

MEMORANDUM

DATE January 3, 2018
TO Los Banos City Council and Planning Commission
FROM Joanna Jansen and Carey Stone
SUBJECT Los Banos General Plan Update - City Council/Planning Commission Study Session

The purpose of this memorandum is to help the City Council and Planning Commission prepare for the January 10, 2018 Study Session. The memorandum provides a brief project overview; defines the role of the General Plan in City government; identifies key issues for the General Plan Update; describes staff identified General Plan fixes; and outlines the outreach process for the project. The memorandum concludes with a list of questions for the Council and Planning Commission to consider in advance of the January 10 discussion.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

The City of Los Banos is initiating an update of its 2009 General Plan. While the 2009 General Plan is not quite yet 10 years old, those years have seen significant economic, political, and technological changes, with more on the horizon. The General Plan Update will position Los Banos to respond to those changes and gear up for the future.

The General Plan Update will focus on the City's most important issues: economic development, growth management, Downtown, agricultural mitigation, and water supply. In addition, the General Plan will fulfill recent State required updates that have been enacted since the last update.

In addition, to take concrete steps to implement the General Plan, the project will also include three separate plans that respond to some of the City's key issues: an Economic Development Strategy, a Business Park Master Plan, and a Downtown Strategic Plan. Our primary focus at the January 10 study session will be the General Plan, but many of the big-picture topics we will discuss will have implications for other implementing plans as well.

When this project is complete, in the spring of 2020, the City will have a set of action plans to help focus and guide future work for years to come.

WHAT IS A GENERAL PLAN?

California State law requires every county and city to adopt a General Plan. The General Plan outlines the City's goals for physical growth, conservation, and community life, and contains the policies and actions necessary to achieve those goals. The General Plan is the foundation of all local land use decisions about zoning, permitted development, and allowable activities.

The General Plan is the “constitution” of City government; its regulatory power rests in its integrity and its clarity in expressing shared values. Just as with the United States Constitution, amendments should ideally be rare, extremely carefully considered, and the result of a strong community consensus.

Typically, a General Plan begins with a Vision Statement and then establishes specific goals and policies related to a range of civic issues. These issues are organized into a series of topical “Elements” or chapters of the General Plan. The following Elements are required by State law: Land Use, Circulation, Housing, Conservation, Open Space, Noise, Safety, Environmental Justice, and Air Quality. These Elements can be combined or presented in any order that best fits the community. A General Plan may include an unlimited number of optional elements and the existing General Plan includes the following optional elements: Economic Development and Public Facilities and Utilities.

The Los Banos General Plan addresses all State requirements and organizes the General Plan in its own unique format as described below. The General Plan Update will work from the existing General Plan to update each of these Elements.

- **Introduction:** describes the purpose of the General Plan, the planning boundaries, key themes, allowed development, and how the document is organized. It includes this vision statement of Los Banos as: *“a vibrant, safe, and attractive city with community character and an improved economy, new job opportunities, affordable housing, improved public services and facilities, an excellent circulation system, and a superb quality of life.”*
- **Economic Development Element:** describes the economic vision and addresses the economic and fiscal goals of the city.
- **Land Use Element:** addresses growth management, residential and non-residential land use, and community character.
- **Circulation Element:** identifies the planned circulation network for all modes of transportation, including cars, bikes, pedestrians, transit, and goods movement.
- **Parks, Open Space, and Resources Element:** plans for open space; agriculture, biological, water, mineral, and cultural resources; and air quality.
- **Noise Element:** addresses noise sources within the community and identifies strategies to mitigate potential impacts.
- **Safety Element:** addresses hazards associated with seismicity, soil hazards, erosion, flooding, wildfires, and exposure to hazardous materials; plans for fire and police service; and plans for emergency prevention and response.
- **Public Facilities and Utilities Element:** addresses schools, community facilities, water, wastewater, and solid waste.
- **Housing Element:** identifies current and future housing needs and proposed actions to facilitate the provision of housing to meet those needs at all income levels.

KEY ISSUES FOR THE GENERAL PLAN UPDATE

Based on discussions with City staff, we understand the General Plan must address the following key issues. For each issue, the update process will include technical research and analysis, community input, close coordination with staff, and multiple check-ins with decision-makers:

