

Introduction

1.1 Purpose

The City of Visalia has embarked on a comprehensive update of its General Plan – the policy document that guides the growth and development of the city. The General Plan is required by law in the state of California, and identifies current and future needs regarding land use, transportation, housing, environmental quality and resources, safety, and noise. In addition to these required elements, Visalia’s General Plan also addresses public facilities and services, city design, and implementation. The General Plan update provides an exciting opportunity for Visalia community members to share their vision for the city’s future and provide input on the city’s long-term goals and development opportunities.

The purpose of this General Plan Update is to:

- Establish a long-range vision that reflects the aspirations of the community and outlines steps to achieve this vision;
- Establish long-range development policies that will guide City Departments, Planning Commission and City Council decision-making;
- Provide a basis for judging whether specific development proposals and public projects are in harmony with plan policies;
- Plan in a manner that meets future land needs based on the projected population and job growth;
- Allow City departments, other public agencies, and private developers to design projects that will enhance the character of the community, preserve and enhance community character and environmental resources, and minimize hazards; and
- Provide the basis for establishing and setting priorities for detailed plans and implementing programs, such as the zoning ordinance, subdivision regulations, specific and master plans, and the Capital Improvement Program.

Accomplishing these goals requires a solid knowledge base of existing conditions and related plans and regulations that have a bearing on the General Plan. This report, which analyzes land use, infrastructure, hazards, and environmental resources, is the first major technical component of the General Plan update process. It evaluates opportunities and constraints in Visalia and the immediately surrounding area and discusses planning implications that the update process will address going forward. The information conveyed in the Existing Conditions Report will help community members, City staff, and elected officials make informed input and decisions throughout the rest of the General Plan update.

1.2 Contents and Organization

Chapters in the Existing Conditions Report are organized by topic, as follows:

1. *Introduction*. Overview of the General Plan Update process, public participation component, Visalia's regional context, and the Planning Area.
2. *Sustainability*. Introduces and defines the concept of sustainability as it pertains to planning and the General Plan Update, discusses how sustainability is measured, and suggests possible leadership opportunities for the City to coincide with the Update.
3. *Demographic and Economic Conditions*. Describes Visalia's current and projected population and employment, and discusses other demographic and economic trends that have implications for future growth and development.
4. *Land Use and Urban Form*. Illustrates Visalia's historical urban development and current city form, identifies current land uses in the Planning Area, describes existing land use plans efforts in Visalia and surrounding jurisdictions, and their bearing on the City.
5. *Development Potential*. Describes current development projects, analyzes future demand and existing supply of land for development, and identifies potential opportunity sites and urban land needs over the planning period.
6. *Transportation*. Examines the existing conditions of roadways, transit, airport, and bicycle and pedestrian facilities, and compares these with level of service (LOS) standards as a way to evaluate how well these systems work.
7. *Public Facilities and Services*. Describes the current regulatory context and conditions and future needs of Visalia's parks, recreation, and open spaces; public schools; social services; police and fire departments; water supply; wastewater and stormwater infrastructure; solid waste facilities; and electricity supply.
8. *Environmental Resources and Hazards*. Examines the current state and concerns related to assets and hazards of Visalia's natural environment, including agriculture, geology, biological resources, air quality, greenhouse gases, hydrology, fire threats, hazardous materials, and noise.

The research and analysis on each topic is communicated through text, tables, and maps. Key findings and planning implications are summarized at the end of this chapter.

1.3 Public Outreach and Participation

Because the General Plan is a policy document meant to implement a community's vision for its future, public participation is an essential part of the planning process. An effective public participation program helps create confidence in the planning process, ensures that the plan's policies are based upon ideas with broad support and reflect the needs and desires of community members. Successful public participation involves collaboration between the City decision-makers, City staff, community members, and the planning team.

