

# SHAPING THE COUNTY'S FUTURE

June 27, 2006

## Summary

All Sonoma County residents should take a look at this map. Expert chart readers will probably recognize it as a map of Sonoma County. But what are the colors all about? Try as hard as you can, the index in this picture is too small to decipher. However, the title of the map as listed just



Sonoma County Land Use Plan Map  
Courtesy of PRMD

above “Sonoma County” reads **Land Use Plan Map**. This map represents an image of the policies of the **Land Use Element** which provides the distribution, location and extent of uses of Sonoma County land for housing, business, industry, open space, agriculture, natural resources, recreation and enjoyment of scenic beauty, education, public buildings and grounds, solid and liquid waste disposal facilities, and other uses. Think about this map as a Land Use Plan for our county for the next decade or two.

The Land Use Element is one of ten elements contained in the **Sonoma County General Plan**. The General Plan is a policy document that identifies what can be done with Sonoma County land. “The Plan”, as it is often referred to, designates Open Space and Resource Conservation tracts. It also deals with Traffic Circulation and many other county assets such as Recreation, Public Facilities, Public Safety and more.

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General Plans are living documents, subject to State legislation, ever changing ergonomic and economic factors, and, last but not least, public desires and preferences. Sonoma County residents are encouraged to become familiar with the General Plan, and to participate in the update and decision making process for the benefit of the community. The review of the proposed General Plan amendments will give the reader a better understanding of Sonoma County government at work.

California Government Code, Section 65300 mandates that each planning agency shall prepare, and adopt a comprehensive, long-term General Plan for the physical development of the County or City. Each general plan must include seven required Elements: **LAND USE, CIRCULATION, HOUSING, CONSERVATION, OPEN SPACE, NOISE, AND SAFETY**. The Government Code provides for the opportunity to add locally important elements at the discretion of the local authority. )<sup>1</sup>

Sonoma County started a land use planning process as far back as 1978. A more formalized process was implemented in the late eighties, following the State mandate for every county to have a General Plan.

After three and a half years of work, and over two years of public hearings, a General Plan was adopted in 1989, and was designed to expire after 15 years, i.e. in 2004. Two appointed citizens committees participated in the development of the '89 Plan. Extensive public involvement through workshops and public hearings resulted in a Plan that balances the many diverse and sometimes-competing community interests.



Highway 101 North of Santa Rosa  
Courtesy of Kurt Bauer

The current Sonoma County General Plan includes all seven mandatory elements, plus three additional ones: **AGRICULTURAL RESOURCES, AIR TRANSPORTATION, PUBLIC FACILITIES AND SERVICES**. These Elements were added because of their special importance for the county. )<sup>2</sup>

The General Plan is a policy document, not an implementation tool. The Board of Supervisors is in overall charge of the General Plan and provides input and oversight. General Plan development responsibility and operational authority are delegated to the Permit & Resource Management Department (PRMD) of Sonoma County. PRMD was charged with the development of General Plan 1989, and subsequent updates.

Leading up to General Plan 1989, there were over 1,200 individual property owner requests to amend the land use map, which at that time was rather general in nature. Since the adoption of General Plan 1989 in March 1989, there have been 173 General Plan amendments. This is a

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significant reduction in applications, which, to a large degree, can be attributed to the parcel-specific identification and designation of properties. )<sup>3</sup>

It should be noted here, that the Housing Element is subject to stringent rules determined by the State Department of Housing and Community Development. The County failed to meet these State mandates with updates of the Housing Element performed in 1992 and 1996. In 1998 the County was sued over the adequacy of the Element by a consortium of housing advocacy groups. The Court, in December 2000, found the Element inadequate in four specific areas and directed the County to adopt a new Element by August 2001. A moratorium on approval of new



Housing Construction Site  
Courtesy of Kurt Bauer

subdivisions and rezoning was imposed on properties within Urban Service Areas that are larger than one acre until such time that the Court determines that the Element has complied with its order. A full-scale update of the Housing Element is in progress.

Twelve years after General Plan 1989 was adopted, an update process was initiated with a status report on the 1989 Plan in 2001. Evaluation of Plan performance had to include significant events that affect land use and development. Evaluation criteria were used to assess nine general goals set forth in the Land Use Element. These goals are:

- Accommodation of growth in a manner consistent with environmental constraints, high quality of life, and public service capacities
- Location of growth in the cities and unincorporated communities with urban services
- Maintaining compact city and community boundaries

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- Phased growth with the availability of services
- Maintaining largely open or natural character of open space areas between cities and communities
- Providing a diversity of residential development types and densities
- Avoiding unnecessary public exposure to environmental hazards and limiting development in sensitive areas
- Protect agricultural land and operations
- Assuring that land uses are consistent with preservation of biotic resources and scenic features.

