

# Visalia

## General Plan Update

*Summary of Additional  
Community Leader Interviews*

PREPARED FOR  
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## SUMMARY OF ADDITIONAL COMMUNITY LEADER INTERVIEWS

At the City’s request, 10 additional community leader (“stakeholder”) interviews we conducted, either in person on June 10<sup>th</sup> or shortly thereafter by telephone. This interview summary is intended to complement the May Summary of Community Leader Interviews, providing additional information for the General Plan Update Review Committee (GPURC), City staff and the consultant team to consider as we move forward with the update process. As with the prior interviews, it should be noted that the questions posed were used only to guide the interview process. Actual questions asked and time spent in each topic varied according to the specific concerns and priorities of each interviewed.

### 1. What do you think are the greatest challenges facing the City today? Which of these do you think should be highest priority for the General Plan update? Why?

- In general, most stakeholders interviewed agreed that addressing growth – and the challenges they bring, is the most important challenge facing the City today. While there was broad agreement on the need to manage growth, participants had differing solutions. One stakeholder advocated smart growth as a means to protect farmland and prevent urban sprawl, but another opposed it on the grounds that “higher densities will run businesses out of town”. In terms of economic growth, while some stakeholders stressed the need to diversify the economy and reduce the City’s reliance on agriculture, another was worried that doing so will cause the City to lose its farmlands and agricultural heritage. Those that advocated diversifying the economy suggested opening a 4-year college or creating a medical-hub as potential economic development initiatives.
- Related to the question of growth was the issue of keeping the City’s physical boundary. A number of stakeholders specifically mentioned the need to preserve Visalia’s small-town character, which is partly informed by its compact size and open surroundings as well as the openness residents feel to each other. This rural setting will be threatened if the County introduces urban land uses into unincorporated areas, which this new General Plan could protect.
- Like the earlier group of interviewees, some stakeholders brought up natural resource protection as a topic of concern to them. One stakeholder mentioned the region’s limited and poor quality water supply as an impediment to growth, while another expressed concerns about the Valley’s deteriorating air quality and its impact on Visalia’s quality of life. The City’s quality of life was on the minds of two other stakeholders when they mentioned the deteriorating economy and its effects on crime and the need to support the City’s ability to continue to provide quality service on a reduced budget.
- Other challenges and priorities mentioned included planning for Downtown; preserving Valley Oak trees in the City; public safety (particularly related to gang violence); and historic preservation.

*“Water is an issue – but people don’t think of it as such as long as they turn on the tap and water still runs.”*



*“Real policy is needed for infill development.”*



*“Visalia has a great natural habitat with the creeks and the oak trees.”*



*“Large town with small town qualities.”*



*“Downtown is a big asset, keep it viable.”*



*“The downtown is a prime area for housing. Getting up to 3-4 stories is very good.”*



*“You either let something happen, or you’re proactive about it and you manage it and you plan it.”*



**2. What aspects of the City do you like most? What do you like about living here? Expanding on this idea, what are the community’s assets, and how should the General Plan build on them?**

- “Visalia’s small town character” was an often heard response when those interviewed were asked to identify aspects of the City they liked the most. “Small town character with larger City amenities” is how one stakeholder described it. Stakeholders also liked the City’s natural settings, such as its many waterways and oak trees. Besides the natural environment, many also liked the City’s diversity, quality of life and reasonable cost of living.
- The City’s Downtown was mentioned by several stakeholders as a major asset because it has a sense of place and history. Consequently, these stakeholders thought it is very important for the City to keep the Downtown viable and active. A number of people also counted the hospital as a major asset because it helps attract medical workers and professionals to move to Visalia and makes Visalia a regional medical center, which will be reinforced with buildout of a new campus in the Southeast.
- The City’s physical separation from other communities, professional police force, and historical assets were also mentioned as important assets.
- In commenting on how the General Plan should build on Visalia’s assets, stakeholders emphasized the need to promote infill development and preserve a green belt between Visalia and surrounding communities. One stakeholder noted the concept of concentric growth had served the City well and should be continued. Another stakeholder urged the City adopt a “strong policy on rings and annexation” to encourage economic development. Additionally, stakeholders felt that having a balanced growth is important, particularly with respect to expanding City boundaries northwards without neglecting growth in other directions.

