green your city's blueprint:

a toolkit for climate-friendly general plans

GREENBELT ALLIANCE
Open Spaces & Vibrant Places

Acknowledgments

Greenbelt Alliance gratefully acknowledges support from the Hewlett Foundation for this project.

Thanks to the following individuals who provided expertise:

Terry Watt, Terry Watt Planning Consultants

Melissa Hippard, Greenbelt Alliance Campaigns Director and former Loma Prieta Chapter Director of the Sierra Club

Janill Richardson, California Attorney General's office

Matt Vander Sluis, Greenbelt Alliance Senior Field Representative and formerly of the Planning & Conservation League

Greenbelt Alliance

Jeremy Madsen, Executive Director

AUTHORS

Ellie Casson, Campaign Organizer
Stephanie Reyes, Policy Director

EDITOR

Jennifer Gennari,
Communications Director

COPY EDITOR

Marla Wilson,
Sustainable Development Associate

Photography by Greenbelt Alliance except:
p. 2: Rafat Raie, City of Walnut Creek
p. 9: City of Santa Rosa
p. 11: Oliver McMillan
p. 23: Santana Row

green your city's blueprint:

a toolkit for climate-friendly general plans

GREENBELT ALLIANCE
Open Spaces & Vibrant Places

table of contents

Introduction 4

Why should I care about General Plans and land use if I care about climate change?

Where does climate change fit in a General Plan? 6

General Plan structure

Land-Use Map and Land-Use Alternatives

Where to address climate change

Examples of climate-friendly General Plans

How can I apply climate change to each element? 12

Land Use Element

Transportation or Circulation Element

Housing Element

Open Space Element

How do I make sure my city adopts a good plan? 22

Ten steps to success

Why is the environmental review process important in the General Plan?

Environmental review and mitigation measures

When can I advocate for climate change during the General Plan update?

A typical timeline

Why should my city care about climate change in the General Plan? 28

California's Global Warming Solutions Act

What AB 32 means for your city's General Plan

California's Sustainable Communities and Climate Protection Act

What is a Sustainable Communities Strategy?

What SB 375 means for your city's General Plan

The transportation carrot

What your city should know about climate change lawsuits

Conclusion 32

Act locally for climate change

Resources

Endnotes

introduction

The earth's climate is changing, and you have decided it's time to act. If you are reading this, then you are probably already aware of the causes and likely impacts of climate change. **This toolkit isn't going to bring you down with grim forecasts. It's designed to empower you.**

We hope that you find this guide useful, because you, the local climate change activist, can play a critical role in curbing greenhouse gas emissions.

We bet you already do the many little things that lighten your impact on our planet. All of these steps—recycling, using canvas bags at the grocery store, switching to energy-efficient appliances, and more—add up to make a difference. But individual actions are not enough; the collective decisions we make about the future of the communities we live in affect our shared carbon footprint.

Why does land use matter? In the San Francisco Bay Area, transportation accounts for 36% of greenhouse gas emissions. The majority of this comes from people driving alone.[1] This is a direct result of sprawling land-use patterns that have placed homes far from shops and jobs. Many California cities and counties have been designed around the automobile at the expense of those who walk, bike, or ride transit.

Why should I care about General Plans and land use if I care about climate change?

One extremely effective step you can take in the fight against climate change is to influence your city's General Plan. General Plans set the groundwork for all of the local land-use decisions that determine where we live and how we get around.

How do we make it possible and desirable for people to get where they have to go without getting in their cars? The answer is to take a fresh approach to the way we plan our cities. Rather than designing for automobiles, we need to think about all types of uses and focus on the movement of people. In doing so, we will

also address our biggest source of greenhouse gas emissions. This is where your city's General Plan comes in.

The General Plan is a blueprint for your city's future development and is the perfect place to affect positive change. To help you navigate the jargon-filled land-use planning world, we've outlined everything as plainly as we can. If you want more clarification, we've compiled a list of resources at the end. Greenbelt Alliance acknowledges and thanks the many organizations and institutions working toward the same end—reducing our carbon footprint.

Green Your City's Blueprint is an accessible and clear guide to help you do your part. **So dive in!** With this toolkit, you will be able to jump into the planning process and play a vital role in making your city's General Plan truly climate-friendly.

A General Plan is your city's most important land-use document. The General Plan is a blueprint for your city's future development. It guides where development goes, where roads are built, and where parks are established. Each city updates its General Plan only once a decade or so, and the impacts of these important documents last for generations. If your city announces a General Plan update, now is the time to turn your passion for the environment to local land-use planning.

where does climate change fit in a general plan?

To be an effective climate change and land-use activist, you need to understand how a General Plan is structured and how you can look at future growth through the lens of climate change.

In California, every city and county General Plan must contain certain specific categories of information. These categories are referred to as "elements." Elements help planners and decision-makers organize the many different things that must be considered when laying out a city's future development. The following section shows how climate change can be applied to each General Plan element.

Each element of the General Plan is divided into goals, objectives, policies, and programs. These goals, objectives, policies, and programs influence subsequent planning decisions. The stronger the language in these policies, the better they will hold up when interpreted and converted into decisions and laws. Because of this, it is extremely important the elements contain very clear, aggressive climate change language.

General Plan structure

Often, a General Plan document begins by providing background on the city or county's current condition. Many municipalities choose to follow up this report with a vision statement that lays out where a city or county sees itself at the end of the lifespan of the General Plan.

Once the introduction and vision for the city or county has been stated, the General Plan moves into the more policy-oriented material. All of the remaining information is organized into different elements.

In California, all General Plans are required to contain at least the following seven basic elements:

- Land use
- Transportation
- Housing
- Conservation
- Open Space
- Safety
- Noise

Cities are also free to add other, non-required elements. Common optional elements include:

- Economic Development
- Infrastructure
- Public Services
- Recreation
- Climate Change

It is most common for a city or county to update all elements at once as part of a comprehensive General Plan overhaul. It is also perfectly acceptable to revise a single element or add an entirely new element without doing a full General Plan update, although state law does require the General Plan to be internally consistent. Any individual changes can be adopted into the General Plan. Remember, General Plans are only updated every 10 to 20 years. Comprehensive General Plan updates are also quite costly. If a full General Plan update is not in your local government's timeline or budget, encourage the elected officials and staff to adopt an individual climate change element or revise the most out-of-date required element.

definitions and examples of the four sections within each element

GOAL A general and ultimate aim or end toward which the city or county will direct its effort.

