

CHAPTER
1
INTRODUCTION

A. AN URBAN VILLAGE BY THE BAY

In 2011, Albany retired its former motto as the “Northern Gateway to Alameda County” and adopted the new motto “Urban Village by the Bay.” The change made an important value statement about the city’s identity and aspirations for the future. But what does it really mean to be an “urban village” in 2015—and what will it mean in 2035?

Albany today embodies the best qualities of an urban setting. It is built on a traditional urban street grid, with walkable neighborhoods and thriving pedestrian-oriented shopping districts. It is economically and culturally diverse. Its residents enjoy the amenities of urban living—great restaurants, unique shops, high-quality public transit, a vibrant local arts scene, and easy access to major cities like San Francisco and Oakland.

Of course, nearby cities can also boast these qualities. What distinguishes Albany is its dual identity as a “village.” With barely more than a square mile of urbanized area, the city combines urban ambiance with the amenities of small town living.

Albany is a city of neighbors. It is safe and family-friendly. It is a place where residents come together for a Fourth of July party at Memorial Park and a citywide “Dinner with Albany” on Solano Avenue. It is a city that treasures its schools and parks, where residents can still make a difference in local affairs and decision-making. This strong sense of community and civic pride make Albany one of the most desirable places to live in the Bay Area.

Albany’s motto references “the Bay” for good reason—it is an essential part of the city’s identity. San Francisco Bay defines the city both physically and culturally. It is an aesthetic resource, a recreational resource, and an ecological resource. It influences everything from Albany’s weather and vistas to its flora and fauna.

The General Plan seeks to protect and enhance the qualities of our Urban Village by the Bay. These qualities did not happen “by accident.” They are the legacy of decades of thoughtful and deliberate discussion, debate, and planning.



Photo: Albany Recreation and Community Services

Bi-annual "Dinner With Albany"

B. PURPOSE OF THE GENERAL PLAN

The Albany General Plan guides decisions about development, growth, and conservation in the city. It expresses goals for Albany's future, along with the policies and actions needed to achieve those goals. The Plan aims to preserve the qualities that make Albany a special place while responding to the challenges and opportunities the future will bring.

Every city and county in California is required to prepare a general plan. The plan provides the foundation for each city's zoning map and capital improvements program. It guides basic decisions about the location, type, and character of future development. A general plan also provides information about the community, including data and maps describing existing and projected conditions in the city.

Although Albany is a mature city, it is continuously evolving. Residents improve their homes as their needs change. Businesses adapt to new technologies and consumer preferences. Schools and public facilities are modernized and streets are re-designed to make it safer to travel. Demographic and cultural changes create new demands on local services and new expectations for the future.

The world around Albany is also changing. Albany is located near the geographic center of one of the most dynamic metropolitan areas in the country. The City is regarded as a regional leader in sustainability, public education, and participatory government. The General Plan also envisions Albany as a leader in addressing climate change, meeting housing needs for its diverse population, promoting public health and wellness, improving pedestrian and bicycle safety, and preparing for natural disasters.

The Albany General Plan reflects input from Albany residents and businesses on how to manage change. Dozens of meetings, including Planning and Zoning Commission meetings, City Council meetings, community meetings, and meetings of other City Commissions and Committees, provided a forum for the public to express their priorities. This Plan also builds on input from other planning studies and initiatives completed over the last two decades, leveraging past efforts and providing a consistent framework for long-range planning.

C. LEGAL BASIS FOR THE GENERAL PLAN

The Albany General Plan has been prepared to meet the requirements of the California Government Code. Section 65300 of the Government Code requires that each city and county “shall adopt a comprehensive, long-term general plan for the physical development of the county or city.” State guidelines describe the general plan as a city’s “constitution” for development. The law requires the plan to be internally consistent, meaning that all aspects of the plan support and reinforce one another.

Section 65302 of the Government Code establishes the requirement for general plan contents. This includes the requirement that the plan cover seven topic areas, referred to as “elements.” The mandatory elements are land use, transportation, housing, conservation, open space, safety, and noise. The Government Code gives local governments the flexibility to organize these elements in different ways, as long as the mandatory topics are covered.

Section 65303 of the Government Code empowers cities and counties to adopt “other elements or address any other subjects which, in the judgment of the legislative body, relate to the physical development of the county or city.” When such subjects are included, the policies carry the same legal weight as the mandatory components.