PRMD concluded that based upon the above analyses, a full-scale reconstruction of the plan would not be necessary.

This investigation was focused to look into the General Plan development and update process,



rather than the content and performance of individual Plan Elements. Because of the daunting size of the General Plan, the grand jury concentrated on the Land Use Element for this review. This element incorporates land use policies of most other elements and it is safe to anticipate that the processes used for other Plan Elements are identical to the land use update approach. Emphasis of the review was the visibility of the for the General Plan update activity for the public at large, and the opportunity for all residents of Sonoma County to become involved in the Plan update process.

A Gift of Nature  
Courtesy Kurt Bauer

Individual tasks of the General Plan update are well documented and accessible to the general public via the PRDM Web site; however, it is almost impossible for an uninitiated party to know what they should be looking for, and at what location on the web it might be found.

A General Plan update may cover several years of activity, segmented into a number of major steps and numerous, sometimes sequential, tasks. Interwoven are milestones and decisions points, before work on a next phase can begin. The grand jury, even with access to staff and management personnel, was not able to discover a document or chart containing all update phases, steps, and tasks, as well as their sequence and timing. The lack of such a document makes it extremely difficult for a layperson to understand and follow the process.

The Permit & Resource Management Department prepared an Update Work Plan and budget for review and approval by the Board of Supervisors in March 2001. The Board of Supervisors

approved the work plan and appointed a Citizens Advisory Committee (CAC) composed of 15 citizen volunteers, three from each supervisorial district. The Committee met from September 2001 through February 2006 to conduct well over 40 community meetings in locations throughout the County to review and comment on draft sections as created by PRMD staff. As a last task, the CAC reviewed a draft for an Environmental Impact Report (EIR) that addresses proposed changes to the 2020 General Plan Elements.

The Environmental Impact Report draft will be reviewed in approximately ten public hearings conducted by the Planning Commission. The final EIR and General Plan Draft will then go to the Board of Supervisors for review and approval by the end of 2006.

Individual General Plan update segments appear sound, well documented, and professionally executed. A formal, documented approach including and connecting each step would be helpful to optimize understanding and input by the general public.

Sources:

- )<sup>1</sup> California Government Code Section 65300
- )<sup>2</sup> PRMD General Plan Elements, [http://www.Sonoma-county.org/prmd/General\\_Plan2020/elements.html](http://www.Sonoma-county.org/prmd/General_Plan2020/elements.html)
- )<sup>3</sup> PRMD General Plan Elements, [http://www.Sonoma-county.org/prmd/General\\_Plan2020/status.html](http://www.Sonoma-county.org/prmd/General_Plan2020/status.html)

### **Reason for Investigation**

A general review of current, major County activities revealed work in progress at the Permit & Resource Management Department on an update to the 1989 General Plan which had expired at the end of 2004. This update will result in General Plan 2020, which sets Sonoma County land use policy for the next 15 to 20 years. Timely review of the methodology of the update process will generate public interest and encourage input from a wide variety of community members to the Plan update.

A County General Plan is a daunting project described in, and supported by a great number of very voluminous documents. Though in the public domain, it might be difficult for any one individual, not directly involved with the General Plan process, to readily find and study these documents. Therefore, plan review integrity and visibility for the community was the primary driver of this investigation.

### **Background**

Because of the great complexity of the General Plan, it would have been impossible to study each one of the ten Elements in detail. The Grand Jury therefore decided to concentrate on the General Plan update process itself through one of the more important Elements, the Land Use Element. It was expected that a thorough evaluation of the update process for this Element would allow extrapolation of findings to the overall update process.

The Land Use Element deals with the governance of county lands and compiles the requirements of all elements in one place. Having evolved into a parcel-specific map, interested parties can look at this map and assess which restrictions, easements, or ordinances might be attached to a particular property. Because of its great importance for the future use of County lands, it was deemed important to understand the background for land use criteria, how they were established, and how they are implemented. Who participates in the development of land use details, who provides input, where are suggestions or requests for changes collected, evaluated, and adjudicated, and who gives the final stamp of approval for the next 15 years, the life of General Plan 2020.