EXAMPLE Reduce greenhouse gas emissions from all activities within the city/county boundaries to support the state's efforts under AB 32 and to mitigate the impact of climate change on the city/county, state, and world.

OBJECTIVE A specific statement of desired future condition toward which the city or county will expend effort to achieve a broader goal. An objective should be achievable and, where possible, should be measurable and time-specific.

EXAMPLE By 2035, the city/county will reduce greenhouse gas emissions from within its boundaries to a level 15% less than the level that would otherwise occur if all activities continued under a "business as usual" scenario.

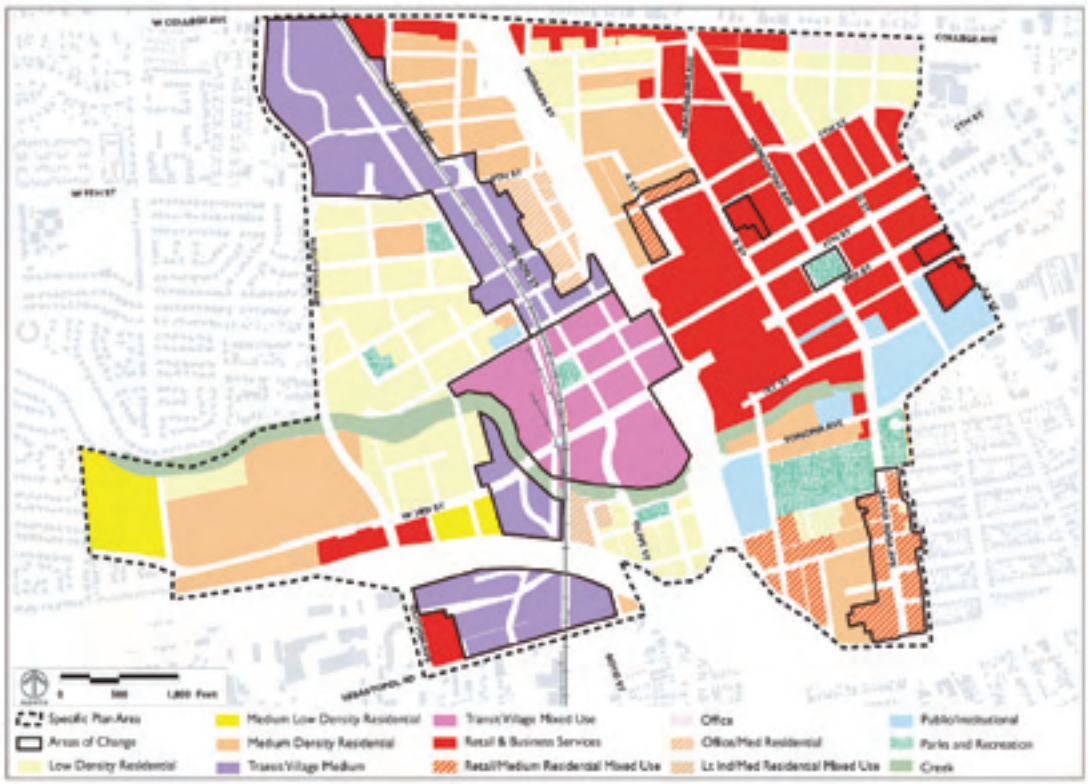
POLICY A specific statement of principle or of guiding actions that implies clear commitment but is not mandatory. A general direction that a governmental agency sets to follow to meet its goals and objectives before undertaking an action program.

EXAMPLE The city/county will establish plans to reduce or encourage reductions in greenhouse gas emissions from all sectors within the city/county.

PROGRAM An action, activity, or strategy carried out in response to an adopted policy to achieve a specific goal or objective. Policies and programs establish the "who," "how," and "when" for carrying out the "what" and "where" of goals and objectives.

EXAMPLE Within 2 years of adoption of the General Plan, the city/county will, in collaboration with the stakeholders from the community at large, establish a Community Climate Action Plan, which will include measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from community, municipal and business activities by at least 15% by 2035, compared to "business as usual."

Getting the land-use map right will likely be the most essential step your city takes to address climate change through the General Plan. Decisions about where different types of development will go, how much new development will go in which places, and what transportation options are available nearby have a huge impact on your city's greenhouse gas emissions. The section "How can I apply climate change to each element?" describes these connections in more detail.



An example of a land-use map for downtown Santa Rosa.

Land-Use Map and Land-Use Alternatives

In addition to the goals and policies within the elements, every General Plan must contain a land-use map. A land-use map outlines what type of uses (open space, industrial, residential, commercial, mixed use, etc.) will be permitted at different locations within your city borders. Often, cities will use the General Plan land-use map to set the minimum and maximum densities for each of these areas. Density refers to how many dwellings can be built in an area, such as 20 units—townhomes, condominiums, apartments—per acre. Sometimes cities choose to use the land-use map to set building heights, but other cities choose to leave this level of specificity to the zoning map. (The zoning map is a more detailed and legally binding set of land-use codes that is based on the General Plan.)

Before adopting a land-use map, your city must weigh different land-use options. Your city will do this by proposing and analyzing multiple land-use alternatives that offer different future growth scenarios. After reviewing and refining these alternatives, the decision-making body that is reviewing the General Plan will choose a *preferred* alternative. After receiving official approval from your city's planning commission and city council, this land-use alternative will become your official land-use map.

Where to address climate change

That's the basic structure of a General Plan; let's talk about how climate change fits in. Though climate change is a young topic compared to other planning issues, cities and counties are quickly figuring out how to incorporate it into their General Plans.

Some cities have chosen to devote an entire, separate element to climate change. Others have chosen to weave it into other elements. Of the seven required, some key places for climate change policies are the Land-Use, Transportation, Open Space and Housing elements. (The Conservation element is another place where cities can incorporate strong greenhouse gas reduction policies. These policies tend to deal more with emission reductions through improved energy efficiency rather than land-use planning. Refer to *Model Policies for Greenhouse Gases in General Plans*[2] for energy efficiency, green building, or similar policies.)

