$50,000	\$150,000	Smaller studies are zoning evaluations while the larger studies include design and economic evaluations.
Inclusionary Ordinance	\$7,500	\$12,000	\$25,000	Difference is extent of public outreach (No Nexus Study)
Inclusionary Nexus Study	\$50,000	\$75,000	\$150,000	
ADU Ordinance	\$3,000	\$7,000	\$15,000	Difference is extent of public outreach
Density Bonus Ordinance	\$3,000	\$7,000	\$15,000	Difference is extent of public outreach
CEQA				
<i>Exemption</i>	\$1,500	\$5,000	\$15,000	Depends on how much technical analysis is needed to ensure § 15300.2 Exceptions do not apply.
<i>Addendum</i>	\$2,500	\$7,500	\$25,000	Assumes no technical studies.
<i>IS/ND</i>	\$15,000	\$50,000	\$75,000	Assumes no technical studies.
<i>IS/MND</i>	\$25,000	\$75,000	\$150,000	Moderate Studies (i.e. bio, cultural, traffic, aq/ghg, noise)
<i>Supplement/Subsequent EIR</i>	\$25,000	\$75,000	\$150,000	Focused issues moderate studies (i.e. bio, cultural, traffic, aq/ghg, noise)
<i>Program EIR</i>	\$100,000	\$150,000	\$300,000	Usually General Plan Level
<i>Project EIR</i>	\$100,000	\$150,000	\$350,000	Usually Specific Plan / Zoning Level

OTHER PLANNING ACTIONS	TARGETED	MODERATE	COMPREHENSIVE	
Outreach				
<i>Kick Off Meeting</i>	\$1,200		\$2,500	
<i>Scoping Meeting</i>	\$2,500		\$5,000	
<i>Workshop</i>	\$5,000		\$25,000	
<i>Charette</i>	\$10,000		\$25,000	
<i>Certification / Adoption</i>	\$1,500		\$7,000	
<i>Permit Processing Software</i>	\$100,000	\$125,000	\$250,000	Depends on extent of hardware, licenses, and amount of historic data input.