Members of the public are encouraged to voice their opinions and contribute to the planning process at any stage. The public participation program for Visalia's General Plan update includes the following components:

- City Council, Planning Commission, and General Plan Update Review Committee (GPURC) meetings
- Community Workshops
- Community Leader Interviews
- Newsletters
- Mail-in Survey
- Project Website (www.visaliageneralplanupdate.com), and also accessible on the home page of the City website
- Focus Groups

As of July 2010, substantial public outreach regarding visioning and issue identification has been completed. In May and June 2010, the consultant team conducted interviews with community leaders, including elected officials, City staff, and representatives from major organizations and institutions. Nearly 50 interviews were held over two three-day periods. The project website was launched on May 20, 2010, which provides background on the update process, links to published documents, and opportunities to provide feedback. The first project newsletter was distributed on May 20 and 21, 2010. The newsletter was written in both English and Spanish. It introduced the General Plan Update, announced the first workshop, and contained the mail-in survey. The mail-in survey included a mix of open-ended and marked-choice questions about various community issues. Finally, the first community workshop was held on June 9, 2010. A presentation, activities, and small group discussions gave participants (approximately 90 in attendance) opportunities to learn more about the planning process and share their ideas, priorities, and concerns. The results of these efforts are summarized in documents on the City's website for the Update.

Public outreach efforts, including additional community workshops at key points in the planning process, will continue through the General Plan Update process. Key decision-making points will include the evaluation of Sketch Plan Alternatives, the development of a Preferred Plan, and the drafting of General Plan policies. An Environmental Impact Report (EIR) will be completed in conjunction with the General Plan, which will present ways to reduce or avoid any environmental damage that may be associated with the plan's adoption and implementation. Community members will also have opportunities to provide input during the EIR process.

I.4 Regional Location and Planning Boundaries

Regional Location

The City of Visalia, located in the Central Valley, covers an area of approximately 36 square miles. The City is situated in northwestern Tulare County, north of the City of Tulare and west of the City of Farmersville (*Figure 1-1*). The City of Hanford, in Kings County, lies 12 miles to the west. Most of the remaining land uses surrounding the city are agricultural in nature. With a 2009 population of 123,670, Visalia is the largest city in Tulare County.

Highway 198 passes east-west through the center of the city, while Highway 99 runs north-south two miles from the western edge of the city. Highway 63 passes north-south through the center of the city. The city is also served by transit, including the Visalia City Coach (VCC) and Tulare County Area Transit (TCAT). Amtrak connects to Visalia via a bus service from the train station in Hanford. Additionally, the city is served by the Visalia Municipal Airport, which is located at the city's western edge, along Highway 99. Several creeks, rivers, and canals run through and adjacent to the city, including the St. John's River, which forms the northeast border of the city. Mill, Packwood, and Persian creeks run east-west through the city.

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Planning Area

The planning area is the geographic area for which the General Plan establishes policies about future urban growth, long-term agricultural activity, and natural resource conservation. The boundary of the planning area was determined by the GPURC in response to State law requiring each city to include in its General Plan all territory within the boundaries of the incorporated area as well as “any land outside its boundaries which in the planning agency’s judgment bears relation to its planning” (California Government Code Section 65300).

The planning area comprises all land within the city limits as well as neighboring unincorporated land, including the community of Goshen (**Figure 1-2**). It encompasses approximately 104 square miles or 66,640 acres. It is roughly bounded by Avenue 328 to the north; Road 158 and Mariposa Avenue to the east; Avenue 264 and Avenue 260 to the south; and Road 64 and Road 52 to the west.

Contained within the planning area is Visalia’s Sphere of Influence (SOI). The SOI is a boundary that encompasses lands that are expected to ultimately be annexed by the City. It is determined by the Tulare County Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO), which is an entity empowered to review and approve proposed boundary changes and annexations by incorporated municipalities, determines the SOI. Portions of the Planning Area beyond the SOI may or may not be annexed to Visalia, but are still considered to be related to and influenced by the City’s planning.

Data for this report were largely collected and analyzed for the planning area as a whole, or, where necessary, for the area just within the city limits. Currently, research and analysis indicates that the planning area as defined in this report is of adequate size and does not need to be expanded. Chapter Five, Development Potential, discusses the capacity of the planning area to accommodate new growth in population and jobs that is expected to occur over the next 20 years.

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