Some California cities and counties have chosen to create a Climate Action Plan (some places use a different name, such as Sustainability Action Plan or Greenhouse Gas Reduction Plan). A Climate Action Plan can take a variety of forms but essentially it is a city document that lays out strategies for preparing for and preventing climate change. By themselves, Climate Action Plans are not enforceable. However, cities can choose to adopt the Climate Action Plan *as a part of the General Plan*. This makes the goals in the Climate Action Plan more enforceable, as the General Plan is a legally binding document. If your city decides to develop a Climate Action Plan, it is important to urge them to adopt it as part of the General Plan so its provisions are legally binding.

Examples of climate-friendly General Plans

Now that you are acquainted with the structure and ways of incorporating climate change into a General Plan, you may want to review specific examples. Here are two excellent General Plans that address climate change in a variety of ways.

The City of San Diego

- **Conservation Element:** San Diego included this optional element, which has sustainable development policies designed to reduce the city's environmental footprint. It covers conserving resources, following sustainable building practices, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and encouraging clean technologies.[3]
- **Integrated Tactics:** Other climate change-fighting policies were added throughout the General Plan. Table CE-1 in the Conservation element is a comprehensive list of policies related to climate change issues and where you can find them in San Diego's General Plan.[4]
- **Vision Statement:** San Diego's General Plan includes a vision, City of Villages, which focuses growth into mixed-use centers that are pedestrian-friendly districts linked to an improved regional transit system. The City of Villages

Above: The proposed redevelopment of the Hazard shopping center into a pedestrian-friendly Hazard Center is in keeping with San Diego's City of Villages vision.

strategy is designed to sustain the long-term economic, environmental, and social health of San Diego and its many communities. This development pattern will also reduce greenhouse gas emissions; the policies that support it are mostly found in the Land-Use and Transportation elements.[5]

Yolo County

Though Yolo County is just outside the Bay Area's official boundaries, its General Plan recognizes that many people who live in Yolo commute to jobs in the Bay Area or Sacramento. Over the next 50 years, the county's share of regional growth may include as many as 78,000 new homes and 99,000 new jobs.

- **Housing Element:** By being realistic about how much growth is coming to the cities and unincorporated areas of Yolo County, the General Plan lays out a land-use pattern that will put homes close to existing services and transportation infrastructure. This will prevent housing and jobs from sprawling outward in locations that require people to drive more and generate more greenhouse gas emissions. The county's Housing element determines suitable locations for both new housing and preservation of existing land uses, like agriculture and open space.[6]

- **Open Space Protection:** Many prospective home buyers are attracted to Yolo County because of the rural lifestyle, access to open space, and outdoor recreation. Planners and officials in Yolo recognize that protecting this open space is critical to maintaining the region's appeal. It also serves the dual purpose of curbing carbon emission increases, as preserved agricultural land and open space help mitigate greenhouse gas emissions.

how can I apply climate change to each element?

Once a city decides to address climate change in its General Plan, there are five components that should be included.

Whether or not your city creates a Climate Action Plan, includes a Climate Change element in its General Plan, or incorporates climate change provisions into the other elements of its General Plan, there are five components that should be included. (See page 28 for more information regarding cities' responsibilities for addressing climate change.)

The California Attorney General's office recommends including the following components:

1. **Greenhouse gas emission reduction targets** that apply at reasonable intervals through the life of the plan.
2. **An emissions inventory** that breaks down the city's emissions into categories (e.g. transportation, building energy, waste, etc.).
3. **Enforceable emissions control measures**.
4. **A system for monitoring and reporting** to ensure that targets are met.
5. **Mechanisms to allow for the revision of the plan**, if necessary, to stay on target.[7]

We've made it easy for you to make these components concrete for your decision-makers. The following sections describe some significant policy issues with strong links to climate change that can be addressed in the Land-Use, Transportation, Open Space and Housing elements. (To read case studies of cities that have successfully addressed these issues, see pages 52-69 of Greenbelt Alliance's *Smart Infill* report.[8])

For specific Goals, Objectives, Policies and Programs that your city can adopt outright into its General Plan, please see *Model Policies for Greenhouse Gases in General Plans* from the California Air Pollution Control Officers Association.[9] Pages 70-89 of this document contain policy language that your city can copy and paste directly into its General Plan elements.

We've made it easy for you to make these components concrete for your decision-makers. The following sections describe some significant policy issues with strong links to climate change that can be addressed in the **Land-Use, Transportation, Open Space** and **Housing** elements.

LAND USE ELEMENT AND LAND USE MAP

infill development

DEFINITION "Infill development" does not refer to one type of building. It refers to finding room for new homes and jobs in existing urban and suburban areas, and designing them in a way that will work well with their surroundings. It can mean building on vacant lots, reusing underutilized sites (such as parking lots, old shopping malls, or industrial sites), or rehabilitating historic buildings for new use.

Infill development policies guide development away from agricultural land, open space, and city edges toward land within the urban footprint. Compact urban development in vacant areas makes use of existing infrastructure like sewer and water pipes. Smart infill development is the key to accommodating growth and redesigning our cities to be environmentally and socially sustainable.

mixed use

DEFINITION Mixed-use development places homes and jobs close to services and stores. When the term mixed-use is used, many people think of multi-story buildings with shops, restaurants or offices below and homes above. This design is a great way to get people living, working, and relaxing in the same place, but it may not be suited for smaller cities and towns. Instead of building up, different types of buildings can be mixed in together, side by side. Both of these styles accomplish the goal of bringing a variety of services close together so that people can meet their basic needs within their neighborhoods, thereby reducing how much people drive. When advocating for mixed-use development policies in your General Plan, emphasize that it can fit the character of your community.

transit-oriented development

DEFINITION Transit-oriented development integrates moderate to higher density development located within an easy walk of a major transit stop, generally with a mix of residential, employment, and shopping opportunities designed for pedestrians, but without excluding cars.

LINK TO CLIMATE CHANGE When transit use, walking, and bicycling increase, vehicle miles traveled (the number of miles that people drive) can drop by 20-30%.[12] Consequently, air pollution emissions and energy consumption decrease for people living in transit-oriented

LINK TO CLIMATE CHANGE Infill development in existing cities and towns tends to be closer to the places people want to get to—jobs, shops, schools, etc.—and to more transportation options like buses and trains. According to the Center for Clean Air Policy, an infill development that is designed compactly with a diversity of uses near destinations and transit can reduce CO2 emissions by 15 - 50% compared to the emissions generated by traditional development.[10]

Infill development like these homes near BART in Oakland attract residents and customers alike.

