



COUNTY OF SONOMA

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

SUMMARY REPORT

Agenda Date: 7/23/2024

To: Sonoma County Board of Supervisors

Department or Agency Name(s): Permit Sonoma

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Vote Requirement: Informational Only

Supervisorial District(s): Countywide

Title:

Workshop on the General Plan 2020 Public Safety Element Update and New Environmental Justice Element

Recommended Action:

Review and provide direction on draft policy concepts and Board priorities for the General Plan 2020 Public Safety Element update and new Environmental Justice Element.

Executive Summary:

The General Plan is a planning and policy document that guides land use, physical development, and public action through a set of goals, policies, and implementation measures. It is a shared community vision that reflects priorities and values, shapes future growth, encourages housing and job development, fosters healthy and resilient communities, guides the protection and management of natural resources, and promotes social and economic equity. Permit Sonoma is preparing an update to the County's existing General Plan 2020 Public Safety Element and developing a new Environmental Justice Element for Board consideration. These updates are being completed in advance of a comprehensive update to General Plan 2020 to meet State requirements.

The Public Safety Element update will establish goals and policies to reduce the potential short- and long-term risks to people, property, and systems resulting from fires, floods, earthquakes, landslides, climate change, and other hazards. The new Environmental Justice Element will set goals and policies to advance health in low-income communities that are disproportionately burdened by environmental conditions (called "disadvantaged communities" by the State) and across the unincorporated County.

This item presents the legal requirements for the General Plan 2020 Safety Element update and new Environmental Justice Element, summarizes progress and community engagement completed to date, and offers conceptual policy strategies through Policy Frameworks for Board discussion to inform development of the draft elements.

Discussion:

Background

General Plans are the constitutions of land use and development for a city or county, and are structured by topical elements, each with a set of goals, policies, and implementation measures. Policies are required to be implemented through actions, programs, procedures, or other techniques. Zoning and subdivision ordinances and specific plans are the primary regulatory tools used for implementing General Plans, although General

Plans often provide the framework for other local regulations such as building and fire codes.

General Plan Update Timeline

The County's existing General Plan ("General Plan 2020") has served our community since 2008. Certain General Plan elements are required by State law to be updated at established frequencies, including the General Plan Housing Element and Safety Element. Additionally, when two or more General Plan elements are updated, State law requires the County to develop an Environmental Justice Element. The Housing Element update was completed in 2023 and the Permit Sonoma project team started work on the General Plan Public Safety Element update and new Environmental Justice Element in late 2022.

Concurrently, Permit Sonoma has initiated the first phase of a comprehensive update to the Sonoma County General Plan that involves auditing the existing General Plan 2020, as well as area plans, and early community engagement that will begin in 2025. Because the comprehensive General Plan update will be a multi-year process, Permit Sonoma seeks to complete the safety and environmental justice updates to General Plan 2020 no later than early next year to respect State-mandated timeframes. The primary objective for these interim updates is to comply with new State requirements in a timely manner.

Once completed, the Safety and Environmental Justice Elements are expected to require more modest revisions as part of the comprehensive General Plan update since they will have been updated more recently. However, the comprehensive update process will provide further opportunities for community conversations and input on the various topics addressed in safety and environmental justice elements beyond the engagement conducted to date, discussed further below.

Safety Element Update

All jurisdictions in California are required to have a Safety Element as part of their General Plan. The County General Plan 2020 Public Safety Element was last updated in 2024. The Safety Element update will incorporate and build upon the risk assessment findings in the 2021 Sonoma County Multi-Jurisdictional Hazard Mitigation Plan to identify known hazards, assess vulnerability, and develop goals, policies, and strategies to protect the public from unreasonable risks associated with the effects of seismic and geologic hazards, flooding, and wildland and urban fires (Government Code § 65302(g)(1)). Recent updates to State law require updated Safety Elements to:

- Evaluate climate vulnerabilities and, based on the findings of the assessment, include climate adaptation and resilience policies and implementation measures (Government Code § 65302(g)(4); Senate Bill 379, 2015);
- Identify and evaluate evacuation routes under a range of emergency scenarios (Gov. Code § 65302.15 (a); Assembly Bill 747, 2019; Assembly Bill 1409, 2021); and
- Identify residential developments in hazard areas without at least two emergency evacuation routes (Gov. Code § 65302(g)(5); Senate Bill 99, 2019).