Requirements for the housing element of the general plan are somewhat unique. For the past 30 years, the state has mandated that local housing elements be updated on a regular cycle (every five to eight years) and submitted to the California Department of Housing and Community Development for certification. No other element of the Plan is subject to state certification. The statutory requirements for housing elements are also extensive, with specific standards for data collection, analysis, and policies. Because of these requirements, the housing element is often prepared as a companion document to the rest of the general plan and exists under separate cover.

The relationship between mandatory elements and the elements of the Albany 2035 Plan are shown in the graphic below.

State-Mandated Element	Corresponding Albany General Plan Element
Land Use	Land Use
Transportation	Transportation
Housing	Housing
Open Space	Parks, Recreation, and Open Space
Conservation	Conservation and Sustainability
Safety	Environmental Hazards
Noise	
	Community Services and Facilities
	Waterfront

General plans are subject to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). A plan amendment or update is considered a “project” under CEQA, meaning that local governments must analyze the plan’s potential impacts and identify mitigation measures where feasible. A major plan update usually requires preparation of an environmental impact report (EIR). General plan EIRs examine potential conditions in the horizon year of the plan based on the development forecasts and policies.

The EIR is considered a “Program EIR” in that it provides a basic level of review for subsequent actions, including the approval of future development projects that are consistent with the plan. Such projects may be subject to specific CEQA requirements such as traffic studies and geologic surveys, but they can rely on the general plan EIR for broader analyses.

The Government Code also states that the general plan must cover the entire area within the City limits and any land outside its boundaries which “bears relation to its planning.” This requirement is intended for cities adjacent to unincorporated land or areas that may someday be annexed. Because Albany is a landlocked city, the area covered by this Plan is coterminous with the city limits.

D. CONTEXT FOR THE GENERAL PLAN UPDATE

This is the third major update of the Albany General Plan in the last 45 years. In 1973-1975, the City prepared its first contemporary General Plan. That Plan was updated between 1989 and 1992 and used a base year of 1990 and a horizon year of 2010. The 1990-2010 Plan was amended in 2004 and was supplemented by other plans prepared between 1992 and 2015 covering topics such as parks, transportation, and climate change.

The State General Plan Guidelines recommend that general plans be updated every five to ten years to ensure that they remain relevant. Periodic updates are important to incorporate current data and forecasts, and to reflect emerging issues and state mandates. Updates also ensure that the plan provides a framework for future area plans, specific plans, and plans for infrastructure and public services.



Solano Stroll Street Fair

Updating a general plan does not require starting from scratch. In fact, the 2035 Plan for Albany carries forward much of the policy content of the 1990-2010 Plan and maintains a similar vision for the city's future. The prior Plan's policies have been edited and supplemented by many new policies, reflecting more recent plans, public input, and new issues.

Among the key City plans referenced in this document are the Active Transportation Plan (2012), the Parks, Recreation, and Open Space Master Plan (2004), the Albany Creekside Master Plan (2012), the Climate Action Plan (2010), the Public Arts Master Plan (2010), and the Sewer System Management Plan (2014). The 2035 General Plan also considers the plans of other agencies that affect Albany, including the Eastshore State Park General Plan (2002), the University Village Master Plan (2004), and ABAG/MTC's Plan Bay Area (2013). It also considers the public input received during the Voices to Vision community planning process (2008-2010).

Although the General Plan has a 2035 horizon year, it includes immediate and short-term actions, as well as guidance on operating procedures that are already underway. The Plan identifies ways that existing City programs can be strengthened, as well as new ordinances and programs to be considered in the future. It also helps advance a variety of initiatives previously approved by Albany voters, including those protecting open space on Albany Hill and along the Bay.

This General Plan includes a "Waterfront Element" that guides planning decisions in the area west of Interstate 80. The focus of this Element is on implementing park and open space improvements and protecting the ecology of the Albany shoreline. It does not propose any land use changes in this area. The Element presumes that the 107-acre Golden Gate Fields racetrack will remain during the time horizon of the Plan and designates the site for Commercial Recreation, just as the 1990-2010 Plan did. Although proposals for the reuse of Golden Gate Fields may be considered before 2035, Albany's Measure C stipulates that any change of use would require a General Plan Amendment, which would be subject to a citywide vote.