LINK TO CLIMATE CHANGE Research has shown that by planning and zoning for sufficient densities to support a mix of uses that people can walk to, it is possible to reduce driving by 30% below traditional development patterns.[11] The less people drive, the less global warming pollutants enter the air.

In Windsor, apartments are above shops, building a community around the new Town Green.

developments. Rates of greenhouse gas emissions have been shown to be 2.5 to 3.7 tons per year per household lower when development occurs near transit stops.

Residents of these row homes near the Diridon transit hub in San Jose have the option to drive less.

TRANSPORTATION OR CIRCULATION ELEMENT

parking

DEFINITION Generous parking requirements discourage transit use, walking, and biking and add enormous costs to infill development. Surface parking can cost $9,000 per space; more land-efficient garages or underground parking can cost $30,000 to $50,000 per space. This drives up housing prices and may make entire developments economically infeasible. Ample parking also encourages more driving, prioritizing convenience for cars rather than the safety or comfort of people on foot. By discouraging parking and encouraging walking, cities can provide more housing and amenities for residents—with less traffic impact and less land wasted on parking lots.

Cities can adopt creative policy solutions that reduce demand for parking spaces and meet their parking needs with fewer spaces. Examples include allowing parking to be shared where appropriate, so that residents can use parking spaces at night and office workers or shoppers

complete streets: bicycle initiatives

DEFINITION "Complete Streets" are streets which make it easy and comfortable for all users to get around, whether they are walking, bicycling, driving, or in a walker or wheelchair. Bicycle programs can include a variety of initiatives to increase safety and accessibility for cyclists. Program options (related to land use) may include but are not limited to:

- Designated bicycle lanes and bridges
- Effective bicycle signs and traffic signal improvements
- Connections between transit and bicycling
- Bicycle parking and storage
- Facilities for cyclists, such as showers and lockers

complete streets: pedestrian-oriented design

DEFINITION For the past half century or more, many American cities have been designed around the automobile. Because we have been building our cities without considering how people will experience a city as they navigate it by foot, it is now extremely difficult to be a pedestrian in many places. Pedestrian-oriented design shifts the focus of design away from the car and back to people. Making cities easier, safer, and more enjoyable places to walk will encourage people to drive less.

Pedestrian design features include:

- Buildings with features such as front porches and rear garages that foster an interactive relationship between people and passersby
- Interconnected streets with a grid pattern rather than dead ends or cul-de-sacs

by day. Another idea is "parking cash out" at workplaces, where employers offer employees a monthly cash payment in lieu of free parking.

LINK TO CLIMATE CHANGE An Air Resources Board analysis of employers who participated in the state's parking cash-out program found an average 17% reduction in solo driving per employer and a 12% drop in average vehicle miles traveled per employee per year.[13] Genentech's Transportation Demand Management program for its South San Francisco campus, which includes parking cash out and improved transit and shuttle services, increased transit ridership by 70% in eight months. In addition, excessive minimum parking requirements make it very difficult to repurpose an older building or to develop infill sites. This hinders developing within our existing cities and towns and encourages developing on open space, which gives people little choice but to drive long distances to meet their basic needs.

LINK TO CLIMATE CHANGE A National Personal Transportation Survey indicated that 40% of all trips in the United States are shorter than 2 miles in length, the equivalent of a ten-minute bicycle trip.[14] While not every trip can be made by bicycle, this illustrates that there is high potential for increasing bicycle trips. As a non-polluting form of transportation, bicycles contribute to the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and other air pollution resulting from fossil fuel use.

Bike lanes make it safer and easier for more people to cycle to their destinations.

- Short to medium length blocks with continuous sidewalks
- Well-marked and frequent pedestrian crossings
- Features that strongly encourage cars to slow down, such as medians, curbs that bulb out to create a narrower roadway, and on-street parking
- People-scale features that make a place feel welcoming, including benches, pocket parks, and food stands
- Integration of shade-trees into the streetscape

LINK TO CLIMATE CHANGE It is estimated that by improving pedestrian amenities, cities can reduce their rates of vehicle miles traveled by somewhere between 1% and 10%.[15] Though this may not seem like a very high percentage, it can add up when creating pedestrian-friendly streets is coupled with other approaches.

HOUSING ELEMENT

affordable housing

DEFINITION According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, a home is considered "affordable" if the costs account for less than 30% of an individual or family's income. Families who pay more than 30% of their income on rent or a mortgage are considered burdened by the cost of their shelter. Paying more than 30% for housing may make it difficult to pay for other necessities such as food, clothing, transportation and medical care.[16]

LINK TO CLIMATE CHANGE When affordable homes are unavailable within a city, many residents are forced to move to more reasonably priced areas outside city limits and commute in to their jobs. This contributes to sprawl, which

density

DEFINITION Higher-density housing can take many different forms, from apartments to condominiums to townhomes. The basic principle of higher-density housing is to create many attractive, affordable homes within a small amount of space, rather than building inefficient, piecemeal single-family homes on individual plots of land. What is considered "high" density depends largely on the setting. While newer suburbs have densities of only four to six houses or dwellings per acre, suburbs built in the early 20th century have densities of ten to 18 dwellings per acre. Apartment buildings of three to five stories have been built in the Bay Area at anywhere from 30 to 150 dwellings per acre. All of these can be built attractively, fitting into a neighborhood's character, while adding a significant number of homes. Ultimately, residents' experience of a given building has much less to do with density than design.

LINK TO CLIMATE CHANGE Well-located, higher-density housing puts people close to shops, jobs, restaurants and services, meaning more trips can be made by walking, biking, and riding buses instead of by car. This also creates a larger customer base for local stores, supporting a wider array of services, which in turn means that even more needs can be fulfilled close to home. Similarly, putting people close to transit increases the service on that line and the overall feasibility of public transportation.

paves over important greenhouse gas-absorbing open space and adds to a community's rate of vehicle miles traveled. In the Bay Area, 30% of workers commute to jobs outside of their own county; traffic congestion is expected to increase by 249% by 2020.[17] Among these commuters are those who lack a nearby affordable home and must live far from their jobs.

Edgewater in Larkspur provides homes that are affordable to low-wage workers and offers access for people with disabilities.

