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# INTRODUCTION

## WHAT IS THE GENERAL PLAN?

The Contra Costa County 2045 General Plan is the County's primary policy tool to guide physical changes in the unincorporated areas of the county. This General Plan looks over 20 years into the future and establishes a vision for development of our communities and stewardship of our natural environment. It is aspirational and long-range, but also practical, providing a useful, everyday guide for community planning.

This General Plan references numerous public agencies, geographic areas, and political boundaries, which often share a common name. For example, the proper noun "Contra Costa County" can refer to either the public agency led by the Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors, or the geographic area defined by Contra Costa County's borders. To avoid confusion, this General Plan uses capital letters when referencing public agencies and lowercase letters when referencing political boundaries or geographic areas. Thus, "the County" (capitalized "C") means the governing body of Contra Costa County, while "the county" (lowercase "c") means the territory within Contra Costa County's borders. In instances where complete proper nouns are used, the meaning should be discernible from the context.

## Legal Authority

California Government Code Section 65301 requires every county and city in the state to adopt a general plan "for the physical development of the county or city, and of any land outside its boundaries which in the planning agency's judgement bears relation to its planning." Decades ago, local general plans were viewed as a set of broad policies that had small roles in development decisions. However, changes in State law since the original statutes were

adopted in the 1950s have vastly increased the importance and authority of general plans. Each jurisdiction's general plan acts as its "charter" or "constitution" governing development. State law requires local governments to implement their general plan once it has been adopted.

A general plan provides a comprehensive, long-range statement of the jurisdiction's land use policies for the coming decades. It must respond to existing conditions, anticipate emerging trends that will shape the community of tomorrow, and provide flexibility for balancing necessarily competing goals and policies.

General plans typically have four defining features:

- **Comprehensive.** A general plan covers a wide range of planning-related topics such as land use, housing, economic development, environmental justice, sustainability and resiliency, transportation and mobility, public health and safety, recreation, and natural resources.
- **General.** A general plan does not attempt to address every topic in detail; instead, it provides high-level policy guidance that will be used to direct future decisions.
- **Long-Range and Aspirational.** A community's general plan articulates a vision for how it will develop, normally over a timeframe of approximately 20 years.
- **Internally Consistent and Compatible.** While addressing a wide range of topics, the goals, policies, and actions in a general plan nevertheless establish a unified and coherent framework for decision-making.



Together with specific plans adopted for various communities, the Zoning Code and related sections of the County Ordinance Code, Climate Action and Adaptation Plan, and Objective Design Standards, the County's General Plan serves as the basis for planning- and infrastructure-related decisions made by County staff, the County Planning Commission and other County commissions and committees, and the Board of Supervisors.

## USER'S GUIDE

The Contra Costa County 2045 General Plan is for all members of the community and anyone interested in the future of the county. It was crafted with a constant eye toward keeping it clear, implementable, and useful as time passes. The graphic on the following page explains the individual components found on a typical page of the Plan providing policy guidance.

### Words, Phrasing, and Interpretation

Great care was taken to ensure that this General Plan is relatable and easy to understand. Terms of art, jargon, and unnecessarily technical or abstract language have been avoided whenever possible. Unless context dictates otherwise, all words and phrases should be interpreted consistently with their most common usage and meaning.

The goals, policies, and actions in this General Plan include verbs, usually at or near the beginning, that provide direction and express varying degrees of obligation or applicability. Words such as "require," "prohibit," "approve," and "deny" indicate mandatory directives. "Encourage," "discourage," "consider," "should," "may," and similar words provide less rigid direction. The flexibility

inherent to such words must not be misinterpreted though; the guidance they provide must be followed absent compelling, conflicting considerations.

While every effort has been made to provide clear and comprehensive policy direction through this General Plan's text and graphics, unique or unusual situations will necessitate interpretation from time to time. The Department of Conservation and Development Director is ultimately responsible for interpreting this document, their decisions being appealable to the Board of Supervisors as provided in Title 1 of the County Ordinance Code.

