



COUNTY OF SONOMA

575 ADMINISTRATION
DRIVE, ROOM 102A
SANTA ROSA, CA 95403

SUMMARY REPORT

Agenda Date: 8/12/2025

To: Sonoma County Board of Supervisors

Department or Agency Name(s): Permit Sonoma

Staff Name and Phone Number: Scott Orr, Interim Director, (707) 565-1754, Haleigh Frye, Planner III, (707) 565-2477, Ross Markey, Comprehensive Planning Manager, (707) 565-2543, Doug Bush, Planner III, (707) 565-5276

Vote Requirement: Majority

Supervisory District(s): Countywide

Title:

General Plan Sonoma: Community Visioning Outcomes and General Plan Scope Recommendations

Recommended Action:

Review the results of the Community Vision Phase of the Sonoma County General Plan Update and provide direction to staff on the recommended scope for the General Plan Update.

Executive Summary:

The General Plan guides land use decisions and reflects the community's shared values for development throughout unincorporated Sonoma County. The current general plan, General Plan 2020, was adopted in 2008. In 2024, Permit Sonoma initiated General Plan Sonoma to update the existing plan to address changes in local demographic and environmental conditions, and identify goals, objectives and policies to support the community's vision for the future. Following completion of Community Visioning, Permit Sonoma will now begin the Policy Development stage.

Community Visioning began in June 2024, with public engagement running from January through July 2025. This stage of public engagement focused on spreading the word about the update process, providing education about the significance of the General Plan, and gathering feedback on primary issues affecting the community. Feedback was then used to formulate a draft community vision and guiding principles to underpin the upcoming policy development work. This report presents the results of Community Visioning, including an Outreach Summary, and Draft Vision and Guiding Principles.

This item also outlines staff's recommended approach for the next stage of the General Plan Update: policy development. More details are provided in Attachment 3 General Plan Scope Report, which provides three options for moving forward, a high, medium, and low tier, based on the depth and scale of potential updates.

Staff's recommendation for a comprehensive medium tier update reflects the dominant themes heard through community engagement, including broad support for the existing General Plan's core areas of emphasis, which continue to resonate with the community. This next step in the update process will include all steps necessary to draft and adopt an updated General Plan.

Discussion:

Background

A General Plan reflects community values, sets the vision for future growth, and guides land use, housing, job creation, natural resource management, and social and economic equity. State General Plan Guidelines recommend updating General Plans every 5 to 10 years to ensure that they remain relevant and reflect local physical and demographic changes and broader changes in culture and technology. Permit Sonoma initiated General Plan Sonoma to satisfy current State law requirements, reevaluate community priorities, and address changes in local conditions and review existing policies in light of recent events, including flooding and wildfire recovery.

In December 2023, the Board accepted staff's recommendation to proceed with a phased approach for the update. Community Visioning followed by Policy Development. Community Visioning launched in June 2024, with public engagement from January to July 2025.

Policy Development is anticipated to begin by the end of 2025, and will update the goals, objectives, policies, and implementation programs in the General Plan to reflect the community's vision, align with State law and reflect current conditions.

Overview of Community Vision Phase

The Community Vision engagement effort was designed to identify and confirm issues to address in the Policy Development Phase of the update and to formulate a shared community vision for the future to underpin the upcoming policy development work. Community Visioning included the following components:

- Preliminary Audit of the existing General Plan
- Preparation and implementation of a Community Engagement Plan
- Broad community outreach efforts such as workshops, surveys, events, focus groups, initial engagement with tribal communities
- A statistically valid countywide survey
- Development of a Draft Vision and Guiding Principles informed by community input
- Completion of a General Plan Scope Report with three potential options to move forward with policy development.

Community Engagement

Community Visioning included a robust engagement approach aimed at reaching residents across the county's diverse communities and demographic groups. The County participated in 50 engagement activities, engaged a total of 4,023 people, and received 5,413 individual comments (including survey responses). Input was gathered through the following:

- Countywide and Local Community Visioning Workshops.
- Community events in key locations around the county.
- Focus group meetings with underserved populations in collaboration with community-based organizations (CBOs).
- Interactive engagement activities including an online vision survey, online mapping survey, and a community-wide statistically significant survey, as summarized in the General Plan Update Communitywide Survey Summary Report in Appendix A of the Outreach Summary.
- Public meetings with the Board of Supervisors, Planning Agency, and Citizens/Municipal Advisory

Councils/Commissions (C/MACs).