A study published by the California Air Resources Board found that people in newer, low-density suburbs drive almost twice as much as people living in more compact Bay Area cities such as Berkeley and Oakland, and four times as much as people living in northeast San Francisco. Another study concluded that for every doubling of density, the amount each resident drives annually drops by 25–30%.[18]

Density also reduces building energy use. Housing with shared walls uses less energy. Renewable energy can also be more affordable because the cost can be shared by the residents of an entire building or neighborhood. Finally, building more compactly contains sprawl, minimizing the degradation of vital agricultural and conservation lands.

In Hercules, planners designed a community that provides close-knit homes and pleasant, walkable neighborhoods.

OPEN SPACE ELEMENT

urban parks and greenspace

DEFINITION Urban green space can take a wide variety of forms, from playgrounds, community gardens, and boulevards lined with old growth trees to trails, streams, wetlands, and wildlife habitat tucked within a city's limits. All urban parks and green spaces are similar in that they bring the built and natural environment together.

LINK TO CLIMATE CHANGE One of the climate challenges unique to cities is the phenomenon of urban heat islands. Much of the land in urban areas is covered in dark, paved surfaces that absorb heat during the day, retain it, and slowly release it at night. Vegetation mitigates this phenomenon by converting hot, CO_2 laden air to cooler, purified air through evapotranspiration. Urban parks are critical in breaking up dark, impervious surfaces and improving air quality within cities.

To make living in an urban area attractive, easy access to open space is important as a substitute for backyards. If urban residents are able to access nature within their cities, they may be less likely to move or travel to less dense areas to meet their recreational needs, thereby reducing miles traveled by car.

urban growth boundaries

DEFINITION An urban growth boundary is a line that defines where new development should and should not go. Beyond this line, the city's urbanized area will not expand. An urban growth boundary should encircle the entire city, be adopted by voters, be geographically specific, and be long lasting. A strong boundary prevents the subdivision of farmland and open space on the city's edge, and channels investment into the existing city. Adopting an urban growth boundary sends a clear signal that a city wants to direct growth toward improving existing neighborhoods, and that it will not support sprawl development. Urban growth boundaries are a tool for redirecting growth, not stopping it. They are most effective when combined with plans and zoning codes that encourage more intensive development inside the line, especially downtown and near transit.

Urban parks and open space are vital places to relax and rejuvenate.

LINK TO CLIMATE CHANGE Urban growth boundaries set limits on sprawling development, and instead encourage denser, more energy-efficient development within city centers, where people are less likely to drive to get to their destinations. The large, contiguous swaths of open space created by urban growth boundaries are essential to mitigating climate change as they absorb the greenhouse gas produced by the cities they surround.

Urban growth boundaries, like this one in Fairfield, keep growth within a city's footprint and preserve open space.

how do I make sure my city adopts a good plan?

The process of creating and adopting a General Plan typically takes two years or more. Community advocates like you should establish themselves as a source of both information and political support for elected officials to adopt a high quality General Plan that thoroughly addresses climate change.

Ten steps to success

Outlined below are the basic steps to get a jurisdiction to adopt a climate-friendly General Plan. These steps are roughly in order, though some may occur simultaneously. Much of this section is adapted from the Great Communities Collaborative toolkit,[19] an excellent reference for community members working on land-use planning processes. We encourage you to refer to it for more details on the steps listed below.

1. **Set goals for the General Plan.** Along with your partners, envision what you would like your city to look like in the future. Develop a platform that includes your goals for the General Plan. These goals can include a number of new homes (market rate and affordable), a mix of uses (shops, jobs and homes in the same neighborhoods), design principles, bike and pedestrian paths, public parks, and other features the community needs. (See pages 14-21).

2. **Educate and organize your base.** Reach out to a base of supporters who will become advocates for a climate-friendly General Plan that meets your goals. These supporters need to be vocal at every step in the process. Equip them with information and facts about the need for a climate-friendly General Plan, talking points for public hearings, sample letters to the editor, and media training, if possible.

3. **Find a champion.** Find a city council member or members who will advocate for a climate-friendly General Plan that meets your goals. Talk with the council member(s) about your goals and gauge their level of understanding and knowledge. Your champion may be able to get

the city council to outline goals for the plan before the staff starts working on it. Talk with your champion early on about this possibility.

4. **Understand the process.** Meet with city staff to understand the process and the opportunities for public input. Cities generally hold a series of community meetings where information is presented and input is sought. Then the city releases a series of alternatives followed by a draft preferred plan and draft environmental impact report for public comment. The planning commission will review these drafts and city council will ultimately adopt the plan. It is important to understand the process, know important dates, and be informed if dates change. Once the city has kicked off a

People with many different interests have a stake in the city's General Plan. Think broadly and identify people that share your goals.

planning process, staff will often carry out community meetings and hire consultants to do studies and analyses. Often they will hire a consultant to do the entire planning process. If your city does hire consultants, ask to see the Request for Qualifications before they are released and make suggestions. If you can influence who they hire, you can influence how the analysis and community outreach is done. Stay in contact with your city staff and make sure you know when decisions will be made and where you can influence the plan. (See timeline on page 27.) Although the process may drag out, stay vigilant to ensure a quality plan is adopted.

5. **Submit recommendations.** Using the resources provided in this document, create specific, written suggestions for the General Plan—including draft policy language and land-use map proposals—that will best achieve your goals. Send your suggestions to city staff; they may appreciate the help and put your recommendations into the draft plan.

6. **Build alliances for good planning.** People with many different interests have a stake in the city's General Plan. Environmentalists, bike advocates, affordable housing supporters, faith leaders, union members, businesspeople, health care representatives, and many others can benefit from well-planned, climate-friendly development. Think broadly and identify people that share your goals. Contact these people to see if they are interested in working together to support a climate-friendly General Plan.

7. **Contact the media.** Contact the media at key milestones during the campaign, including when your city kicks off the planning process, holds community meetings, and releases drafts. Find out which reporters will likely cover this issue and begin contacting them early to show them why the General Plan is so important to the whole community's future.

8. **Shape the plan through community meetings.** Community meetings are an opportunity for your base and your allies to shape the plan to meet your goals. Ask city staff how the meetings will be run, and prep your members and allies beforehand with talking points. Some residents may oppose some of your goals for the plan. Stay in close contact with your supportive council members and participate in the community meetings to ensure your goals are well-represented.