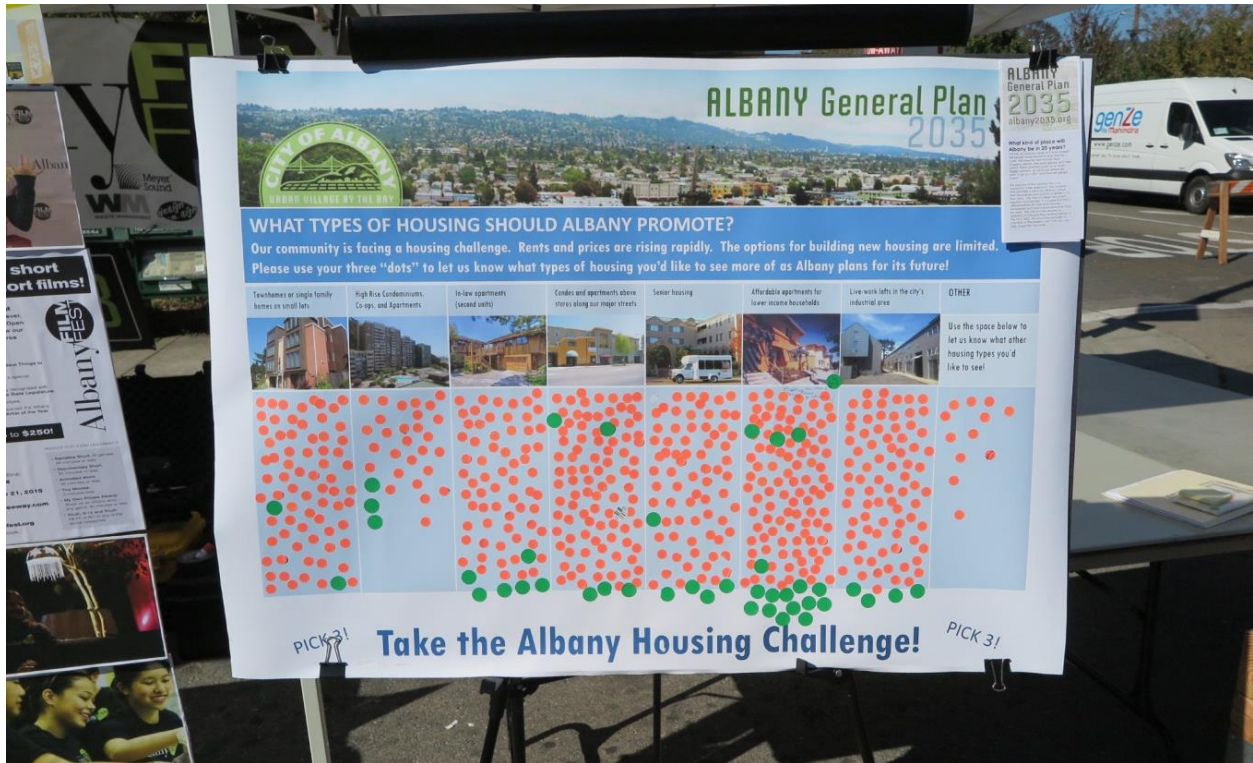
E. GENERAL PLAN UPDATE PROCESS

The Albany City Council began discussing the need for a General Plan Update in 2010. The City had completed a first draft of its 2007-2014 Housing Element by that time, which led to broader discussions about the status of the other Plan elements. New state mandates were pending, community concerns were changing, and new issues about the future of the city had emerged. Financial constraints brought on by the economic recession prevented the City from moving forward until 2012.

In determining the scope of the General Plan, the City faced an important choice: it could amend the Plan to identify specific future land uses at Golden Gate Fields—or it could postpone that discussion to a later date and carry the existing policies for the site forward. Given the substantial expense of the Voices to Vision process in 2008-2010, and with no specific proposal for re-use on the horizon, the City chose the latter approach. Had the former approach been taken, the General Plan would have been subject to a citywide vote (required by Measure "C" for changes to General Plan designations at the waterfront). It would have also required an expanded Environmental Impact Report, detailed economic and urban design studies, and potentially several additional years of community discussion and analysis, all at a very significant cost.