The Public Safety Element is proposed to be retitled as the Safety Element to align with State terminology and prevent confusion about its core purpose to reduce the risks of environmental hazards.

Environmental Justice Element

California law defines environmental justice as "the fair treatment of people of all races, cultures, and incomes with respect to the development, adoption, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws,

regulations, and policies,” (Government Code Section 65040.12(e)).

Government Code § 65302(h), often referred to as Senate Bill 1000 (2016), mandates that local agencies identify disadvantaged communities within their jurisdiction and adopt an environmental justice element or integrate environmental justice goals, objectives, and policies into other elements of their General Plan to reduce unique or compounded health risks and prioritize improvements in those communities. State law requires the County to address the following environmental justice topics in its General Plan update:

- Pollution burden
- Access to public facilities, services, and community amenities
- Health and physical activity
- Healthy food access
- Safe and sanitary housing
- Civic engagement in the public-decision making process

State law defines disadvantaged communities as areas identified by the California Environmental Protection Agency (CalEPA) as disadvantaged utilizing a tool called [CalEnviroscreen](https://oehha.ca.gov/calenviroscreen/report/calenviroscreen-40) <<https://oehha.ca.gov/calenviroscreen/report/calenviroscreen-40>>, or areas that are low-income and disproportionately affected by environmental pollution or other hazards that can lead to negative health effects (Government Code Section 65302(h)(4)(A)). Lands under the control of federally recognized Tribes are also considered disadvantaged by the State. In Sonoma County, this includes Dry Creek Rancheria, Stewarts Point Rancheria, and Kashia Coastal Reserve.

Permit Sonoma recommends a standalone Environmental Justice Element, instead of policies spread throughout various elements, to recognize the importance of the topic and centralize core policies in one place.

Analysis

The first steps for long-range planning and policy development efforts include an assessment of existing conditions, collection and analysis of data, and public engagement to identify community needs and values that will guide the process.

As part of the assessment phase, staff has worked with Rincon Consultants, Inc. to prepare two reports exploring the current social and environmental conditions of the unincorporated County to inform the Environmental Justice and Safety Elements: the Environmental Justice Technical Report (Attachment 3) and the Climate Change Vulnerability Assessment (Attachment 4). The reports draw on quantitative data and qualitative information to present key findings about the various topics Safety and Environmental Justice Elements must address, including social vulnerabilities, environmental pollution, and climate adaptation and resilience.

Evacuation-related assessments required by State law (Gov. Code §§ 65302(g)(1) and 65302.15) are still under development and expected to be available later this summer. These assessments will be high-level, data-oriented, and limited in scope. The assessments will be appended to the Safety Element as reference documents and may be used as informational tools for decision-making on evacuation related policy and program development at the Board’s discretion.

The assessments will provide limited information about areas of the County where evacuation conditions may be less efficient due to roadway conditions, such as the number of egress routes or roadway carrying capacity. The results of the assessments should be viewed as sources of information and not a complete picture of evacuation considerations within the county. The assessments will not provide a comprehensive status of evacuation accessibility for individual parcels in the unincorporated area nor specify the time it will take to evacuate any given area in any given emergency scenario.

Environmental Justice Technical Report

The report provides an analysis of the environmental justice context in unincorporated Sonoma County and is intended to help inform a baseline understanding of the environmental justice issues facing Sonoma County. In concert with this report, input gained from community engagement will directly shape the County's environmental justice policies. The Environmental Justice Technical Report identifies Sonoma County's Environmental Justice Communities (called disadvantaged communities by the State) and explores existing conditions within those areas.