9. **Review and respond to analyses and drafts of the plan.** As the city releases land-use alternatives and the draft plan, as well as associated environmental review documents, you should be prepared to review and respond to them. Some organizations or coalitions have the expertise to review these studies and plans, but if you do not, you may be able find experts to help you. Ask them to review the plan, see how well it measures up to your goals, and recommend policies to improve the plan. You should also prepare your base to be able to respond quickly to the draft plan, as time is often limited to 60 days or less. (See Resources for sample comment letters for different stages of a city's General Plan process.)

10. **Celebrate and monitor implementation.** After the plan is adopted, don't forget to publicize and celebrate! After that, monitoring and implementation are the final steps to make sure the plan is followed. Encourage your city to take creative steps to implement the plan, including seeking out additional funds.

City and planning staff may be delighted to see an engaged resident and welcome your comments. By law, though, you get to chime in about climate change. According to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), every General Plan must undergo an environmental review. As a result of court cases (see page 31) and other recent changes to the CEQA process, climate change must now be considered during the environmental review of a General Plan.

Why is the environmental review process important in the General Plan?

The California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) is a law that requires state and local agencies to identify the significant environmental impacts of their actions and to avoid or mitigate those impacts, if possible. The primary way CEQA is implemented is through the creation of an Environmental Impact Report that identifies potential environmental impacts of a plan or project and specific mitigation measures to avoid or reduce those impacts.

If you are already familiar with CEQA, you may know it best as a process that private developers must go through when they have proposed a specific development project. This is true but it is not the end of the story. Public agencies—like cities and counties—must also comply with CEQA any time they undertake a "project." Legally, a project is any kind of activity taken on by a public or private agency that requires approval and "which may cause either a direct physical change in the environment or a reasonably foreseeable indirect change in the environment." In other words, any new development or plan that could have an impact on the environment has to go through the CEQA review process. This includes city and county General Plans.

Environmental review and mitigation measures

If the review shows that a General Plan will result in an increase in greenhouse gas emissions, the city or county must come up with some kind of alternative or way to counter balance any damage done. The Attorney General's office has stated that, whenever possible, these mitigation measures must be mandatory, rather than optional.

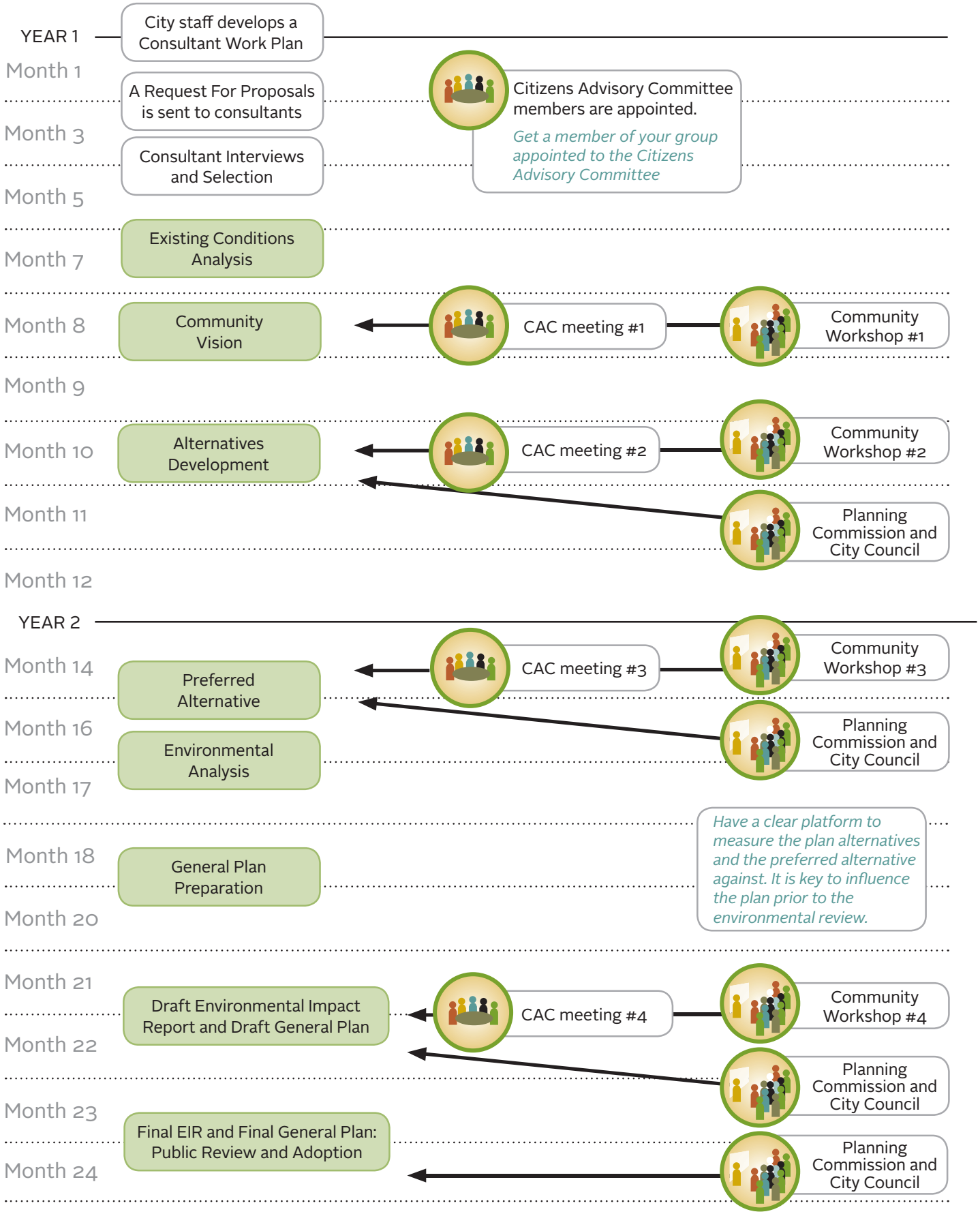
Infill and mixed-use development, reduced parking, bicycle and pedestrian amenities, and creation of affordable homes are all tools that can be used as mitigation measures to reduce your city's impact to climate change.

