



General Plan Policy Audit Report

CITY OF FOWLER
GENERAL PLAN UPDATE
APRIL 2020



CITY OF **FOWLER**
California

GENERAL PLAN POLICY AUDIT REPORT

GENERAL PLAN UPDATE

APRIL 2020

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction & Purpose	1
What Is a General Plan?	1
Components of the General Plan	1
What General Plans Do	1
What General Plans Don't Do.....	2
Why is the General Plan Being Updated?.....	2
Approach & Organization	2
Considerations in the Analysis.....	2
Audit Report Organization.....	3
How will this Report be Used?	3
Policy Audit Analysis	3
Structural Organization	3
Summary Observations	4
Recommendations	5
Supporting Principles & Topic Areas.....	5
Summary Observations	7
Recommendations	7
State Legislative Requirements	8
Summary Observations	10
Recommendations	11

INTRODUCTION & PURPOSE

WHAT IS A GENERAL PLAN?

A general plan is a comprehensive, long-range planning document that forms the basis of land use decisions and envisions how a community will grow. It determines development policy, community values, guiding principles, objectives, standards, and program proposals. It addresses issues that impact the entire city, such as how land is used, where buildings are built, the locations of roads and parks, safety, noise, and more. Every other planning document adopted by the city must be consistent with the goals and policies of the general plan.

All California cities and counties are required by law to adopt a general plan. Plans must include certain required elements, such as land use, safety, and circulation. Jurisdictions may also add additional elements based on local need and organize the plan in any way they see fit.

REQUIRED GENERAL PLAN ELEMENTS

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

Components of the General Plan

General plans are usually made up of three primary pieces: goals, policies, and action items.

- **Goals.** A goal is a general expression of community values. It is typically not quantifiable, nor is it an action to be completed, but rather it is a vision of the community's future.
- **Policies.** A policy is a specific statement that guides decision-making and helps to implement the general plan.
- **Action Items.** Action items are specific procedures, programs, or techniques that carry out the policies of the general plan.

EXAMPLE COMPONENTS

GOAL: A connected active transportation network.

POLICY: Accommodate pedestrian and bicycle facilities along all roadways.

ACTION ITEM: Review and update, as necessary, public works improvement standards for local, collector, and arterial roadways to ensure adequate

What General Plans Do

- ✓ **Establish goals, policies, and action items.** General plans guide land use, circulation, and resource conservation for a community by defining goals, establishing policies, and determining action items for each of the required elements of the Plan.
- ✓ **Establish jurisdiction priorities.** General plans, help prioritize identified action items to align with other community priorities.
- ✓ **Guide decision-making.** General plans are the basis for regulations and administrative procedures and help the planning commission, city council, and city staff make decisions regarding land use and physical development. General plans also inform developers and the public on the vision for the community and expectations for development.

What General Plans Don't Do

Just as important as understanding what general plans do is understanding what they don't do.

- ✗ They **do not implement themselves**. Other planning documents and activities, like the Zoning Code and its enforcement, implement the policies established in the General Plan. The General Plan cannot answer every question about development during the lifetime of the Plan, but it can provide the general policies that should govern the answer.
- ✗ General plan land use designations **do not zone land**. While both the general plan and zoning code designate land uses, they do so in different ways. General plans maintain a long-term outlook and the general pattern of physical development. Zoning codes establish specific development standards such as allowed uses or setbacks.

WHY IS THE GENERAL PLAN BEING UPDATED?

The City of Fowler adopted its first General Plan in 1976. The current Plan, adopted in June 2004, runs through 2025 and includes land use, circulation, housing, and economic development. Since its adoption, the General Plan has been revised and amended but not comprehensively updated. Most notably, Fowler adopted the Fresno County Multi-Jurisdictional Housing Element in April 2016.

It is important for the Plan to be updated to represent changed community conditions. Additionally, new legislation has altered general plan requirements, new social and environmental issues have emerged, and new planning strategies and practices have been developed. This update will incorporate these changes and better equip Fowler to address today's challenges and look ahead to 2040.

The objectives of this General Plan update are to:

- Confirm the vision for the community,
- Provide clear goals and policies to support the community vision and guide decision-making,
- Prepare a plan to implement the goals and policies,
- Comply with state requirements and incorporate best planning practices, and
- Create a user-friendly General Plan.

APPROACH & ORGANIZATION

CONSIDERATIONS IN THE ANALYSIS

Before updating the General Plan, it is important to understand how the current Plan works, what about it is effective, and what is not. In order to do so, a preliminary analysis of the General Plan has been conducted. It considered:

- **Structural Organization and Ease of Reference.** Goals and policies are not effective if they cannot be found quickly and easily. The General Plan should be logically organized, well-formatted, and easy to use.

