

INTRODUCTION



INTRODUCTION TO THE GENERAL PLAN

Today, Los Altos is a community grounded in the unique history of its agricultural and railroad culture, yet it is also a community of the 21st century that is prepared to face the challenges ahead. To meet these challenges, the General Plan for Los Altos is the primary source of long-range planning and policy direction that will be used to guide growth and preserve the quality of life within the community.

Since the last comprehensive update of the General Plan in 1987, there have been relatively minor changes to the established community of Los Altos, but many significant changes to the surrounding region. According to the previous General Plan, the population of Los Altos in 1987 was 27,189 persons. Census data for 2000 shows Los Altos with a population of 27,693 persons, representing less than two percent growth over the 13-year period. Comparatively, the population of Santa Clara County and surrounding communities grew at a rate between 12 and 18 percent in the same period.

After the economic recession of the early 1990s, Santa Clara County (Silicon Valley) grew quickly, driven by the new information technology surrounding the internet. Development trends included large employment centers, regional retail centers, and new neighborhoods along major transportation routes. This type of growth commonly required larger, primarily undeveloped land, with infrastructure capacity for this scale of development. As an established community with primarily residential use, small neighborhood commercial areas, and few undeveloped parcels, Los Altos would not easily accommodate this type or scale of employment and housing growth. Thus, unlike many of the surrounding communities

over the past 15 years, Los Altos did not undergo substantial change. Rather, the City focused its planning efforts toward managing and enhancing existing character and land use patterns. Planning will now focus on stimulating new economic growth, revitalizing older areas, assuring public safety, finding new uses for underutilized land, and enhancing the amenities and environmental resources that define Los Altos.

The General Plan is founded upon the community's vision for the City and expresses the community's long-term goals. Implementation of the General Plan will ensure that future development is consistent with the community's goals and that adequate urban services are available to meet the needs of new development. The General Plan provides a continuum between the City's unique traditions and the Los Altos of tomorrow.



LOS ALTOS PLANNING AREA

The geographical area addressed by a General Plan is not limited to a City's corporate limits. State law requires the City to plan for areas outside of its immediate jurisdiction if the areas have a direct relationship to its planning needs. The Los Altos planning area includes the entire incorporated City and unincorporated land areas within the City's Sphere of Influence.