### Overview of the Elements

State law requires that general plans contain eight mandatory chapters, or "elements." The State allows considerable flexibility in how these elements are organized. They can be combined, split up, renamed, or otherwise modified so long as the required content is present. The State also allows for inclusion of any number of optional elements to address issues of local importance. All elements, mandatory or optional, have the same legal standing once adopted. No single element supersedes any other, and all elements must be internally consistent (i.e., the goals, policies, actions, maps, and diagrams must be in harmony with one another across topic areas and not conflict). **Table INT-1** lists the State-mandated elements and their counterparts in the Contra Costa County 2045 General Plan, as well as two optional elements that the community considers fundamental to maintaining the quality of life in the county. This General Plan addresses all topics required by State law, with their organization tailored to the local context.

# How to Use the General Plan

**Goal:** An end statement describing the general result sought by the community. Each goal has associated policies and most also have associated actions.

**Goal Numbering:** Each goal number starts with the element acronym and is followed by the number of the goal (e.g., COS-1 = Conservation, Open Space, and Working Lands Element, first goal).

**Policy:** A specific statement that guides decision-making as the County works to achieve a goal. Policies represent statements of County regulation and establish the standards used when considering proposed development and other decisions. A policy is ongoing and requires no corresponding action.

**Policy Numbering:** The policy number is shown as the last number, supporting the goal it follows (e.g., COS-P1.1 = Conservation, Open Space, and Working Lands Element, first goal, first policy). Policy numbers are not tied to action numbers.

**Action:** A measure, procedure, or activity that helps the County achieve a specific goal. An action is something concrete that can and will be completed.

**Action Numbering:** The action number is shown as the last number, supporting the goal it follows (e.g., COS-A1.1 = Conservation, Open Space, and Working Lands Element, first goal, first action). Action numbers are not tied to policy numbers.

## Goal COS-1

Preserved open space for environmental protection, resource management and production, recreation, scenic value, and climate resilience and adaptation.

### Policies

#### COS-P1.1



Support efforts by public agencies and nonprofit organizations to acquire and permanently protect open space areas containing important ecological or scenic resources and areas that connect protected lands to form a cohesive system of open space. Plan infrastructure to avoid interfering with such acquisitions whenever possible.

#### COS-P1.2



Pursue opportunities for permanent open space dedication for habitat, scenic, or passive recreation benefits as part of future development approvals and major capital improvement projects.

#### COS-P1.3



Discourage conversion of land designated Resource Conservation or Parks and Recreation to urban uses. If such conversion is to occur, require mitigation through permanent protection of other open space or park lands for habitat, scenic, or recreation benefits at a ratio to be determined based on the biological, scenic, or recreational value of the land, but not less than 3:1.\*

#### COS-P1.4



Require new projects adjacent to protected open space areas, such as EBRPD lands, to establish buffers on their properties as necessary to minimize conflicts and protect the open space. If conflicts arise between protected open spaces and other uses, prioritize maintaining the viability of the open space functions.\*

### Actions

#### COS-A1.1

Convene an annual staff-level meeting with conservation agencies, such as the East Contra Costa County Habitat Conservancy and EBRPD, and conservation organizations (land trusts, watershed stewardship groups, etc.) to review current and planned efforts to protect and maintain open space and habitat.

See the Land Use Element for additional policies and actions related to the Urban Limit Line and open space uses.

## AGRICULTURAL RESOURCES AND WORKING LANDS

### Agricultural Resource Areas

There are approximately 254,500 acres of agricultural land mapped by the State in Contra Costa County, most of it in the unincorporated area. The California Department of Conservation's Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program (FMMP) maps land by agricultural production potential using the following categories:

**Asterisks** identify policies and actions that mitigate potential environmental impacts, as described in the General Plan Environmental Impact Report.