- **Consistency with Vision and Supporting Principles.** As an early step in the General Plan Update process, the City crafted a vision statement, built around goals from the previous update and recent comments received by the City, that describes the values and aspirations for Fowler. The statement is accompanied by supporting principles that will also be a helpful tool in organizing and updating the General Plan.
- **State Legislative Requirements.** The State of California requires that all cities and counties have a general plan and that the plan contain certain elements and address certain planning issues. Since the last update of Fowler's General Plan in 2004, the legislative requirements for general plans have changed, and these will need to be addressed in the update.
- **Best Practices.** The field of urban planning continues to evolve, and practices continue to be improved. The update should incorporate new methods and policies that are in-line with current best planning practice.

AUDIT REPORT ORGANIZATION

This Report summarizes observations related to the General Plan which have been compiled into the following sections:

- Structural Organization,
- Supporting Principles & Topic Areas, and
- State Legislative Requirements.

Following the observations for each category are recommended actions to be implemented during the General Plan update process.

HOW WILL THIS REPORT BE USED?

This Report is a key step towards updating the Fowler General Plan. The Report will be presented at a joint Planning Commission/City Council workshop, along with policy papers related to legislative updates affecting general plan requirements. The next step towards reorganizing and updating General Plan goals and policies will be to refine existing policy language and propose new language based on feedback received at the public workshop. Policy revisions will be presented to the public for further review and comment as part of the update process, occurring during the public review period of the draft General Plan prior to adoption.

POLICY AUDIT ANALYSIS

STRUCTURAL ORGANIZATION

Planning strategies, goals, and policies contained within the General Plan are most effective when they are well written, well organized, and when the document itself is organized and formatted effectively. A user-friendly document should have the following features:

- A **table of contents** that provides descriptive chapter titles so a user can quickly navigate the documents. Chapter titles are organized by element.
- **Headers and footers** that allow a reader to quickly navigate to relevant chapters or sections.
- A **community vision** that provides context for each goal, policy, and action item.
- **Cross references** to chapters or sections influenced by overlapping policy areas.
- An **implementation plan** that includes implementing programs for each General Plan policy. Ideally, this implementation plan identifies programs for short-term, medium-term, and long-term timelines to help ensure the vision and intent of the General Plan is met and is treated as a living document guiding elected officials, city staff, and the public.

This section contains general observations about the existing organization, format, and usability of the General Plan, as well as strategies for improving these aspects in the General Plan update.

Summary Observations

Observation 1: There Are Over 200 Policies in The Current General Plan

The current General Plan contains 229 goals and policies covering 16 different topics. While many of these policies may still be relevant, many others may be redundant or more impactful when combined with other policies. In addition, an overabundance of policies makes implementation and progress reporting cumbersome and difficult. A comprehensive review of each policy statement will be undertaken to eliminate those which are redundant or no longer applicable. New policies may be created in order to help guide new topics important to the community or incorporate updated legislative requirements. Overall, many policies may be consolidated to increase ease of reference and maximize efficiency and implementation moving forward.

Observation 2: Many Policies Contain Action Items

Policies are specific statements within a general plan which support the goals and vision of a community and guide decision-making. Each goal may have several supporting policies and each policy may have an associated action item, or specific task to carry out the policy. Good action items should be concrete and measurable so that communities can efficiently and accurately measure progress towards their goals over the life of the general plan document.

The current Fowler General Plan does not contain specific action items; however, many policies contain statements that would typically be considered action items. Action items should stand separately from policies so that they can be easily identified. By listing action items separate from the policy, the actions identified may also be more concrete and measurable. By combining the two, many existing policies are too specific, yet may not contain enough detail to enable measurement of progress in the future. This leads to difficulty when tracking community progress towards achieving the goals and implementing policies found in the General Plan. Moving forward, policies will be revised, and implementation measures or action items will be identified separately from policies.

Observation 3: Some Policies Contain Standards

While the general plan is responsible for specifying density and intensity guidelines for development and policies which guide planning decisions, it cannot provide every detail necessary to implement those

decisions. Implementation of the general plan relies on other planning documents such as the zoning code, public works standards, fire and building codes, and other management programs. The zoning code contains development standards which govern the type of development allowed in specific locations as well as how that development is designed and built. Examples of these standards include setbacks, landscaping requirements, height minimums and maximums, and lot coverage requirements. Several policies in the Fowler General Plan were found to contain development or design standards. These policies will be revised to remove specific development or design standards and will contain levels of guidance more appropriate for long range policy documents. The development and design standards should be incorporated into the applicable implementing documents, such as the zoning code. An action item will be included as part of the General Plan to ensure implementation.