### **Investigative Procedures**

Preliminary examination of relevant documents and responses to interview questions suggested a structured investigative approach based around the following points:

- Were changes in Federal, State, and local legal requirements/parameters for the County General Plan issued? If so, were they incorporated into the General Plan 2020?
- Are the additional elements adopted for General Plan 1989 still valid for General Plan 2020?
- Was the performance of General Plan 1989 measured and used as a factor for the development of General Plan 2020?
- Was the scope of the General Plan 2020 update work plan and budget request reasonable?
- Does the update work plan proceed on a logical approach?
- Does the update work plan make use of the most beneficial resources?
- Are the time lines and milestones for individual update segments realistic and achievable?
- Is public access and visibility to the update process optimized?

In pursuit of these goals, one or more interviews were conducted with the following functionalities:

- Director, (Sonoma County) Permit and Resource Management Department [PRMD]
- Comprehensive Planning Manager, PRMD
- Planner III, PRMD
- City Manager, City of Cloverdale
- Community Development Director, City of Cloverdale
- Director, Advance Planning and Public Policy, City of Santa Rosa
- Chairman, Citizens' Advisory Committee, Sonoma County General Plan Update 2020
- Chairman, Sonoma County Planning Commission
- Chairman, Sonoma County Board of Supervisors

Grand jury members attended relevant public meetings or hearings:

- Citizens' Advisory Committee – 2/16/2006: Review of Draft Environmental Impact Report
- Planning Commission – 2/28/2006: Public Hearing on Draft Environmental Impact Report
- Planning Commission – 3/07/2006: Workshop on Draft General Plan 2020
- Planning Commission – 3/17/2006: Close of Draft EIR Public Review Period

A majority of the documents reviewed and listed below are residing on the PRMD website, and can be accessed at <http://www.sonoma-county.org/prmd/>

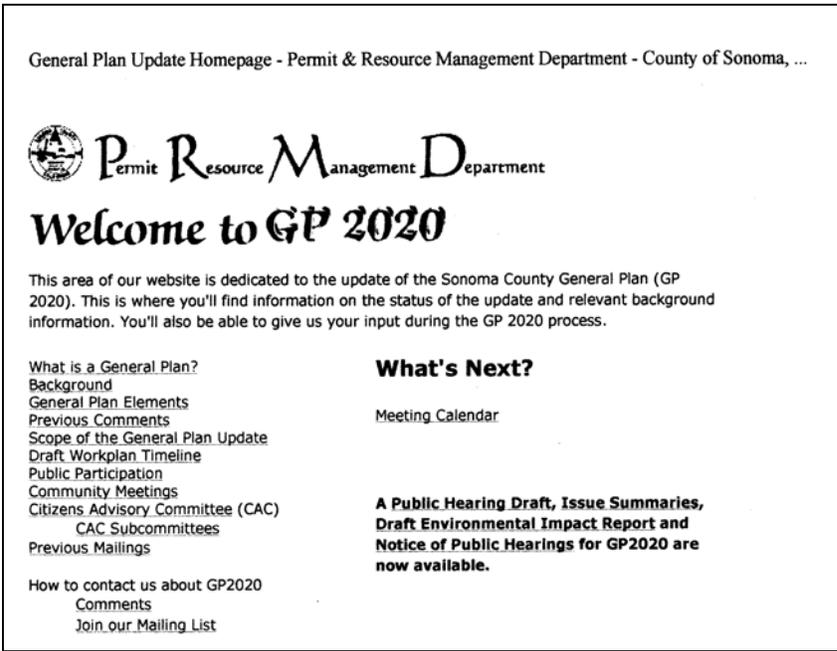
- Index to the 1989 Sonoma County General Plan
- General Plan 2020 Sonoma County General Plan Update, Status Report on the 1989 General Plan
- PRMD March 23, 2001 Memo to Board of Supervisors: Draft Work Program – General Plan Update
- General Plan Update (General Plan 2020) Issues
- Sonoma County General Plan Update – Draft Work Program Timeline
- Sonoma County General Plan 2020 – Draft Land Use Element
- What is a General Plan
- General Plan Elements
- Charter of the (General Plan 2020) Citizens' Advisory Committee
- PRMD Planning Commission – Purpose and Composition

## Findings

As a first task in the grand jury investigation, an effort was made to identify major General Plan update process components and the participants and/or contributors to those process steps. Finding the Sonoma County Web Site as a starting point was no problem. A list of County offices and links did not include "General Plan". Neither did the drop-down menus "Find it FAST", or "Find a Department or Agency". Looking for the General Plan in a "Search" box produced links to documents dealing with the General Plan. At the time this report was written, there were 1,042 Plan-related documents identified.