Another advantage to making sure your city puts together a strong environmental impact report (EIR), complete with detailed mitigation measures, is that thorough environmental review early on makes it easier for climate-friendly development to move forward when it is proposed later. CEQA allows development proposals that are consistent with the General Plan to rely on or "tier off" the General Plan EIR, rather than repeat existing analysis. Once your community has decided, through its General Plan, where and how you want to grow and develop in your town, a good environmental impact report can help chart the course for making that vision a reality.

When can I advocate for climate change during the General Plan update?

Every General Plan must go through a fairly standard review process before it is adopted. At each stage of review along the way, you will have the opportunity to add your voice as a climate change activist to the conversation. The timeline of events on the next page outlines opportunities for engagement in the environmental review process for a General Plan update. (For more information on CEQA, see *The Community Guide to CEQA* from the Planning and Conservation League Foundation.[20])

A typical timeline of events for a General Plan update



why should my city care about climate change in the general plan?

To address climate change, California passed new laws that have a big influence on local land-use planning. The following are a few of the most important state level decisions and laws that relate to climate change. Having a basic understanding of these significant laws will be helpful in your local advocacy.

California's Global Warming Solutions Act

In June 2006, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger issued an executive order, calling for California to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions to 1990 levels by 2020 and to 80% below 1990 levels by 2050.[21] Later that year, the legislature voted to codify the goals of Governor Schwarzenegger's executive order by passing Assembly Bill 32. AB 32, or the Global Warming Solutions Act of 2006, officially recognizes the threat that climate change poses to the "economic well-being, public health, natural resources, and environment of California." The bill also officially required that statewide greenhouse gas emissions be reduced to 1990 levels by the year 2020.

What AB 32 means for your city's General Plan

The authors of AB 32 recognized that their visionary targets would remain unattainable without an accompanying plan for implementation. To ensure that California would have a clear path to achieving the required 15% greenhouse gas reduction by 2020, the language of AB 32 also explicitly charged the California Air Resources Board with the task of developing a plan to achieve the targets.[22] In 2008, the California Air Resources Board released a Scoping Plan that set specific numbers for California's greenhouse gas reductions and spelled out how those numbers would be achieved through a variety of different strategies.

This is where your city's General Plan comes in. The Scoping Plan for AB 32 recommends that local governments reduce their emissions 15% below current levels by 2020. In order to meet the mandate of AB 32, each city and county should make "a good faith effort to estimate its present inventory of sources of emissions." After calculating

its estimated greenhouse gas emissions, your city or county should then prepare a plan to achieve the AB 32 goals and adopt those measures as part of its General Plan.[23] If your city or county has not conducted a greenhouse gas inventory, you can find out how to do so by contacting the California Air Resources Board and the California Climate Action Registry.

California's Sustainable Communities and Climate Protection Act

California's SB 375 is the nation's first legislation to link transportation and land-use planning with global warming. The Sustainable Communities and Climate Protection Act, SB 375, is a unique, complex law but one crucial thing it does is change the way the state plans regionally,

It is definitely not essential that you understand the ins and outs of SB 375. The most important thing to know, as a climate change activist, is that SB 375 signals a statewide sea change in the way we are approaching climate change and the way we are distributing transportation funding. For the first time, California is recognizing the direct link between the ways we plan our cities and our greenhouse gas emissions and calling for spending decisions to be linked to greenhouse gas reductions.

enhancing our ability to reach AB 32 goals. To learn more, visit *http://www.nrdc.org/globalwarming/sb375/*.[24] For this toolkit, we'll focus on the key elements of SB 375 relevant to General Plans.

SB 375 changes California planning and transportation law in five basic ways:

- It adds a component called the Sustainable Communities Strategy to the Regional Transportation Plan, a region's 25-year blueprint for transportation projects and investments. The Sustainable Communities Strategy is an integrated land-use and transportation plan that lowers greenhouse gas emissions by reducing driving (see sidebar).
- It links the region's transportation spending decisions to the Sustainable Communities Strategy.
- It makes sure that the regional distribution of housing reflects the land-use pattern in the Sustainable Communities Strategy.
- It adds new provisions to the California Environmental Quality Act to encourage land-use decisions that implement the Sustainable Communities Strategy.
- It adds new provisions to accurately account for the transportation impacts of land-use decisions.[25]

What SB 375 means for your city's General Plan

While one of the main goals of SB 375 is to place more emphasis on planning at the regional level, local governments will still play a very important role in the bill's implementation. In California, essentially all land use authority lies in the hands of local governments. Development occurs only when and where local governments approve it. The General Plan establishes where that development ought to go.

SB 375 does not explicitly require cities to update their General Plans to be consistent with the region's Sustainable Communities Strategy. The one exception is that each city must update the Housing element of its General Plan every eight years to identify locations where the city can accommodate its fair share of the region's need for new homes. Those "fair share" numbers will be based on where the Sustainable Communities Strategy shows new development can be the most climate-friendly.

The transportation carrot

Local governments rely on regional transportation funds to provide services for new developments. If cities want those regional transportation dollars, they will now have to comply with SB 375. What does this mean in practice? The legislation merely states that transportation funding decisions must be consistent with the Sustainable Communities Strategy. It is open to interpretation whether this means simply that large transportation projects (like new highways and rail lines) must be part of the Sustainable Communities Strategy to receive funding, or whether it means cities whose General Plans don't match the land-use pattern contained in the Sustainable Communities Strategy can no longer receive any transportation dollars.

The important thing for you to know is that it is in your city's best interest to get on board now and commit to climate-friendly planning to ensure they are fully eligible for regional transportation funding.

What your city should know about climate change lawsuits

If AB 32 and SB 375 are not enough to persuade your city to address climate change in its General Plan, perhaps legal threats will be! In recent years, the State Attorney General's office and other plaintiffs have successfully sued cities for failing to adequately address climate change in their General Plans. Even in situations where cases are settled out of court, the ordeal is costly, time consuming and something that every city wants to avoid. If you feel that your local decision-makers and planners are not seriously considering the climate-related ramifications of your city's General Plan, remind them that there is a legal precedent that establishes that they must.

In 2007, the Attorney General sued the County of San Bernardino for inadequately considering climate change in its county General Plan. In 2008, the State Attorney General and the Sierra Club sued the City of Stockton for failing to incorporate climate change reduction strategies in its General Plan. Both San Bernardino County and the City of Stockton lost their legal battles and were required to add specific greenhouse gas reduction strategies to their General Plans. Similarly, the Sierra Club won its lawsuit against the City of Tulare because it had failed to examine global warming, urban sprawl, and farmland conservation.