Observation 4: The General Plan Elements are not Well Defined

A general plan has nine required elements, consisting of land use, circulation, housing, conservation, open space, noise, safety, environmental justice, and air quality. These elements may be organized or combined in any fashion as long as they are included in the general plan document. Typically, elements are combined when their content overlaps, making a single element more efficient and comprehensive than maintaining multiple elements. Common examples of this include a single element dedicated to conservation and open space, or a combined safety and noise element. While the combining of elements may often contribute to efficiency and ease of use, combining too many elements may have the opposite effect, leading to confusion and making policies hard to find.

In 2004, the Fowler General Plan was updated, and new Land Use, Economic Development, and Circulation elements were adopted. The City also adopted a Housing Element update in 2016 as part of Fresno County's Multi-Jurisdictional 2015-2023 Housing Element. While these elements may cover the statutory requirements in place at the time of adoption, the current structure does not facilitate ease of reference. Elements created as part of the General Plan Update may be reorganized, separated, and/or restructured in order to facilitate ease of reference and to emphasize specific needs relevant to the community.

Recommendations

1. Reduce the overall quantity of goals and policies in the General Plan to facilitate maximum efficiency, impact, and ease of reference.
2. Remove standards from policies.
3. Separate policies and action items.
4. Ensure that all action items are concrete and measurable.
5. Restructure the General Plan chapters to align more closely with state required elements.

SUPPORTING PRINCIPLES & TOPIC AREAS

As part of community outreach for the Fowler General Plan Update, a series of stakeholder interviews were conducted in the spring of 2019. Stakeholders were asked a standard list of questions related to community development within the City of Fowler. A total of 14 community members were interviewed, including City staff.

Several primary themes and key issues emerged from the stakeholder interviews in response to the challenges of expanding City limits and top challenges to businesses and residents in general. The key issues identified included economic development, community growth and infrastructure, circulation, parks and recreation, and community character.

In response to these key issues, and the fact that the City's current General Plan does not contain a vision statement, the consultant team drafted a vision statement which was shared with residents and presented to both the Planning Commission and City Council at a series of public workshops in the fall of 2019. The vision statement is reinforced by five supporting principles, or statements that contribute to the larger community vision and provide more specific guidance for general plan goals and policies.

As part of the policy review efforts undertaken for the General Plan Update, each goal and policy found in the current General Plan was reviewed for alignment with each supporting principle. The information below outlines each supporting principle and lists coordinating key policy areas based on the findings of this review process.

Supporting Principle 1: Our Economy Thrives and Businesses Provide Local Amenities.

We value and support businesses which bolster the community by providing jobs, services, goods, and recreational opportunities. Economic development focuses on supporting business expansion and diversification. Our small-town character is preserved while also providing jobs and increased local amenities, ensuring residents the opportunity to live, work, and recreate all in one place.

COORDINATING POLICY AREAS

Agricultural Preservation
Land Use
Downtown Revitalization
Economic Development

Supporting Principle 2: Growth Occurs Thoughtfully and is Shaped by Our Community.

A creative growth management strategy allows expansion to occur in a way that aligns economic needs, community vision, and regional goals. There is a strong system in place to guarantee that as the community accommodates new neighbors and new jobs, it continues to maintain and improve upon the lives of City residents, ensuring infrastructure and services successfully reach growth areas while continuing to serve established neighborhoods. New development is executed through land use decisions which involve careful research, coordination and community outreach.

COORDINATING POLICY AREAS

Agricultural Preservation
Annexation
Circulation
Land Use
Economic Development
Growth Management
Open Space
Public Facilities
Sustainability

Supporting Principle 3: Our Community is Mobile and Connected.

Our circulation system is complete, with amenities which make walking, biking, and transit use a safe, comfortable, and viable means of getting from place to place. Roadways are scaled appropriately for the types of land uses that surround them and provide access to jobs, services, goods, and recreational opportunities. The central commercial core is contiguous, with a well-maintained streetscape. Our circulation patterns are shaped by urban design principles which value street design as a method of community connection and placemaking.

**COORDINATING
POLICY AREAS**

Circulation
Land Use
Design
Sustainability
Safety

Supporting Principle 4: Parks and Recreation are a Focal Point of Our Community.

Our parks and recreation facilities are safe, accessible, and connected to the community they serve. Passive and active recreation opportunities are abundant and coordinated across local facilities and organizations.