**3. Community livability has been an important concern, and many think of Visalia as one of the best places to live in the county. As the City looks ahead to potential growth areas—in the southeast, the 198 corridor west of town, along Mooney Boulevard, and other areas—what are the ideas you would like emphasized? (Community design, walkability, public space, etc.)**

- A few of those interviewed expressed reservations about the planned development in the Southeast. One commented that they City should not start major developments if there are still infill sites within the City. While he felt the Southeast Area specific plan was interesting, the “whole process seemed to ignore the concept of infill”. Another expressed doubts that the area or Tulare County in general are ready for high density development. And, then another stakeholder raised the issue of connectivity and felt that there were not enough links between the proposed development and existing areas. The development’s impact on existing neighborhoods was on the mind of one stakeholder when he commented that the proposed developments may divert activity away from Downtown.

- Related to the discussion on Downtown was a suggestion to turn empty upper floors of buildings in downtown into artist lofts or residential units to fulfill Housing Element needs. The interviewee felt that the City could work more closely with property owners and the College of the Sequoias to put the empty floors into use. This would bring greater vitality to the Downtown area. Other suggestions to promote vitality in Visalia included attracting a Trader Joe's or 4-year college, introducing a light rail transit line (LRT), and transitioning Mooney Boulevard from a 1960s strip mall model into a mixed use area.
- Promoting vitality was a frequent theme throughout the interviews and many good ideas were put forward. One stakeholder suggested creating an agriculture enterprise zone that would have wineries or agricultural-related offices in an agricultural setting. Besides increasing job opportunities, this would also make Visalia more appealing from a tourism standpoint. Similarly, creating a museum could help promote tourism and preserve Visalia's history.
- A number of people touched on the issue of cross-town accessibility. For them, walkability, bikability, and better transit service are factors that could help increase Visalia's livability. One stakeholder especially liked the idea of providing shuttle service to the parks as is now done to the Sierras. Many felt that the parks as well as the creeks and waterways are natural features that make Visalia special and the City should do more to improve them.

*"Very important that the town maintains its identity."*



**4. What trends concern you when thinking about the future of Visalia?**

- Many of those interviewed were concerned about the bad economic situation and its effects on Visalia. Some stakeholders noted that foreclosures have led to empty homes in the City's residential neighborhoods and vacant stores in the commercial areas. Particularly troubling to them were vacant stores in Sequoia Mall and Mooney Boulevard.
- Two stakeholders were concerned about the City losing its identity from a gradual loss of land to the County. One of them highlighted the need to "preserve the green belt as long as possible" while the other worried that County developments, such as the Tulare Motor Sports Park, could destroy Visalia's community fabric.
- Additional concerns that were mentioned included the deteriorating air quality in the Valley, increasing gang activity in Visalia, and water supply shortage.

*"Mooney Boulevard is looking bad. Should try to fill the existing facilities/stores, rather than development new buildings."*



**5. Economic development will be a cornerstone of the new General Plan: what specific industries or types of businesses have growth potential and how could the City use the General Plan process to attract them?**

- The majority agreed that economic development is an issue that needs to be addressed in the upcoming General Plan. Of the industries or types of businesses that the City should attract, some stakeholders expressed a preference for high-tech industries due to the higher wages they bring. But the stakeholders were uncertain if the City could attract them if it does not have a higher education institution. Related to that suggestion was the idea, mentioned before, to attract a 4-year col-

*"Visalia could be the solar City of the future."*



*"Manufacturing – we have to be selective in who comes in."*



lege. However, the stakeholder later remarked that it was “probably not a real possibility” since College of Sequoias had been unable to bring Fresno State facilities to Visalia over the years.

- “Green technology” and “clean industries” were other strongly supported suggestions. One individual in particular gave the example of solar industries as an industry the City should attract. Another wondered why the City should send its garbage to be recycled in the County if it could create a recycling industry “right here in Visalia”. Other stakeholders suggested light manufacturing, but stressed that they must be non-polluting. VF Industries was mentioned as an example of a clean industry.
- A couple of stakeholders mentioned that City should not just attract any industry or businesses, but target those that play to City strengths. Examples of those that fit in this category include the agriculture food processing industry and agriculture tourism industry. In suggesting the latter, a stakeholder remarked that Visalia has many assets, such as farmlands, creeks and trees, all of which could attract visitors. Another suggested attracting commercial tree nurseries. He reasoned that their operations are containerized and have the benefit of helping reduce carbon dioxide in the atmosphere.
- Others suggested industries that play to the City’s strengths include transportation-related industries due to the City’s accessibility to 198/199, airport and rail; and medical-related industries and services due to the City’s proximity to Hospital.

