

ABOUT GENERAL PLAN AMENDMENTS

This explains 1) what a "general plan amendment" is, 2) how general plan amendments fit into our efforts to shape our surroundings, and 3) how you can participate in the decision-making process.

What is a "General Plan Amendment?"

Much as an architect draws up plans to build a house, land use planners prepare a document called a "general plan" to guide overall building activities in a community. Our community's general plan says what kinds of land uses can go where.

From time to time, someone will propose changes to our general plan. These changes are called "general plan amendments." Sometimes the proposal to change comes from someone who wants to do something different from what the general plan says is okay. Other times, amendments reflect changes in our views of what best serves our community.

About the General Plan

The general plan is a very important document. Our general plan represents our long-term vision for land uses. It guides all land use decisions in our community and includes goals, policies and maps to guide decisions. State law says every general plan must include seven parts or elements:

- Land Use
- Circulation
- Housing
- Conservation
- Open Space
- Noise
- Safety

The plan may also include other elements, depending on our community's needs and priorities.

The policies in a general plan must be consistent with one another. The general plan also guides other land use policies (for example, zoning) in our community.

Decision-Making Process

Decision-makers want to hear from those who have opinions or information about whether to approve a general plan amendment. If you want to share your thoughts, see "Preparing for Public Hearings" on the back of this sheet.

To Learn More

- *California Planning Guide: An Introduction to Planning in California* (Office of Planning and Research, December 2005), available at www.opr.ca.gov/planning/PDFs/California_Planning_Guide_2005.pdf
- *The Planning Commissioner's Handbook*, League of California Cities, 2005, Chapter 4: The Planning Framework (www.ca-ilg.org/pch4)
- Government Code Section 65350 and following (accessible from www.leginfo.ca.gov/calaw)
- Solano Press (www.solano.com) has a number of helpful planning publications available for purchase

Key Questions

- Does the proposed amendment reflect our views on which land uses should go where?
- Would a change violate other policies in the general plan?
- Is changing the rules fair? How would a change affect others who have followed the rules?
- How will the change affect public services and facilities (for example, roads, schools, sewers, water systems, and police and fire services)?
- Is the change consistent with land use planning and other laws?

PREPARING FOR PUBLIC HEARINGS

Opportunities for Input: Meetings and Letters

There are a number of ways to share your views with decision-makers. One is to participate in public hearings or other kinds of gatherings during which public input is sought. Another is to send letters and other written materials in advance of a meeting.

General Communications Tips

- Focus Your Message

You may have lots of concerns. See if they can be grouped into categories or themes. Choose two or three of your most important themes or concerns to emphasize. Otherwise, you risk overloading your listeners and possibly diminishing your effectiveness. It's not how much you say, it's how well you say it.

Start with your basic position (for example, "I support the proposed specific plan"). Then explain your connection to the issue (for example, "I live in the neighborhood covered by the plan"). Then explain the reasons for your position. It can be persuasive to think about the values underlying these reasons. ("I believe the plan fairly balances the need for affordable housing with the need for urban open space.") Tie your position to larger community interests. ("For our businesses to thrive, we need workforce housing.")

- Organize Supporting Materials

You may have written materials you want to share with decision-makers. Make sure that you have at least enough copies for each member of the decision-making body plus one for staff. If you have a lot of documentation, think about submitting it in advance. A page explaining what a larger packet contains can be helpful.

To Participate in a Meeting

- Get the Agenda and Other Information

The meeting agenda explains what issues are up for discussion and provides other useful information. Agendas usually are prepared three days (72 hours) in advance of a meeting. Many agencies post agendas on their websites. Another option is to ask that an agenda be sent to you. You can also pick up a copy. Staff reports are another helpful source of information.

A Note about Civility

Your goal is to persuade decision-makers to see the issue your way. Focus on the merits of your position. Even if you disagree about what's best for the community in this situation, it doesn't mean someone is a bad person. Questioning others' motives or intelligence, being hostile, engaging in name-calling or making threats will not reflect well on you or the position you are urging.

No matter how passionate you are about an issue, conduct yourself in a way that will add to your credibility and standing as a thoughtful member of your community.

About Public Hearings

A public hearing is a relatively formal proceeding. A typical one involves:

- A report to decision-makers, given by a staff member or consultant who has been working on the item;
- A statement by the project applicant or proponent (the person asking for the decision); and
- Statements from members of the public who may 1) support the proposed action, 2) have concerns that they would like decision-makers to address, and 3) oppose the action under any circumstances.

The decision-making body will then decide what to do by voting. If it needs more time to get more information or think about the issues raised at the hearing, the body may postpone a decision until another meeting.

Staff may be able to tell you at what point public input will be sought at the meeting and what you need to do to be recognized to speak. Be prepared to wait until the item you are interested in is called.

- Indicate You Want to Speak

The presiding official will generally ask for people who want to speak to come forward. Some agencies use a speakers list to help the presiding official manage the meeting better (for example, if lots of people want to speak, there may be time limits for each speaker).

- Make Smart Use of Your Time

Listen carefully to what others say. Try to find common interests and values. Try to not repeat their comments (although you may want say if you agree what someone else said). If you are part of a group, coordinate your remarks to avoid repeating each other.

- Be Prepared for Questions

Answer as best as you can. It's okay to say that you don't know or that a given question would be a good one to research.