Following a series of study sessions to refine the scope of the project, the City issued a request for proposals for a consultant in October 2012. In February 2013, Barry Miller Consulting was retained to manage the project. Work on the new Plan was initiated in March 2013.

In April 2013, a project website was launched and a video was made to announce the start of the project. The website was updated throughout the project, with draft reports posted as they were released. The website also served as a means of advertising upcoming meetings and documenting public feedback.



Housing Element “Dot Exercise” at the Solano Stroll

Following a series of orientation workshops, the initial task was completion and certification of the 2007-2014 Housing Element, including the development of new housing policies and actions. This occurred during Spring and Summer 2013, with a new Draft Housing Element submitted to the state in October 2013. The Element had been deemed pre-compliant when it was adopted by the City Council in March 2014. It received formal State certification in June 2014.

An update to the 2007-2014 Housing Element took place almost immediately after it was certified. This was necessary to meet a State deadline imposed on all Bay Area cities to complete housing plans for 2015-2023 no later than January 31, 2015.

An additional Town Hall meeting was held in July 2014 and an Affordable Housing Symposium was convened by the City in September. The second Housing Element was completed in November 2014 and was certified by the state in February, 2015.

Most of the work on the other elements of the General Plan took place in late 2013 and 2014. New land use categories were developed in 2013 and a Draft Land Use Map was prepared. An “audit” of existing City policies was conducted in 2013 and 2014. This entailed reviewing the 1990-2010 General Plan and about a dozen other planning documents to determine which policies would be incorporated into the General Plan and in what manner. New policies were drafted based on the audit and input from City Commissions and the community.

Topical study sessions with the Planning and Zoning Commission were convened to review policies for each element of the Plan as they were drafted. The Commission convened more than 20 study sessions over a 28-month period. The public was invited to attend and actively participate in each one.

For topics such as transportation, recreation, the waterfront, and sustainability, study sessions also were held with the Traffic and Safety Commission, the Parks and Recreation Commission, the Waterfront Commission, and the Sustainability Committee, respectively.

Public involvement was also solicited through the media, the internet, and community events. In addition to the Town Hall meetings held for the Housing Element, a mobile General Plan exhibit was prepared for citywide events such as the Solano Stroll. Brochures were distributed at City Hall and the annual Arts and Green Festival. Presentations were made to community groups such as the Rotary Club. A number of City Council study sessions also were convened.

A Draft of the General Plan was released for public review in November, 2015. A Draft Environmental Impact Report (DEIR) was released at the same time. Following a public review period, the City prepared responses to comments on the DEIR and proposed revisions to the General Plan in response to public input.

The document and the Final EIR were adopted by the City Council on April 18, 2016. The adopted General Plan supersedes the 1990-2010 General Plan in its entirety. It includes this document, plus the Housing Element, which was adopted in February 2015.

F. PLAN ORGANIZATION

The General Plan is organized into 11 chapters. The first two chapters provide the context for the rest of the document. The next eight chapters are the Plan's "elements," containing the key policy recommendations on each topic. The last chapter of the Plan addresses implementation.

Each of the Plan's elements includes two key components. First, narrative text is provided as context for the topic. Second, goals, policies, and actions are presented to guide future decisions. The function of the goals, policies, and actions is described in the sidebar on the next page. All goals, policies, and actions are labeled with a prefix indicating the subject matter (LU=Land Use, T=Transportation, etc.) and a number (1.1, 1.2, etc.) or letter (1.A, 1.B, etc.) for easy reference.

An overview of the chapters is provided below:

How to Use the General Plan

If you are an Albany resident, the General Plan indicates the long-range plans and policies that may affect your neighborhood in the coming years. The Plan's Land Use Diagram (Figure 3-1) is a useful starting point, since it shows the different uses permitted in each part of the city. However, it is important to review maps and policies throughout the document to get the full perspective on city plans.

If you are an Albany business, the General Plan outlines the City's vision for its commercial and industrial areas. The Plan provides information that may affect your future business decisions, including planned improvements to the transportation system and public services. It outlines the policies the City will follow to protect your investment, while ensuring that business operations are compatible with nearby uses and contribute to the quality of the community.

If you are interested in finding out more about Albany, the General Plan contains extensive background information about the city. It includes detailed data on local demographics, land uses, transportation, history, and natural resources.