**Section Footer:** Identifies the Element title.

**Page Numbering:** Shows the chapter and page number (e.g., 7-3 = Chapter 7, page 3).



**TABLE INT-1 STATE-MANDATED AND CONTRA COSTA COUNTY 2045 GENERAL PLAN ELEMENTS**

State-Mandated Element	Contra Costa County 2045 General Plan Element
Land Use	Land Use
Circulation	Transportation
Housing	Housing
Conservation	Conservation, Open Space, and Working Lands
Open Space	
Safety	Health and Safety
Noise	
Environmental Justice	Stronger Communities Also incorporated throughout most other Elements
<b>Optional Elements</b>	
Any element addressing a locally relevant topic relating to the jurisdiction’s physical development	Public Facilities and Services
	Growth Management

Each Element of this General Plan includes background information that provides context for the goals, policies, and actions that follow. The background information often includes maps, diagrams, and other graphic components to illustrate key data and concepts.

In addition to the background information and goals, policies, and actions that are included in each Element, the Stronger Communities Element contains 22 **Community Profiles**, which provide community-specific guidance that speaks to the unique needs of individual communities.



*Community members discuss their vision for the future of Crockett.*

## Goals, Policies, and Actions

The Contra Costa County 2045 General Plan is built around goals, policies, and actions that must be implemented to achieve the community’s vision for the future. Goals, policies, and actions are found in every Element.

Placement of a goal, policy, or action in a specific Element does not limit its scope to only that Element’s topic. For example, a policy in the Conservation, Open Space, and Working Lands Element can apply to topics beyond the realm of conservation, open space, and working lands. There also is not a one-to-one correspondence between policies and actions. An individual action can implement more than one policy and contribute to achieving multiple goals across different Elements.

## Other Components of the Plan

A **Glossary** and **List of Abbreviations** are provided for reference (Chapter 11).

The **Appendices** include a compilation of the policies and actions that relate to each of the four themes described in the next section (**Appendix A**), as well as a technical appendix to provide additional detail on health and safety topics (**Appendix B**).

While not contained within the General Plan, an **Environmental Impact Report** (EIR) for the General Plan has been prepared pursuant to the requirements of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). The EIR evaluates the effects of the General Plan’s policy guidance on Contra Costa County’s environment and includes mitigation measures to lessen the General Plan’s potential environmental impacts when possible. Policies and actions that mitigate potential impacts are identified in this General Plan with an asterisk. The EIR also identifies impacts that cannot be mitigated to acceptable levels (i.e., significant and unavoidable impacts) and areas where more detailed environmental analysis may be required as specific projects are proposed in the future.

## GENERAL PLAN OBJECTIVES AND THEMES


The Contra Costa County 2045 General Plan replaces the previous General Plan adopted in January 1991. While the 1991 General Plan was refreshed in 1996 and 2005, it remained rooted in planning concepts from the 1980s and earlier. The overarching objective of this comprehensive General Plan update has been the creation of a modern, visionary, and nimble policy document designed to address the opportunities and challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Because the county spans a wide geography with diverse communities that have different visions, goals, and opportunities for growth,

another important objective was to plan at a community scale, rather than relying on a one-size-fits-all policy approach throughout the county.



*Sunrise over Mount Diablo. (Hao Li)*

When it decided to update the General Plan, the Board of Supervisors directed County staff to incorporate four themes: environmental justice, community health, economic development, and sustainability. These themes are interrelated and woven throughout this General Plan. Policies and actions that relate to each theme are marked with a corresponding icon, as shown below and in the User’s Guide above.


- **Environmental Justice.**  Environmental justice policies and actions intend to reduce the unique or compounded health risks in communities that experience the highest levels of pollution and negative health outcomes, such as asthma and low birth weight babies, and the greatest social and economic disadvantages, such as poverty and housing instability. This General Plan refers to these areas as “Impacted Communities” and focuses on improving environmental





justice for the people living there by promoting meaningful community engagement and prioritizing improvements that address their needs. Environmental justice is a new topic that was not discussed in the prior General Plan. State law now requires that general plans address environmental justice and it is a matter of great concern to many county residents. While this topic is addressed throughout the General Plan, the Stronger Communities Element provides detailed information about Impacted Communities and environmental justice.