--- City Boundary
 ~~~~~ Planning Area Boundary

Source: City of Los Altos GIS.



Figure I-1  
 Los Altos Planning Area



Unincorporated land areas in Santa Clara County abut the City's southern and south-western boundaries.

The Los Altos planning area is located in the northwest portion of Santa Clara County, approximately five miles west of San Francisco Bay at the southern end of the peninsula. Los Altos is surrounded by Mountain View and Palo Alto to the north, Sunnyvale to the east, Cupertino to the south, and Los Altos Hills to the west. Figure I-1 depicts the planning area for Los Altos.

## HISTORY OF THE COMMUNITY

The community of Los Altos can trace its roots back to the Ohlone and Muwekma Indians, who resided along the area creeks in the early twentieth century. Most of the region was agriculturally based until the development of the railroad. The origins of urban Los Altos began in 1907 with the creation of the town plan centered around the Southern Pacific Railway Station in what is now the Downtown. Several commercial buildings were developed prior to 1940, surrounded by residential use, ranches, and agriculture.

Most of the land within the City's existing boundaries was developed in the two decades following City incorporation in 1952.

## VISION FOR THE FUTURE OF LOS ALTOS

The Vision for the Future provides the foundation of the General Plan and an expression of what the City of Los Altos wants to maintain or become over the next two decades:

*In the year 2020, the City of Los Altos continues to support a community-focused lifestyle for its residents, promoted and celebrated through neighborhood and community activities and involvement. The small town atmosphere, enhanced by the village*

*character of the Downtown and other neighborhood commercial centers, also contributes to this friendly community spirit.*

*New development and redevelopment is compatible with and sensitive to the existing community. New development reflects the existing small town, semi-rural character of the community with its Downtown commercial area and wooded, quiet, low density residential neighborhoods. People feel safe in their neighborhoods, commercial districts, and schools. In addition, the quality of the City's environmental, open space, and scenic resources is preserved and enhanced. Recreational opportunities are available to meet the needs of all members of the community.*

*The local circulation system meets the needs of the community while slowing and reducing the amount of traffic in residential neighborhoods and near schools. Within this circulation system, pedestrians and cyclists are able to travel safely and quickly throughout the community.*

*Appropriate commercial and office uses locate and thrive, providing fiscal stability to the City and a revenue source to finance community improvements. These beneficial businesses operate in harmony with surrounding residential neighborhoods and contribute to the small town atmosphere. Downtown is the city center for traditional events and festivals that serve the entire Los Altos community. Downtown provides goods and services, restaurants, and entertainment for all age groups in our community. The town is active in the evenings as well as during the weekdays and weekends. The streets and sidewalks are clean, and landscaping is attractive. The competition to locate retail businesses Downtown is keen.*



*A variety of housing options are available to meet the needs of all segments of the community, including the local workforce, residents' children, and the elderly. Mixed-use housing is available and affordable for workers in Los Altos including teachers, City employees, and other members of the local workforce.*

*Other assets, such as the high quality of the local education system, as well as the City's agricultural past with its historic buildings and remaining orchards, are important to the community. Existing development is well maintained so that Los Altos remains an attractive and enjoyable place to live, work, and play.*

## PURPOSE OF THE GENERAL PLAN

California law requires each city to adopt a comprehensive, long-term General Plan to guide the physical development of the incorporated city and land outside city boundaries that bears a relationship to its planning activities. Fundamentally, the General Plan serves as a blueprint for future growth and development. As such, the plan contains policies and programs designed to provide decision makers with a solid foundation for land use and development decisions.

The Los Altos General Plan represents the values and outlines the vision of the community. The Plan organizes the desires of Los Altos residents with respect to the physical, social, economic, and environmental character of the City. It embodies what the City is now and what it hopes to be in 2020.

In accordance with California Government Code Section 65302, a general plan must address the issues of land use, circulation, housing, noise, safety, conservation, and open space. These issues are discussed in the General Plan to the extent that they apply to Los Altos. The Plan also addresses topics of special and unique interest, including community design, economic develop-

ment, community facilities, infrastructure, and waste disposal. These topics are optional, but reflect issues that are important to the community.

According to state law, the General Plan is the primary document the City utilizes to regulate land use. Consequently, the Zon-

ing Ordinance, Specific Plans, and individual public and private development proposals must be consistent with the Plan goals, policies, and standards.



## ORGANIZATION AND USE OF THE GENERAL PLAN

The Los Altos General Plan contains goals, policies and plans which are intended to guide land use and development decisions through the year 2020. There are eight individual elements of this Plan, which fulfill the state requirements for a General Plan. Table I-1 shows the relationship between the eight elements of the Los Altos General Plan and the state-mandated elements.

### **Plan Organization and Use**

The General Plan is comprised of this Introduction and eight elements. Each element is a distinct, but integral part of the General Plan. The General Plan is accompanied by a Glossary (Appendix A). Each of the elements is organized according to the following format: (1) Introduction; (2) Plan; (3) Issues, Goals, and Policies; and 4) Implementation Programs Appendix.



**TABLE I-1  
RELATIONSHIP OF LOS ALTOS GENERAL PLAN ELEMENTS TO STATE-MANDATED ELEMENTS**

| Los Altos General Plan Elements                  | Land Use | Housing | Circulation | Safety | Conservation | Open Space | Noise | Optional |
|--------------------------------------------------|----------|---------|-------------|--------|--------------|------------|-------|----------|
| Community Design & Historic Resources            |          |         |             |        |              |            |       | ■        |
| Land Use                                         | ■        |         |             |        |              |            |       |          |
| Housing                                          |          | ■       |             |        |              |            |       |          |
| Economic Development                             |          |         |             |        |              |            |       | ■        |
| Open Space, Conservation, & Community Facilities |          |         |             |        | ■            | ■          |       | ■        |