Some of the document titles suggested two possible leads in the search for Plan related entities. Frequently referenced was the PERMIT & RESOURCE MANAGEMENT DEPARTMENT. The second reference was the "CAC", short for the CITIZENS' ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON GENERAL PLAN UPDATE. The Permit & Resource Department website was accessed using the County web site and there, finally, was the link to the General Plan Update web site.

It became apparent very early in our work, that most of the County staff involved in General Plan activities had been in their positions for a long time. They had contributed to General Plan 1989, and were thoroughly familiar with all details that would have to be covered to develop the General Plan 2020. In a way, though, this intimate and personal knowledge of the process by staff makes it more difficult for them to communicate these activities in detail to the public. W public.ritten documentation of all review phases and parties involved was not provided, and may not have been developed.



General Plan Update Homepage - Permit & Resource Management Department - County of Sonoma, ...

 Permit Resource Management Department

## Welcome to GP 2020

This area of our website is dedicated to the update of the Sonoma County General Plan (GP 2020). This is where you'll find information on the status of the update and relevant background information. You'll also be able to give us your input during the GP 2020 process.

<b>What is a General Plan?</b> Background General Plan Elements Previous Comments Scope of the General Plan Update Draft Workplan Timeline Public Participation Community Meetings Citizens Advisory Committee (CAC) CAC Subcommittees Previous Mailings	<b>What's Next?</b> <a href="#">Meeting Calendar</a>
<b>How to contact us about GP2020</b> Comments <a href="#">Join our Mailing List</a>	<b>A Public Hearing Draft, Issue Summaries, Draft Environmental Impact Report and Notice of Public Hearings for GP2020 are now available.</b>

PRMD Web Site Home Page  
Courtesy PRMD Website

Detailed findings are as follows:

- F1. State and Federal mandates are issued periodically and incorporated in General Plan updates as fast as feasible. The Housing Element is governed by mandate of the State Department of Housing and Community Development. New, or modified requirements are issued frequently, asking for an almost annual update of this element. Main thrust is the availability of affordable housing.
- F2. The three additional elements included in General Plan '89 were found to be valid and useful for the County. They will be continued under General Plan 2020.
- F3. The General Plan is viewed more as a policy document, a guideline, for the Elements covered by it. There are few, if any, measurable goals or standards. An evaluation of

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- the General Plan performance is, therefore, more subjective than based on tangible data.
- F4. The work plan and budget developed by staff for the update and development of General Plan 2020 was adequate in scope and fiscally sound. It was approved as submitted by the Board of Supervisors.
- F5. The logic and phasing of the update process follow a sensible path and incorporate all possible resources at the disposal of the County. Especially the use of a Citizens' Advisory Committee to solicit public input is commendable.
- F6. Timelines and milestones are reasonable and generally met. Since timing is well beyond the General Plan 1989 expiration, and finalization of General Plan 2020 will not happen before the end of 2006, the update process and time schedule should be reviewed.
- F7. The opportunity for input by the general public is provided and publicized through mailings, the press, and word of mouth. Representatives of interest groups and citizens groups attend most of the meetings, both pursuing a special amendment rather than a general policy.
- F8. About 35,000 property owners potentially affected by changes in the General Plan 2020 were invited to a public hearing on the Draft EIR. The notice did not identify why a property could be affected, causing an overflow crowd to show up for the hearing at a venue with limited occupancy. Many citizens were turned away, prompting a very negative reaction in the press. (See Sonoma West Times and News, Volume 117, No. 20)
- F9. Sonoma County has failed to meet mandated housing requirements since 1992. Repeated attempts to satisfy State requirements were not successful, resulting in a zoning moratorium. The County anticipates succeeding in meeting State Housing mandates with General Plan 2020.
- F10. Land Use policies for County land bordering property in a City's area of influence occasionally create controversy. Every effort is made by both authorities to minimize undue inconvenience to the property owner. There is no formal approach, though, to address these issues.
- F11. Resolution of General Plan conflicts in adjacent jurisdictions is handled on a case-by-case basis and is usually resolved successfully. There is no formal approach to address these issues.
- F12. The 15 members of the Citizens' Advisory Committee are serving as volunteers without compensation or mileage reimbursement. In the case of the CAC 2020, members served for almost 70 months and conducted/attended over 40 meetings in different locations.
- F13. From the documents reviewed, the General Plan update process was officially launched in fall of 2001. The General Plan 2020 will not be ready for review by the Board of Supervisors before the end of 2006, two years after the expiration of General Plan 1989.