- **Community Health.**  The physical and mental health of community members is inextricably linked to where and how communities are developed. Therefore, the community health policies and actions guide planning and development decisions to provide opportunities for community members to live healthy lifestyles, including by improving peoples' ability to walk or bike between destinations, providing multi-modal transportation connections, creating opportunities for social interaction, and promoting access to outdoor recreation, healthy food, and medical facilities. The community health policy guidance additionally aims to reduce exposure of all community members to pollutants that can adversely affect their health.
- **Economic Development.**  The economic development policies and actions aim to develop the county's workforce and attract and support sustainable businesses and industries that provide living-wage jobs, invest in hiring from the local workforce, and engage with communities. Investment in diversified industries, as supported in the economic development policy guidance, promotes innovation, builds the tax base, and allows residents to work in the county where they live.

- **Sustainability.**  Sustainability means meeting the needs of today's population while leaving viable resources to meet the needs of future generations. One important part of a sustainable future is resiliency, which is the ability to withstand, recover, and learn from a disruptive experience, such as a wildfire, flood, or pandemic. The sustainability policies and actions aim to conserve resources, improve resiliency (especially to the impacts of climate change), protect the environment, reduce pollution, and enhance overall quality of life.



*Community farms promote access to healthy food, supporting environmental justice and community health goals.*

## IMPLEMENTING THE GENERAL PLAN

Long-range planning in Contra Costa County begins with adoption of the General Plan. To achieve the community's vision and objectives, decisions on development projects, capital improvements, County programs and services, and other issues related to the physical environment must be consistent with the General Plan's policies. The implementing actions identified throughout the Plan must be carried out. Finally, the County must monitor progress in achieving the major goals of the Plan, adjusting policy guidance as needed to advance those goals through the 2024-2045 planning period.



*Contra Costa County's Administrative Campus in Martinez, the County seat.*

## County Decision-Making Structure

Decisions on matters addressed in this General Plan occur at various levels of County government.

- The **Board of Supervisors** is Contra Costa County's legislative body. The Board consists of five members, each representing a geographically-defined supervisorial district. Among its many responsibilities, the Board adopts the County's annual budget, adopts General Plan amendments and rezonings, acts on appeals of County Planning Commission decisions, and authorizes construction of capital projects.
- The **County Planning Commission (CPC)** consists of seven residents appointed by the Board of Supervisors. The CPC's responsibilities include making recommendations to the Board on General Plan amendments and rezonings, hearing and deciding on development applications for projects generating 100 or more peak hour vehicular trips, and acting on appeals of County Zoning Administrator decisions. The CPC also acts on applications referred by the Zoning Administrator.
- The Contra Costa County Planning Director is the **County Zoning Administrator**. The Zoning Administrator and their appointed Deputy Zoning Administrators render decisions on most development applications (i.e., projects generating fewer than 100 peak hour vehicular trips, certain subdivisions, land use permits, development plans, variances, sign permits, lot line adjustments, etc.).
- **Department of Conservation and Development (DCD)** staff is responsible for day-to-day implementation of the General Plan, Zoning Code, and other County planning documents. DCD staff reviews development applications for compliance with County planning policies and regulations, conducts environmental reviews, and makes recommendations to decision-makers on planning matters.



## Relationship of the General Plan to Other County Planning Documents

This General Plan establishes a vision and framework for land use planning and environmental stewardship in unincorporated Contra Costa County. To facilitate General Plan implementation, the Board of Supervisors has adopted additional documents regulating planning and development.

- **Specific Plans** focus on smaller geographic areas than general plans and address topics such as land use distribution, infrastructure, development standards (e.g., building heights and setbacks, parking ratios, and landscaping requirements), financing, and plan implementation in detail. The County has adopted specific plans for all or part of Alhambra Valley, Bay Point, Contra Costa Centre, El Sobrante, Montalvin Manor, North Richmond, Northgate, Rodeo, and Shell Ridge.
- Development activities in the unincorporated county are regulated primarily through four titles of the **County Ordinance Code**: Title 7 – Building Regulations, Title 8 – Zoning, Title 9 – Subdivisions, and Title 10 – Public Works and Flood Control. These precise regulations address building construction, land uses, development standards, and design and construction of public improvements in greater detail than the General Plan.
- **Objective Design Standards (ODS)** facilitate expedited review of qualifying multiple-family residential and mixed-use development projects. The ODS address site design and layout, architecture, building massing, materials, lighting, and landscaping.
- The **Climate Action and Adaptation Plan (CAAP)** implements the General Plan’s policy guidance to adapt to changing climate conditions and reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. The CAAP addresses

behaviors, regulations, and investment decisions that directly reduce GHG emissions or promote climate resilience and lays out an implementation and monitoring program to ensure that the County reduces GHG emissions consistent with State emissions reduction targets.