**COORDINATING
POLICY AREAS**

Circulation
Land Use

Supporting Principle 5: Protecting Our Community's Character.

We celebrate Fowler's unique small-town character and balance it with the need to foster growth both physically and economically. Our commitment to facilitating growth in a way that complements our character is reflected in core planning documents. Growth policies preserve our central commercial core, residential neighborhoods, and support local businesses that contribute to the fabric of our community.

**COORDINATING
POLICY AREAS**

Annexation
Circulation
Land Use
Design
Downtown Revitalization
Economic Development
Growth Management
Public Facilities
Specific Plans

Summary Observations**Observation 1: Current Policies Align with The Vision Statement and Supporting Principles**

A jurisdiction's general plan should reflect community values and goals for the future. The objectives, policies, and action items contained within the general plan should be an extension of those community values. Upon reviewing the policies within the current Fowler General Plan, it was found that they generally align well with the community vision and supporting principles. While some reorganization of these policies may occur, their content will generally be preserved. Moving forward in this update process, the existing policies will be evaluated and enhanced as needed to ensure that they continue to support community values. They will also be restructured as either goals, policies, or action items in order to facilitate ease of reference and improve the overall structure of the General Plan.

Recommendations

1. Focus goals, policies, and action items around the community vision and supporting principles.

STATE LEGISLATIVE REQUIREMENTS

The state of California requires all cities and counties to adopt a general plan. The legislative requirements governing California general plans have changed since Fowler's last update in 2004, as identified in **Table 1: Recent State Legislation Affecting General Plan Requirements**. Additional changes in State law, while not directly affecting general plan requirements, do impact how topics related to development may be addressed within a general plan. The observations below reflect how the existing Fowler General Plan will need to be updated to reflect these recent changes and to clarify development requirements.

Table 1: Recent State Legislation Affecting General Plan Requirements

Policy Topic and Bill	Affected Element	Bill Summary	Timeframe for Compliance	Preliminary Determination
Environmental Justice (SB 1000, Leyva)	Land Use	Cities and counties must either add an environmental justice element or incorporate environmental justice policies into their general plan. The element policies must address the health risks faced by disadvantaged communities, identify ways to promote civil engagement in the public decision-making process around issues related to environmental impacts and disadvantaged community, and identify objectives and policies that prioritize improvements and programs that address the needs of disadvantaged communities.	SB 1000 requires that the General Plan address environmental justice upon the next revision of two or more elements occurring concurrently, on or after January 1, 2018.	Add environmental justice element or policies
Climate Adaptation (SB 379, Jackson)	Safety	Cities and counties are required to include strategies for climate adaptation and resiliency in their general plans. Specifically, the legislation requires each local jurisdiction to review and update its safety element to include relevant and applicable climate adaptation and resiliency strategies. Each jurisdiction must conduct a vulnerability assessment that identifies the geographic areas at risk due to climate change impacts and the types of risks or impacts that are likely, and then use the results to develop goals, policies, and objectives.	SB 379 requires that the General Plan address climate change and resiliency requirements upon the next revision of a local hazard mitigation plan on or after January 1, 2017. If an LHMP has not been adopted by the jurisdiction, then the general plan process must begin prior to January 1, 2022.	Add climate adaptation strategies
Fire Hazard Impacts (SB 1241, Kehoe)	Safety	SB 1241 was approved in September 2012. It requires cities and counties to address fire risk in very high fire hazard severity zones and state responsibility areas in their safety elements. This update must include historical data on wildfires, information regarding fire hazards in state responsibility areas and very high fire hazard severity zones, structures, roads, utilities, and essential public facilities in these areas, as well as goals, policies, and implementation measures to protect the community from unreasonable wildfire risk.	SB 1241 requires that the General Plan address fire hazard impacts upon the next update to the Housing Element, on or after January 1, 2012.	Address fire hazard impacts