| Circulation                                      |          |         | ■           |        |              |            |       |          |
| Natural Environment & Hazards                    |          |         |             | ■      |              |            | ■     |          |
| Infrastructure & Waste Disposal                  |          |         |             |        |              |            |       | ■        |

The Introduction of each element describes the focus and the purpose of the element. The Introduction also identifies other Related Laws, Plans and Programs outside of the General Plan that may be used to achieve or relate to specific General Plan goals. The relationship of the element to other General Plan elements is also described in the Introduction.

The Issues, Goals, and Policies section of each element contains a description of identified planning issues, goals and policies related to the element topic. The issues, goals and policies are based on input received from community workshops; members of the General Plan Advisory Committee (GPAC); members of the City Council and Planning Commission; and City staff.

The issues represent the opportunities, constraints or concerns that are addressed by the General Plan. The goals are overall statements of community desires and are comprised of broad statements of purpose or direction. The policies serve as guides to the decision makers in reviewing develop-

ment proposals and making other decisions that affect the future growth and development of Los Altos.

Each element also contains a Plan section. The Plan provides background information regarding existing conditions and an overview of the City's course of action to implement the identified goals and policies. For example, the Land Use Element contains a "Land Use Plan" indicating the types and intensities of land use permitted in Los Altos.

The Implementation Programs Appendix identifies specific actions to achieve the goals, policies and plans identified in each General Plan element. The Implementation Programs Appendix is reviewed and updated periodically to update specific actions, schedules, responsible parties and measures to ensure that General Plan goals, policies and plans are implemented. The Glossary (Appendix A of the General Plan) provides a set of definitions for technical terms used in the Plan.



The organization of the General Plan allows users to easily locate issues of interest and quickly obtain a perspective on the City's policies on the subject. However, General Plan users should realize that the policies in the various elements are interrelated and should be examined comprehensively. Policies are presented as written statements, tables, diagrams and maps. All of these policy components must be considered together when making planning decisions.

### COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN THE GENERAL PLAN PROGRAM

Public participation played an important role in updating the Los Altos General Plan. Because the General Plan reflects the community goals and objectives, citizen input is essential to identifying issues, formulating goals, and creating the City's vision for 2020. Public participation and education during the General Plan program occurred through the following methods:

- ❖ In the Fall of 1996, prior to project kick-off, the City conducted a community visioning process called the **Community Compass**. The goal of the visioning process was to help the community determine what it wants to be in the future (2020) and what is needed to achieve its vision. Information from the Community Compass report was used in developing the preliminary set of issues for the General Plan.
- ❖ Early in the program, the City hosted a **Transportation Charrette** with Dan Burden and his team from Walkable Communities, Inc. The purpose of the workshop series (including a walking tour) was to educate the community on key transportation issues and possible solutions to carry forward to the General Plan vision and circulation-related goals and policies.
- ❖ Three **Community Workshops** were held during the General Plan program. The first General Plan Community Workshop was held to discuss the key community issues and opportunities that should be reflected in the framework of the General Plan. At the second Community Workshop, the consultant team solicited input on land use and circulation alternatives. At the final Community Workshop, the Preliminary Draft General Plan was presented to the public for consideration.
- ❖ The City Council appointed a **General Plan Advisory Committee (GPAC)** to represent stakeholders and provide input and recommendations during the General Plan program. Five meetings were held with the GPAC. The first meeting was a program initiation for the purpose of introducing the General Plan program and soliciting input regarding community issues and future vision. The second meeting was held to review and discuss preliminary draft goals and policies. At the third and fourth meetings, the GPAC continued review of the goals and policies and discussed land use and circulation alternatives. The final GPAC meeting was held to review the Preliminary Draft General Plan and provide recommendations to the City's decision makers.
- ❖ Two General Plan program **newsletters** were prepared during the program. These newsletters provided the public updated information on the status of the General Plan program, upcoming workshop schedules, methods for public comment, and a summary of the proposed General Plan. Newsletters were distributed to all Los Altos residents.
- ❖ The City also utilized its **website** to provide current information on the General Plan program. Both newsletters were posted on the website.



- ❖ The public had the opportunity to address decision makers directly regarding issues, concerns, and desires at three joint **City Council/Planning Commission Workshops**. The first of these workshops was an introduction to the General Plan program and a review of the draft vision statement generated with input from the GPAC. The second joint workshop allowed decision-makers the opportunity to provide direction on the issues, goals and policies to be included in the Draft General Plan, as well as direction on the land use and circulation alternative to be used as the basis of the Draft General Plan. Once the preliminary Draft General Plan was completed, the third joint workshop was held to review that plan and incorporate City Council and Planning Commission comments into the Draft General Plan prior to public hearings.
- ❖ The Draft General Plan and Initial Study/Mitigated Negative Declaration were circulated for public review and comment, before and during the **General Plan public hearings** held before the City Council and Planning Commission prior to adoption of the updated General Plan.



### WAY TO THE FUTURE

The General Plan provides the way to achieve the future the community has identified for itself. Direction is established in the General Plan to take advantage of opportunities to achieve the community's goals for the future. The goals and policies in the elements and the Implementation Program provide guidance for dealing with changing conditions and specific actions to optimize community potential. The path established in the General Plan is an integrated union of the enduring historic values responsible for modern prosperity and innovative approaches to achieve the vision for the future.