State law requires consistency between the General Plan and its subordinate implementing documents. Thus, when the General Plan is amended, the County must review its other planning documents and amend them as necessary to ensure consistency is maintained. Pursuant to State law, wherever a conflict or inconsistency exists between the General Plan and its subordinate documents, the General Plan controls and shall be followed.


## General Plan Action Program

The General Plan Action Program is the mechanism to track implementation of the General Plan’s actions through 2045. The Action Program contains all actions from the General Plan, organized by Element, and provides important details for how each action will be implemented, including:

- The goal that the action implements.
- County departments and partner agencies and organizations with primary and supporting responsibility to execute the action.
- The timeframe for achieving the action.
- General cost range estimates associated with implementing the action.

The Contra Costa County DCD is responsible for maintaining the Action Program and tracking progress. The Action Program is maintained as an accompanying document to the General Plan so it can be updated as actions are accomplished without the need for a General Plan amendment. The pace of implementation of the Action Program ultimately is dependent on





the resources the County and its partners have available and must remain consistent with the County's long-term financial plans, as reflected in its annual budget.

## Assessing Progress Toward Goals

Every five years over the lifetime of the General Plan, the County will assess progress in achieving its major goals through a review of the performance measures listed at the end of each General Plan Element. Based on these reviews, the County will consider whether changes are needed to the policy framework or implementation approach to improve performance. The County will present this five-year review in a clear, concise report to the CPC and Board of Supervisors and post the report on the County's website.

## Amending the General Plan

The General Plan is not a static document; it is intended to be as dynamic as needed by the Contra Costa County community. Over time, the County will amend portions of the General Plan in response to new legislation, evolving community priorities and values, changes in the county's physical or economic conditions, and proposed development. It is also inevitable that refinements will be necessary to improve progress towards achieving the major goals of the General Plan.

General Plan amendments (GPAs) can be initiated by the County or requested by private entities. When the County receives a request for a GPA from a private entity, staff will forward the request to the Board of Supervisors with a recommendation on whether to consider the request further. If the Board authorizes the GPA process to proceed, staff will collect the required application materials and fees and prepare an environmental

evaluation of the proposal as required under CEQA. After the environmental documentation is prepared, staff will submit a report to the CPC. The report will include an analysis of the request, a recommendation to approve or deny, and findings to support the recommendation. The CPC will then conduct a public hearing and forward a recommendation to the Board of Supervisors, which will conduct another hearing and render a decision. The process is similar for County-initiated GPAs.

To amend the General Plan, the Board of Supervisors must determine that the proposed GPA satisfies the following findings:

- (a) That adoption of the proposed General Plan amendment is in the public interest, as required under Government Code Section 65359(a).
- (b) That adoption of the proposed General Plan amendment will not exceed the annual limit on General Plan amendments specified in Government Code Section 65358(b).
- (c) That upon adoption of the proposed General Plan amendment, the General Plan will remain internally consistent and compatible, as required under Government Code Section 65300.5(a).
- (d) That adoption of the proposed General Plan amendment will not violate the provisions of the 65/35 Land Preservation Standard or Urban Limit Line, as outlined in Measure L-2006.
- (e) That adoption of the proposed General Plan amendment is compliant with the provisions of Measure J-2004, the Contra Costa Growth Management Program, and related Contra Costa Transportation Authority resolutions.



- (f) That adoption of the proposed General Plan amendment will not impede attainment of the County's goals related to environmental justice, community health, economic development, and sustainability.

If these findings can be satisfied, then the Board will adopt a resolution approving the GPA.