- **Economic Development:**
 - **Job Growth.** More than half of Los Banos' workforce commute outside of Merced County for their jobs, with a majority of these residents commuting an hour or more to their workplace. The General Plan Update, along with a concurrent Economic Development Strategy, will study how to increase the number of jobs that match the skills of the local workforce to not only improve the quality of life of residents, but to also help build community and decrease some of the environmental impacts associated with commuting.
 - **Business Park Master Plan.** The existing General Plan created a new land use "Employment Park," occupying large amounts of acreage southwest of the planning area, near Merced Community College, and at the Los Banos Municipal Airport site. The General Plan Update will identify key issues and General Plan policies and actions that should be updated. This analysis will reflect recent and ongoing discussions and studies conducted for relocation of the Los Banos Municipal Airport (described below) and development of the Los Banos Agricultural and Industrial Business Logistics Center. This process could also be a venue for the City to explore possible future job-generating uses at the I-5/152 interchange.
 - **Airport Relocation.** The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) regulates the types and height of land uses within a four-mile radius of the Los Banos Airport. These restrictions are limiting the City's ability to expand to the west and to capitalize on its proximity to the I-5 corridor. The General Plan Update will explore the pros and cons of relocating the airport .
- **Growth Management/Annexation Policy.** Ensuring high quality development that can be adequately served by public services and infrastructure is a top priority for the City. The General Plan Update will assess whether the City's existing growth management policies are achieving the desired type and amount of residential development and, if not, identify policies and actions to realize the type of development envisioned by the community. The General Plan Update will also consider future steps the City will need to consider once all the vacant land within the existing City limits is entitled.
- **Downtown.** The General Plan Update will study how to support the Downtown as the heart of the community, capitalizing on its central location, historic charm, and walkable street network to bring new economic development to the area.
- **School Sites/Coordinating on Future Capacity.** The City will work with the Los Banos Unified School District to establish a more formal process for sharing information about future

development and school site planning, and to contribute to a common goal of excellent local schools.

- **Agricultural Mitigation.** While no incorporated city within Merced County has an agricultural mitigation policy in place, the Merced County Farm Bureau has signaled its desire for Los Banos to establish a 1:1 agricultural mitigation policy. The General Plan Update will need to explore this issue and identify strategies to protect agricultural resources without putting an undue disadvantage on the City's ability to compete within the regional economic market.
- **Water Supply.** Ensuring existing and future development will have adequate water supply will be an important issue to be addressed by the General Plan Update.
- **Required Legislative and Consistency Updates.** Since the 2009 adoption of the current General Plan, the State has enacted new legislation on a variety of topics that will need to be addressed in the General Plan Update. These topics include complete streets, disadvantaged unincorporated communities, climate change, 2030 greenhouse gas targets, and public health.

STAFF IDENTIFIED GENERAL PLAN FIXES

In addition to the overarching key issues the General Plan Update will address, City staff have identified the following areas that need attention:

- Update the existing conditions information to reflect present-day conditions.
- Show future public facilities like fire stations on the land use map to reserve appropriate locations for public services.
- Add clarity on the circulation diagram and roadway standards to better define north/south and east/west access routes.
- Add more actionable language and specificity to make it easier for City staff to implement the document.
- Add historic preservation policies and actions to safeguard the city's cultural resources.

PROJECT OUTREACH

As mentioned above, the General Plan outcomes should reflect the community's values and vision for the City's future. To ensure that the General Plan Update appropriately addresses the City's key issues, City staff and PlaceWorks will conduct the following public outreach:

- **Community Event.** The City will host a booth at a popular Los Banos community event, such as the May Day Fair, to engage the community about the General Plan Update process. At the booth, we will introduce community members to the General Plan Update project, confirm with community members whether the existing General Plan vision is still valid, and gather information regarding the community's desires for the future of Los Banos and issues to be addressed in the General Plan and implementation tasks.

- **Online Engagement.** PlaceWorks will utilize its proprietary digital tools to engage community members. We will establish an online comment and discussion forum that can be customized a variety of ways, such as map-based and prioritization exercises that enable residents to participate in the General Plan Update process whenever it is convenient for them. The online engagement strategy could include online surveys that provide opportunities for the community to weigh in on priorities and comment on citywide issues, as well as various digital tools to assist in outreach leading up to, during, and following the community event.
- **Economic Development Advisory Committee.** The City and Bay Area Economics will meet with the Economic Development Advisory Committee at least three times throughout the Economic Development Strategy process to brainstorm strategies to support growth in the local economy and to solicit feedback on work products such as the Economic Development Element.
- **Regular Check-ins with City Council and Planning Commission.** The City will hold regular check-ins with the City Council and Planning Commission at major project milestones and key decision points.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Prior to the January 10, 2018 City Council/Planning Commission Study Session, City Council members and Planning Commissioners should review the following questions and formulate initial responses:

- What current conditions and expected future trends do you see as having the greatest impact on Los Banos' future? (For example: coordination with Merced County, airport relocation, automated vehicles, changes in brick and mortar retail)
- What environmental conditions or issues should we be sure that the EIR addresses? (For example: water supply, agricultural resources, traffic and transportation, biological resources, air quality)
- What is your vision for future job growth in Los Banos? (For example: attracting large employers, retaining and expanding small businesses, developing the local labor force)
- What is your vision for future residential growth in Los Banos? Do you have initial thoughts on ways of managing future growth and considering future annexations once existing land within the City limits is entitled? (For example: setting high standards for housing quality and design, limiting or managing the number of homes approved, establishing standards for allowing annexation)
- What policies and City actions would best support a vibrant Downtown ?(For example: encouraging mixed use development, improving infrastructure, supporting additional cultural events downtown)
- What policies and City actions would best support employment park growth? (For example: proximity to I-5, establishing adequate infrastructure)
- Any other comments on the key issues identified above?