If you are a City staff member or official, the General Plan will help guide future decisions about development and public investments. Future decisions about the use of land must be consistent with the General Plan maps and policies. The Plan provides the basis for the City's zoning regulations and zoning map. It will be used by other agencies such as the Albany Unified School District and East Bay Municipal Utility District as they plan and fund their own projects within Albany.

1. **Introduction** describes the General Plan Update process and introduces the reader to the document.
2. **Framework** provides the context for planning in Albany, including basic data on the city and its relationship to the region around it. This chapter also includes demographic and economic forecasts.
3. The **Land Use Element** describes existing land uses and land use issues in the city, and presents concepts for conserving and enhancing Albany’s neighborhoods and business districts. The chapter includes the vision for areas of Albany with the potential for change in the future. The Land Use Element also includes the City’s Land Use Diagram, which is the official map showing the intended use of land in Albany over the next 20 years.
4. The **Transportation Element** addresses mobility in the city. It is organized by topical headings corresponding to different modes of travel and transportation issues. Policies cover issues such as safety, access, parking, mode choice, and congestion.
5. The **Housing Element** identifies the steps the City will take to meet the current and future housing needs of its residents. This Element is a separate document. A “placeholder” within this document summarizes the contents and directs the reader to the full report.
6. The **Parks, Recreation, and Open Space Element** guides the management of the city’s open spaces and parks, including plans to expand parks as needs change and population grows. It also addresses the delivery of recreational services to Albany residents.
7. The **Conservation and Sustainability Element** addresses the conservation of Albany’s natural resources, including air, water, soil, plants, animals, creeks, wetlands, and hillsides. This chapter also addresses energy and water conservation issues in the city and includes strategies for greenhouse gas and waste reduction.

Goals, Policies, and Actions

The General Plan guides future decisions through:

- **Goals**, which describe ideal future conditions. Goals are intended to be broad and aspirational.
- **Policies**, which provide guidance to the City as it makes decisions relating to each goal. This document contains several hundred policies, each preceded by a title that indicates the subject being addressed.
- **Actions**, which identify the specific steps to be taken by the City to implement the policies. Each action is also preceded by a title. Actions are usually associated with the allocation of resources (time, money, etc.) to a particular task or project. Thus, they can be programmed and prioritized.

8. The **Environmental Hazards Element** addresses the potential for earthquakes, landslides, erosion, flooding, and wildfire in the city, and presents policies to minimize future loss of life and property. Hazardous materials and emergency preparedness also are covered. The chapter also includes the state-mandated noise element, with policies and programs to minimize excessive noise.
9. The **Community Services and Facilities Element** addresses the provision of school, library, police, fire, child care, senior care, youth, and infrastructure services to Albany residents and businesses. Where appropriate, the Element addresses future program changes to respond to increased demand and new operational needs.
10. The **Waterfront Element** includes policies and actions to improve public access to the Albany waterfront and to facilitate the area's transformation into a regional open space and conservation area. The Element is largely a restatement of previously adopted policies for the shoreline, including those adopted by the East Bay Regional Park District.
11. **Implementation** includes a description of the kinds of programs used to implement the General Plan, such as zoning, code enforcement, capital improvement programming, environmental review, and City operating procedures.

An Environmental Impact Report (EIR) has been prepared as part of the Plan Update process. The EIR is a separate document that describes environmental conditions in the city and the possible effects that adoption of the General Plan could have on these conditions between now and 2035. The findings of the EIR help determine the level of review that will be required when future development projects that are consistent with the General Plan are proposed.

G. PLAN IMPLEMENTATION AND AMENDMENT

The General Plan is intended to be a dynamic document. It will be implemented through a variety of ordinances, programs, and activities. Chapter 11 of the Plan identifies the steps that will be taken to put the Plan to work, including specific actions and ongoing programs and procedures.

Although this Plan uses a horizon year of 2035, the City should not wait until the end of the planning period to begin the next update. General plans must be periodically updated so they remain current and responsive, and to respond to new state laws and issues. An annual review of the General Plan is required to ensure it remains relevant.

Most communities update their plans about once every ten years. In the intervening period, general plan amendments may be considered to respond to new plans, unforeseen conditions or specific development proposals. The State allows up to four general plan amendments a year. All amendments are subject to environmental review, and a finding that the change is in the public interest and would not be detrimental to public health, safety, and welfare.