*“In the General Plan thought process, need to think about what the City is capable of putting in.”*



*“Fiscal management is well done. Measure R funds supplement our money. The City does a good job.”*



*“The City has not been good to senior citizens.”*



**6. Do you have concerns about Visalia’s ability to keep up with the provision of public services, such as improvements to the City’s street system, needs for parks and community facilities, maintenance or infrastructure extensions to growth areas? Do you think the City has adequate financial resources to maintain the present quality of public services in the future?**

- Most of those interviewed said the City had been well run fiscally in the last 20 to 30 years and praised the current City Manager. Although stakeholders were generally confident of the City’s current fiscal situation, some were unsure of the future in light of the State ratcheting down transfer payments to the City and the long-term cost of developing East Downtown.
- There were differing opinions as to the best way forward. One believed that continued success will depend on negotiations with public employment groups and how the City performs in terms of attracting development. Another believed the City needs to encourage growth. Yet another suggested that “as long as the City maintains a sales tax, it will be able to keep up”.
- When asked to comment on the City’s infrastructure and services, those interviewed contributed a great many ideas, including the need to revitalize Mooney Boulevard; the need to improve upon the development of low-income housing; the need to provide better services to senior citizens; and the need to emphasize long-term governance in terms of water resources, staffing, and conservation. Related to the issue of staffing, one individual commented that Visalia has fewer staff compared to similar cities and wondered aloud if they were sufficient to achieve good planning.

**7. Having a balanced transportation system is another planning objective in many communities; what works and doesn't work in Visalia? How well does the City balance the needs of cars, pedestrians, cyclists, and other modes of travel?**

- One stakeholder remarked that cross-town traffic was too fast and they ought to be slowed down. Aside from that, there were no expressed concerns about the local traffic system.
- There were some concerns, however, about Caltrans and the highways. One individual remarked that Caltrans has become bureaucratic and hard to work with. Another said that Caltrans should not have had Highway 63 running through the center of town. The trucks it brought were noisy, polluting, and a safety hazard to residents. He wondered if anything could be done to move it.
- Some doubts were expressed about the feasibility of creating a light rail at this time. One person suggested setting up a bus rapid transit system, with separate lanes, (BRT) before considering light rail. Another commented that any plans to connect regionally would depend on the State's fiscal situation and a long-term commitment to the High Speed Rail program. Related to the question of rail was a comment that Amtrak has served the City well and strengthening that service is important.
- Walkability and bikability were also discussed during the interviews. One commented that it is important to have space for bicycles and safe routes to schools. Another said he was happy with the work done so far, but connections between bicycle paths could be improved.

*"Caltrans shouldn't have Highway 63 running through the center of town."*



*"Improve connections around town and what you already have."*



**8. Parks, schools and recreation facilities are key elements of City building: what do you think the City has done well, and how can the park and open space system be improved?**

- Many stakeholders agreed that the City has done a good job with the parks and waterways, which are viewed as valuable assets to the community. While they were satisfied with the City's job so far, a few commented that more could be done to maintain the parks. The Oval Park on Highway 63 was raised as an example of a park that needs improvement.
- Stakeholders also liked the idea of having pocket parks but commented that they need to be integrated with neighborhoods and connected by bikeways. One criticism of the existing parks was that a few of them appear isolated from neighborhoods. Stonebrook was an example of a park that's too big and isolated. Related to the idea of connectivity was one suggestion to have parks co-located with schools, in the center of neighborhoods rather than on the edges.
- Stakeholders singled out the Sports Park, Riverway Park and Mooney Grove as examples of the types of parks they were very happy with. Other suggestions on parks and recreation include naming parks after Visalians who contributed positively to society, and requiring developers to set-aside land for parks.