- Stakeholder engagement.
- Initial outreach to the Tribes to share information and invite participation in advance of the formal consultation process which will proceed in Phase 2 of the update.

Activities were designed to provide accessible, inclusive opportunities for community members to share their vision and concerns for the future of the County. Workshops and community events were distributed countywide, offered both in-person and virtually, at a variety of times and venues, and in English and Spanish so that voices throughout the county could be heard as part of this process.

A variety of outreach methods were used to increase awareness of the update. This included preparing a General Plan Sonoma website that serves as a central information hub, sending out 51,799 postcard mailers about General Plan Sonoma, posting regular updates on social media, sharing newsletters through the County's email listserv, publishing public notices, and hiring a research firm who conducted a survey via phone, text, and email that reached almost 1,900 residents. The County also partnered with CBOs to help spread the word to underserved populations.

Key themes from engagement included the importance of diversifying agriculture and protecting small farms and agricultural lands, focusing growth in and around cities and established urban areas, providing housing options for all residents, expanding open space and recreation opportunities, protecting communities from wildfire, and preserving and improving water supply and quality. Community feedback also noted the importance of preserving community character and open space between communities, maintaining dark skies and minimizing light pollution, protecting sensitive ecological areas, expanding safe bicycle connections, and increasing roadway safety and reducing traffic.

The Outreach Summary for the Community Vision Phase (Attachment 1) provides more details about this engagement process and outcomes. As the County moves into the next phase of General Plan Sonoma, the foundation built through this engagement will continue to guide the process, ensuring that General Plan Sonoma remains grounded in community priorities and shaped by those it is intended to serve.

Draft Vision and Guiding Principles

Based on the input gathered during the visioning, the General Plan team prepared a Draft Vision and Guiding Principles (Attachment 2). The Draft Vision and Guiding Principles capture the community's aspirations for the County's future and will be the foundation for the policy guidance in the updated General Plan. These guiding statements reflect common themes, priorities, and concerns shared by community members throughout the engagement process.

Draft Vision:

Sonoma County is home to small towns and rural communities united by a deep appreciation for its natural beauty, native ecosystems, and iconic agricultural and open space lands, including farms, ranches, and forests.

Residents share a commitment to fostering an inclusive, equitable, and resilient community. We embrace thoughtful development that expands housing and economic opportunity, with a focus on city-centered growth, conservation of natural resources, protection of agricultural and open space lands, and celebration of our unique unincorporated communities.

Our future is grounded in responsible growth, climate resilience, resource stewardship, and sustainable infrastructure to support a high quality of life for generations to come.

Draft Guiding Principles address:

- Equity, Inclusion, and Community Identity.
- Sustainable Land Use and Resource Stewardship.
- Resilient and Diverse Economy.
- Robust and Adaptable Agriculture and Local Food Systems.
- Complete, Connected, and Healthy Communities.
- Climate Action and Long-Term Resilience.
- Tribal Partnership and Cultural Stewardship.

The Vision and Guiding Principles will remain in draft form until a Community Engagement Plan is developed, and additional input is received from the public and decision-makers.

General Plan Scope Report

The General Plan Scope Report (Attachment 3) outlines three illustrative options of how to approach policy development, intended to inform the development of a Request for Proposals (RFP) to hire a consultant team to collaborate with through the remainder of the update process. Each reflects a different level of effort and investment, ranging from a legally compliant update with minimal engagement to a full overhaul of the General Plan with robust community planning and outreach. The options are intended to inform and assist the Board in providing direction on the desired level of update and associated resource allocation. While all three options are included for reference, a Comprehensive Update (Scope Option 2) is staff's recommended path forward. The options are not binding but provide a framework for the Board's discussion and consultant scoping.