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- F14. The review process by the Citizens' Advisory Committee was expected to take about one year but lasted almost five years.
- F15. Staff informed the grand jury, that there is no documented "road map" for the General Plan update process. Staff is familiar with what needs to be done and proceeds accordingly.
- F16. State mandate requires that the Housing Element status be reported on annually. A similar, periodic General Plan implementation status report to the Board of Supervisors and the public is not prepared.
- F17. The active involvement and General Plan oversight function by members of the Board of Supervisors appears to be rather limited, dealing mostly with manpower and budget issues. The planning staffs address implementation and fulfillment issues.

### **Conclusions**

Because of the enormous complexity of the General Plan update process only major process steps could be evaluated for their integrity, sequencing, and timing. Some major phases emerge in the General Plan review. They include among others:

- Recognition of new State and Federal legislative requirements for some Plan Elements
- Economic and ergonomic changes
- An evaluation of the previous plan status
- Development of an update work plan and budget
- Presentation of plan and budget for review/approval by the Board of Supervisors
- Development of revised plan Elements, in cooperation with the Citizens' Advisory Board
- Analyses of the environmental impact of revised policies
- Planning Commission Review, and finally,
- Presentation of the Plan 2020 to the Board of Supervisors.

Each one of these major steps is well documented, backed up by relevant statistical data, and satisfactorily implemented. Because of the duration of this process over several years, it is not always easy to retain public interest and participation. Once final drafts of the Environmental Impact Report and the General Plan 2020 were presented in open hearings, public interest became reinvigorated as demonstrated on the occasion of the Planning Commission meetings in February and March of this year.

It would be helpful for the public as well as other interested parties, if there were a general overview of all significant update phases and milestones. Such documents, in easy to understand format, would assist in anticipating relevant events and milestones of the update process. It would also serve as a guide for staff new to the process, should current staff be re-assigned or retire.

Communication with the general public and with property owners affected by proposed changes has to be conducted in clear language and terms understood by laypersons. Public meetings must be identified as to subjects covered, and conducted in adequate facilities.

### **Commendations**

The grand jury would like to thank all those who assisted in providing valuable information towards this report. PRMD management and staff were very cooperative, professional and skilled in their fields.

### **Recommendations**

The Sonoma County General Plan is a living document. Its policies and objectives are subject to ever changing outside influences that cannot always be predicted for a 15-year period. The grand jury, therefore, recommends a fluid update process, that allows for fast reaction to major shifts in population patterns, business cycles, and land use needs.

Proposed changes in reaction to such factors must be presented to the public and the Board of Supervisors in an easy to understand format, illustrating the change factor and responding solution in a timely fashion. These mid-course corrections make a periodic review of the General Plan a less daunting, time and resource-consuming task.

The Board of Supervisors must insist on regular status reports on General Plan performance through hearings and documentation with access by the public.

Detailed recommendations are:

The Permit and Resource Management Department should:

- R1. Formalize and document the Sonoma County General Plan update process in an electronic or hard copy document or flow-chart, with easy access by the public.
- R2. Create a link on the Sonoma County Home Page that leads the visitor directly to the General Plan site, avoiding the need to navigate through the PRMD home page
- R3. Adopt the General Plan implementation tracking mechanism approved by the Citizens Advisory Committee in their August 19, 2004 meeting.
- R4. Negotiate with affected Cities and Municipalities to establish and implement a formal process to coordinate mutually relevant issues such as traffic, zoning of adjacent properties, etc.
- R5. Include a mileage consideration for all General Plan-related Committee members in future General Plan-related budget requests.
- R6. Develop and implement a periodic General Plan update report for review by the Board of Supervisors.
- R7. Improve public notices about meetings on the General Plan to specifically state the topic and only invite affected property owners to avoid overcrowding.
- R8. Evaluate pre-meeting feedback to hearing notices (e-mails, phone calls, personal visits) and provide meeting facilities to safely accommodate participants.

### **Required Responses to Findings**

Chairman, Board of Supervisors

F3, F5, F6, F8, F9, F11, F12, F13, F14, F15, F16

Director, (Sonoma County) Permit and Resource Management Department [PRMD

F6, F8, F9, F10, F11, F12, F13, F14, F15, F16, F17

### **Requested Responses to Recommendations**

None are requested

**Required Responses to Recommendations**

Chairman, Board of Supervisors

R1, R3, R4, R5, R6,

Director, (Sonoma County) Permit and Resource Management Department (PRMD)

R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R6, R7, R8