*"They keep adding parks – but not maintaining the ones they have."*



*"New sports park is great – they (City staff) are doing well."*



*“We need a cooperative agreement between the County and the incorporated towns.”*

❖

*“Water is important, more than bad air”*

❖

*“If we build “green” infrastructure, the costs will come down.”*

❖

*“Whether its for global warming or other issues, what have to do is improve community and the environment... makes good business sense as well”.*

❖

9. **The County is doing a General Plan Update as well; what concerns do you have about what might be happening within and adjacent to the Study Area in unincorporated areas?**
  - Those interviewed had some reservations about Tulare County’s plans, such as potential very low density development north of the St. John’s River and new urban or “hamlet” land uses in the County General Plan that were seen as incompatible with rural land uses. One stakeholder remarked that he would like to see the City articulate its vision and work cooperatively with the County on issues such as farmland conservation, charging appropriate development fees, and building infrastructure.
10. **Maintaining a strong urban edge is important in some agricultural communities where we have worked, and the idea of urban growth boundaries has been considered by many communities to promote “smart growth” and keep public services costs for new development down. How useful is this idea in Visalia? And, if so, do you think an urban limit line should be tightly or loosely drawn? How well have the current urban growth and development boundaries (based on population projections) worked for the City thus far?**
  - In general, stakeholders liked the idea of maintaining a strong urban edge since having agriculture land or open space around the City is part of Visalia’s heritage. With regards to locating the urban limit line, one stakeholder remarked that growth “north of the river is probably not essential” since the river acts as a natural physical barrier. Similarly, lands west of Highway 198 should remain agricultural. There was no expressed objections to expanding east, northeast, or southeast of current City limits, if needed and justified, since, as one stakeholder commented, “that will keep Downtown more centralized”.
  - Related to the discussion on creating the urban limit line was an idea suggested by one stakeholder to have a minimum 200 feet of buffer corridor between rural and urban land uses.
11. **We have heard a lot in recent years about sustainability, being “green,” and doing what we can to reverse global warming trends. What do these ideas mean for people in Visalia? Do you have any specific thoughts about this, in terms of priorities for this General Plan Update, or any concerns we should know about?**
  - Generally, most stakeholders liked the idea of sustainability and being “green”. For some, it’s a given that people should be good stewards of the environment for the sake of future generations. The idea of being resource independent and self-reliant City also resonated strongly. Some identified the issue with clean air and clean water and felt that being sustainable could increase livability. In spite of these sentiments, a couple of stakeholders cautioned against going to the extreme. The general consensus was that while sustainable development should be an important component of the General Plan, the City should take a balanced approach and ensure that sustainable policies are not at the expense of the City’s competitiveness. The City taking the lead on improving bikability and walkability was listed as one example that was agreeable to all.

- Further to that, stakeholders noted that it is not enough to have ideas about conservation. These ideas need to translate into concrete programs that make people change their behavior. The introduction of water meters is having little effect upon water conservation; this is an example of the need to have effective solutions that are well thought out. Policies need to address details, such as LEED™ standards, and help set up a framework for negotiation with developers about water conservation and energy efficiency, rather than top-down, arbitrary rules. If then it makes economic sense, it will be implemented.
- While discussing the idea of sustainability, a number of stakeholders provided more specific ideas. One expressed a desire to see more trees, another wanted to see Mill Creek daylighted where it currently is buried, and another suggested the City to promote solar generation projects. One felt that the City needed more detention basins or ponding basins and improved filtration systems.

12. We always like to learn from real places, and provide concrete examples of successes in other communities. What cities do you think are good models for Visalia?

- Many stakeholders interviewed liked Visalia as it is and noted the City is the envy of the Valley. What the City really needed to do is to preserve Visalia's assets, such as its oak trees, and create more park-like settings.
- In suggesting cities to learn from, a number of stakeholders selected Davis as an example of a walkable and bikable City. Its education background, recreation amenities, and good stormwater management practices are assets that stakeholders like to have in Visalia. One person brought up Bakersville as an example of a City that has done well with development. Other cities that people mentioned include Modesto and Fresno. One stakeholder mentioned the City should learn from Merced's failed experience to properly integrate their university with the town. Finally, San Luis Obispo was mentioned as having nice downtown and river just like those in Visalia.

*“Modesto has done a good job with its Core.”*



## LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

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