In response to feedback during the visioning process, staff recommend proceeding with a comprehensive update of the General Plan (Scope Option 2 - Medium Tier). This approach retains the current General Plan structure while modernizing and expanding it to address key issues such as climate resilience, equity, and long-term sustainability.

Community feedback consistently supported the existing General Plan's core values but emphasized the need for meaningful updates to meet current and future challenges. The recommended approach reflects this feedback by building on what works, streamlining outdated policies, and integrating new priorities.

The following identifies primary considerations for the scope of the Policy Development Phase, followed by a summary of the three scope options.

Considerations for the Policy Development Phase

Outreach Recommendations

Permit Sonoma will build on the community engagement strategies and principles developed during the Community Vision Phase to create a tailored framework for policy development. The General Plan Scope

Report outlines outreach recommendations informed by visioning and continued staff efforts, including:

- Continue to engage underserved populations and target audiences through collaborations with CBOs and by hosting focus group meetings.
- Ongoing engagement with tribal communities.
- Providing bilingual engagement and translation services.
- Utilization of the County's Office of Equity tools, including the Racial Equity Toolkit, to engage target audiences.
- Host and attend informal and accessible community events.
- Engage the community through a wide variety of activities and interactive tools.
- Leverage technical expertise.
- Expand stakeholder engagement.
- Promoting awareness of the General Plan Sonoma.
Collecting voluntary demographic data.

Target audiences include the demographic identities noted in the Sonoma County Office of Equity's Community Engagement Plan for focused community engagement (Latine/a/o, Asian American and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (AANHPI), Black, Native American, LGBTQIA2S+, renters, low-income, non-English speakers, farmworkers, people with a lived experience of homelessness, veterans, people with developmental disabilities, rural community members, young adults, and youth).

Key Policy Considerations

The General Plan Scope Report also presents key policy considerations for Policy Development based on community input and the recommendations from the General Plan 2020 Audit. They are organized by the Draft Guiding Principles and cover the following topics. A description for each key policy consideration can be found in the Scope Report.

- | | |
|--|---|
| • City centered and infill development. | • Equity, inclusion, and community identity. |
| • Natural resource conservation. | • Climate action and resilience. |
| • Tribal partnerships and cultural stewardship. | • Celebration of diverse identities and cultures. |
| • Economic diversification and job creation. | • Housing diversity and affordability. |
| • Agricultural protection and sustainability. | • Mobility, access, and community health. |
| • Infrastructure, services, and hazard preparedness. | • Compliance with state legislation. |

Policy Development Recommended Scope

Staff recommends moving forward with a comprehensive update to the General Plan (Scope Option 2 - Medium Tier). This approach reflects the priorities and feedback gathered during the Community Visioning Phase and aligns with the desire to modernize the Plan while maintaining its core framework.

The recommended approach balances depth and feasibility. It includes meaningful updates to policy language, targeted community engagement, and integration of new content areas, such as climate resiliency and tribal resources, without starting from scratch.

Rather than providing a full rewrite, this option focuses on:

- Updating and streamlining policies based on current conditions, State law, and best practices.
- Conducting focused analysis of land use and circulation alternatives.
- Expanding and refining community engagement to ensure equity and inclusion.
- Published as an interactive website with a summary version for accessibility along with multilingual support.
- Establishing clear implementation metrics and tools for accountability.

This option offers the flexibility to address key issues within a manageable budget and timeline. Estimated timeline to complete the update is 3 years with an estimated cost of \$3-\$3.5 million. It also supports ongoing coordination with community partners, tribal governments, and technical experts throughout the process.

For more detail on the recommended scope and other illustrative options, refer to the General Plan Scope Report (Attachment 3).

Board Discussion

Staff recommends that the Board review the attached Outreach Summary, Draft Vision and Guiding Principles, and General Plan Scope Report and provide comments to Permit Sonoma staff on the outcomes of Community Visioning.

Staff also requests Board direction on the recommended scope to approach policy development to inform development of an RFP and scope of work to begin the next step in the process.

Next Steps

Staff requests that the Board review the attached Outreach Summary, Draft Vision and Guiding Principles, and General Plan Scope Report, and provide comments on the outcomes of Community Visioning.