Policy Topic and Bill	Affected Element	Bill Summary	Timeframe for Compliance	Preliminary Determination
Planning for Disadvantaged Unincorporated Communities (SB 244, Wolk)	Land Use	<p>SB 244, approved in October 2011, requires local governments to include data and an analysis of any unincorporated, fringe, island, or legacy communities inside or nears its boundaries that are determined to be disadvantaged unincorporated communities (DUC). The general plan must identify all defined DUCs in the planning area; analyze water, wastewater, stormwater drainage and structural fire protection needs for each identified DUC; and identify financial funding alternatives for the extension of services to identified communities.</p> <p>Government Code Section 65302.10 defines a disadvantaged unincorporated community as a place that meets all the following criteria:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contains 10 or more dwelling units in close proximity to one another; • Is either within city sphere of influence ("fringe community", is an island within a city boundary ("island community"), or is geographically isolated and has existed for more than 50 years ("legacy community"); and • Has a median household income that is 80 percent or less than the statewide median household income. 	The general plan must be updated to incorporate planning for DUCs upon the next update to the Housing Element on or after January 1, 2012.	There are no DUCs within the Fowler planning area
Complete Streets (AB 1358, Leno)	Circulation	<p>AB 1358, approved in September 2008, requires cities and counties to adopt complete street policies and plans for a multimodal transportation network that meets the needs of all users in a safe and convenient manner. This includes all forms of transportation, such as public transit, vehicular, and active modes of transportation like bicycling and walking. The bill acknowledges that the policies should accommodate local context and priorities and allows flexibility and local control over policy making and design to ensure that the manner of implementation is suitable to the rural, suburban, or urban context.</p>	Complete streets should be incorporated into the general plan upon substantial update to the Circulation Element on or after January 1, 2011.	Current policies sufficiently meet the requirements of AB 1358
Flooding (SB 5, Machado)	Safety	<p>SB 5 was approved in September 2007. It requires each city and county within the Sacramento-San Joaquin Valley to amend its general plan to address flooding that has a 1-in-200 chance of occurring in any given year (i.e., a 200-year flood) and include the following within the general plan:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data and analysis contained in that flood protection plan; • Goals and policies for the protection of lives and property that will reduce the risk of flood damage; and • Related feasible implementation measures. 	The general plan must be updated within 24 months of the adoption of the Central Valley Flood Protection Plan, which was adopted in 2012.	Address 200-year flood risk

Policy Topic and Bill	Affected Element	Bill Summary	Timeframe for Compliance	Preliminary Determination
Military Facilities and Military Readiness Activities (SB 1458, Knight and SB 1462, Kuehl)	Land Use	SB 1468, approved in September 2002, and SB 1462, approved in September 2004, require cities and counties to consider the impact of new growth on military readiness activities carried out on military bases, installations, and operating and training areas when lands under jurisdiction underlay or are adjacent to designated military aviation routes and airspace. The general plan must also identify existing and proposed military facilities. Amendments to the general plan must be referred to the US Armed Forces for review and document when the proposed amendments are within or adjacent to military facilities or training routes. Additional requirements for consultation with the US Armed Forces on specific development projects are also included in the bill language.	Mapping of military uses was made available in 2014	Incorporate policies related to military facilities and military readiness activities
Air Quality (AB 170, Reyes)	Air Quality	AB 170, approved in September 2003, requires each city and county within the jurisdictional boundaries of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District to either adopt an air quality element or amend appropriate elements of their general plan to include data and analysis, comprehensive goals, policies, and feasible implementation strategies to improve air quality.	The general plan must be updated no later than one year from the date specified for the next revision of the Housing Element.	Current policies sufficiently meet the requirements of AB 170

Summary Observations

Observation 1: Redevelopment Agencies No Longer Exist

The current General Plan includes several policies and action items related to the Redevelopment Agencies (RDAs). The 2011 Budget Act approved the dissolution of these agencies and the RDAs were officially dissolved on February 1, 2012. As these agencies no longer exist, references to the RDA should be removed from the General Plan policies.

Observation 2: Growth Management Policies Cannot Be Enacted

Senate Bill (SB) 330, the Housing Crisis Act of 2019, has limited the ability of jurisdictions to establish or enact growth management policies, including moratoriums, permit caps, and downzoning. This limitation will be in effect until January 1, 2025. At present, Fowler has a growth management ordinance used to implement the growth management policies found in the Land Use Element of the General Plan. The Fowler growth management policies will be reviewed and amended as necessary to be in compliance with the requirements of SB 330.

Observation 3: Legislative Requirements Have Changed

While some of the legislative changes identified in **Table 1** may have been anticipated and addressed in the last update in 2004, additional policies will need to be incorporated into the General Plan to ensure compliance with state requirements. These necessary updates include:

- Adding environmental justice policies,
- Adding climate adaptation policies,
- Addressing fire hazards,
- Addressing the 200-year flood zone risk in Fowler, and
- Incorporating military readiness into planning efforts.

Policies added to comply with these legislative updates will also need to align with the community vision and supporting principles. Existing policies may need to be reorganized, revised, or removed considering these legislative updates. New policies will be created in response to these updates as needed.

Recommendations

1. Remove references to redevelopment agencies.
2. Revise growth management policy to ensure compliance with new legislative requirements and limitations.
3. Incorporate additional legislative requirements for new general plan topics.