What is a Sustainable Communities Strategy?

In California, each region creates a Regional Transportation Plan, which, thanks to SB 375, now have a component called the Sustainable Communities Strategy. This strategy:

- **Sets forth an integrated development pattern and transportation network** that will achieve the region's greenhouse gas emission reduction target, if possible.
- **Identifies areas** for housing and development for all of a region's projected future population.
- **Identifies and considers significant resource areas** and farmland.
- **Provides an alternative planning strategy** if it is not possible to achieve targets within the Sustainable Community Strategy.
- **Complies with federal clean air** and transportation laws.

Ask your city staff to make sure the General Plan update is consistent with the Sustainable Communities Strategy for your region.

On March 19, 2009, the Tulare County's Superior Court ordered the Tulare planning department to include mitigation measures for these three issues in the City General Plan update.

These court cases send a very clear message to other California municipalities. Unless they too want to go through an expensive and lengthy legal battle, cities and counties must use their General Plans to take a hard, meaningful look at their contributions to global warming.

conclusion

Climate change affects everyone, and many state and regional leaders have spoken up for the need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. We now see the link between land use and climate change. That's why it's vital to change the way we build and how we get around, but those decisions rest with local leaders and people like you.

Act locally for climate change

Local decision-makers may know what they need to do to comply with state and regional rules, but they rely on the support of their constituents. A strong coalition of advocates, with your leadership, can guide elected officials to make good decisions for the future of your city.

That's why you are so important. You can make a difference in your city. By following the steps outlined in this toolkit, you can influence the outcome of your city's General Plan. In the decades that follow, land use in your city will be smart and climate-friendly.

Resources

The Community Guide to CEQA, the Planning and Conservation League Foundation, http://www.pclfoundation.org/events/ceqaguide.html

General Plans and Zoning: A Toolkit on Land Use and Health, Public Health Law and Policy (has a comprehensive glossary), http://www.phlpnet.org/healthy-planning/products/general-plans-and-zoning

Great Communities Toolkit, Great Communities Collaborative, http://greatcommunities.org/resources/regional-tools/gcc-tookit-table-of-contents

Model Policies for Greenhouse Gases in General Plans, the California Air Pollution Control Officers Association, http://www.capcoa.org/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2010/05/CAPCOA-ModelPolicies-6-12-09-915am.pdf

Smart Infill, Greenbelt Alliance, http://www.greenbelt.org/resources/reports/smartinfill/index.html

Sample comment letters on climate change in General Plans, http://www.greenbelt.org/resources/commentletters.html

Endnotes

1. Source Inventory of Bay Area Greenhouse Gas Emissions, Bay Area Air Quality Management District, 2007, http://www.baaqmd.gov/~/media/Files/Planning%20and%20Research/Emission%20Inventory/regionalinventory2007_2_10.ashx
2. http://www.capcoa.org/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2010/05/CAPCOA-ModelPolicies-6-12-09-915am.pdf
3. City of San Diego General Plan, Executive Summary, March 2008, page SF-25
4. Ibid
5. City of San Diego General Plan, Executive Summary, March 2008, page SF-3-4
6. Yolo County: About the General Plan, http://www.yolocounty.org/Index.aspx?page=1311
7. http://ag.ca.gov/globalwarming/pdf/CEQA_GP_FAQs.pdf, page 6
8. http://greenbelt.org/downloads/resources/report_smartinfill2008.pdf
9. http://www.capcoa.org/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2010/05/CAPCOA-ModelPolicies-6-12-09-915am.pdf
10. Transportation Emissions Guidebook, Center for Clean Air Policy, 2009, http://www.ccap.org/safe/guidebook/guide_complete.html
11. http://www.uli.org/AM/Template cfm?Section=News_Roundup&CONTENTID=97047&TEMPLATE=/CM/ContentDisplay.cfm
12. http://www.ccap.org/safe/guidebook/guide_complete.html
13. *Reducing Congestion and Greenhouse Gas Emissions through Parking Policy*, presented to the California State Senate, February 24, 2009, www.sen.ca.gov/ftp/sen/.../02-24-09 Summary-ParkingPolicy.doc, page 3
14. National Household Travel Survey 2001, http://nhts.ornl.gov/
15. http://www.ccap.org/images/guidebook/CCAP_Transportation_Guidebook_Part1.pdf
16. http://www.hud.gov/offices/cpd/affordablehousing/
17. "Livable Communities: Creating Safe and Livable Neighborhoods, Towns, and Regions in California" from UC Berkeley's Institute of Urban and Regional Development, http://escholarship.org/ucitem/8xf2d6jg?query=249%20percent;hitNum=1#page-1
18. http://docs.nrdc.org/smartGrowth/files/sma_09121401a.pdf
19. http://greatcommunities.org/resources/regional-tools/gcc-tookit-table-of-contents
20. http://www.pclfoundation.org/events/ceqaguide.html
21. "Climate Change, the California Environmental Quality Act, and General Plan Updates: Straightforward Answers to Some Frequently Asked Questions," California Attorney General's Office, http://ag.ca.gov/globalwarming/pdf/CEQA_GP_FAQs.pdf, page 4
22. Ibid
23. Adams, Linda S., Mary D. Nichols, James N. Goldstene, *Climate Change, Proposed Scoping Plan: A Framework for Change*, California Air Resources Board, http://www.climateplanca.org/scoping_plan_oct08.pdf
24. *Communities Tackle Global Warming*, National Resources Defense Council, 2009, page 7
25. "Senate Bill 375: Redesigning Communities to Reduce Greenhouse Gas Emissions." Office of the Governor, October 30, 2009, http://gov.ca.gov/index.php?/fact-sheet/10707/ SB375

"Each community can make profound reductions in greenhouse gases by reshaping development patterns over time. *Green Your City's Blueprint* explains how General Plans can save open space, strengthen neighborhoods, and reduce how much we drive—and also gives tactics to make green plans happen. It is a 'must read' for anyone interested in taking on climate change at home."

—Matthew Taecker, Principal Planner for Downtown Berkeley, and Secretary for the California Planning Roundtable

GREENBELT ALLIANCE
Open Spaces & Vibrant Places

631 Howard Street, Suite 510
San Francisco, CA 94105

www.greenbelt.org