In addition, staff requests Board direction on the recommended scope for policy development to inform preparation of a Request for Proposals (RFP) and detailed scope of work for the next step of the General Plan Update.

Policy Development will begin following Board input and the selection of a consultant team. The process will start with a review of existing conditions to establish baseline data that will inform future policy decisions. Staff and the consultant will then develop and evaluate land use and circulation alternatives, considering housing needs, climate resilience, infrastructure capacity, and community character.

After identifying a preferred alternative, staff will draft goals, policies, and actions for the updated General Plan. The draft Plan will undergo environmental review in accordance with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), followed by public hearings and formal adoption.

Community engagement will remain central throughout the process, with public input integrated into each major step to ensure the updated General Plan reflects the values and priorities of Sonoma County residents.

Strategic Plan:

This item directly supports the County's Five-year Strategic Plan and is aligned with the following pillar, goal, and objective.

Pillar: Climate Action and Resiliency

Goal: Goal 5: Maximize opportunities for mitigation of climate change and adaptation through land conservation work and land use policies

Objective: Objective 1: By 2025, update the County General Plan and other county/special district planning documents to incorporate policy language and identify areas within the County that have the potential to maximize carbon sequestration and provide opportunities

Racial Equity:

Was this item identified as an opportunity to apply the Racial Equity Toolkit?

Yes

A full toolkit analysis will be released for review once the plan update is completed. This analysis will evaluate how proposed policies, programs, and land-use decisions may affect different racial and socioeconomic groups within the community. By leveraging up-to-date demographic and socioeconomic data, staff will evaluate disparities in areas like housing, employment, health, transportation, and education. Completing the analysis will help develop equitable policies that address systemic inequalities and promote inclusivity in planning decisions. The questions and promptings of the Racial Equity Toolkit will guide community engagement and policy development for the general plan update.

Prior Board Actions:

10/15/14: General Plan Sonoma, General Plan 2020 Audit and Community Engagement Plan (
<https://sonoma-county.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=6888966&GUID=EE057F3A-26D3-47E2-A55F-60A80906DBE2>)

12/12/23: Sonoma County General Plan Kick-Off (
<https://sonoma-county.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=6446395&GUID=04FE3E33-FB4D-44B4-A5A8-59CB2E2FBACF>)

6/10/23: General Plan Update Project Phase 1 Contract Award(
<https://sonoma-county.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=6720195&GUID=EA6AEAD9-96BC-4C3F-A9CE-0E18F3F3B28C>)

4/19/22: General Plan - Informational Only (
<https://sonoma-county.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=5552424&GUID=795FFC3F-4334-439B-AE83-B36432401F6B&Options=&Search=>>)

06/04/2019: Authorized Comprehensive Planning Two-Year Work Plan for 2019-2020 (
<https://sonoma-county.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=3969755&GUID=D0E2B2F4-DDEF-4482-92B3-C18B84C362BA&Options=&Search=>>)

01/28/2020: Board of Supervisors Strategic Planning Retreat (
<https://sonoma-county.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=4316429&GUID=21AA AFC2-8F35-4C5F-8560-61CF59A01FA1&Options=&Search=>>)

FISCAL SUMMARY

Not Applicable

Narrative Explanation of Fiscal Impacts:

There are no direct fiscal or new General Fund impacts associated with this informational item. Funding for the General Plan Update comes from three sources: the General Plan Administration (GPA) Fund, existing staff time supported by ongoing General Fund allocations for Comprehensive Planning, and the \$2.8 million set aside during the FY 2022-23 budget hearings to cover funding gaps.

Future funding needs will be evaluated annually as part of the County's budget development process, based on available GPA funds and the previously allocated \$2.8 million.

Staffing Impacts:

None

Narrative Explanation of Staffing Impacts (If Required):

Not Applicable

Attachments:

Attachment 1: Community Vision Phase Outreach Summary

Attachment 2: Draft Vision and Guiding Principles

Attachment 3: General Plan Scope Report

Attachment 4: Public Comments

Attachment 5: PowerPoint Presentation

Related Items "On File" with the Clerk of the Board:

Not Applicable