The staff project team, with the guidance of the project's community advisory group (i.e. the Equity Working Committee), discussed further below, identified disadvantaged communities within the unincorporated county in accordance with the State's definition using a methodology tailored to Sonoma County. These areas are the County's draft Environmental Justice Communities (EJ Communities). The EJ Communities comprise 22 census tracts across the County that meet any of the following criteria:

- A census tract that scores at or above the 50th percentile for Overall Pollution Burden in CalEnviroscreen 4.0; or
- A census tract that is low-income and has one of the following accompanying conditions:
 - The census tract scores at or above the 75th percentile for any individual pollutant indicator in CalEnviroscreen 4.0.
 - The census tract scores at or above the 75th percentile for housing burden in CalEnviroscreen 4.0.

Housing burden was identified by the Equity Working Committee as one of the most important determinants of well-being. Housing-burdened households spend a greater proportion of their income on housing, which has cascading impacts on health. Because access to safe, decent, and affordable housing is fundamentally linked to other environmental inequities, housing burden was included as a factor in determining which census tracts in Sonoma County should be considered EJ Communities.

Findings

The following provides a high-level summary of the findings in the Environmental Justice Technical Report.

Pollution Exposure. Most of the County's EJ Communities have significantly elevated pollution exposure, from cleanup sites contaminated with harmful chemicals, groundwater pollutants, hazardous waste created by commercial or industrial activity, impaired surface water, and solid waste facilities such as landfills, transfer stations, and composting facilities. These types of pollution affect air, water, and soil. Certain EJ Communities also experience high pollution exposure from Diesel Particulate Matter (southeast Santa Rosa), pesticides (portions of the lower Russian River area, north Santa Rosa/Windsor, and south of Sonoma), vehicle traffic emissions (south Santa Rosa), and lead (east Cloverdale). See Section 4 of the Environmental justice Technical

Report for more information (Attachment 3).

Access to Public Facilities, Services, and Community Amenities. Although the County has a significant number of regional and community parks, some EJ Communities in south County have low access. Most government buildings and facilities, excluding fire stations, are located in proximity to more urbanized areas such as Santa Rosa. EJ Communities, and the unincorporated County at large, have poorer access to active transportation infrastructure and transit options. See Section 5 of the Environmental justice Technical Report for more information (Attachment 3).

Health and Physical Activity. Southwest Santa Rosa has higher rates of asthma and cardiovascular disease. Life expectancy for Sonoma County's black residents is ten years shorter than any other racial and ethnic group in the County. South and west Santa Rosa residents have lower rates of health insurance coverage. See Section 6 of the Environmental justice Technical Report for more information (Attachment 3).

Healthy Food Access. South and west Santa Rosa, and the Springs in Sonoma Valley are low-income areas with lower access to supermarkets and grocery stores. Many other areas within the incorporated County also have poor access to retail food outlets. See Section 7 of the Environmental justice Technical Report for more information (Attachment 3).

Safe and Sanitary Housing. Guerneville and Monte Rio, south Santa Rosa, west Cotati and Penngrove, and the Springs have high housing cost burden. The Springs has significantly higher levels of overcrowding than the rest of Sonoma County. Residents east of Cloverdale have high risk of lead exposure. See Section 8 of the Environmental justice Technical Report for more information (Attachment 3).

Civic Engagement. North and west County have higher numbers of households with no internet access. East of Cloverdale, south Santa Rosa, and the Springs have higher levels of linguistic isolation (i.e. households in which no one over the age of 14 speaks English well). See Section 9 of the Environmental justice Technical Report for more information (Attachment 3).

Climate Change Vulnerability Assessment (CCVA)

This assessment provides an evaluation of potential climate change impacts on community members rendered vulnerable by systemic inequities; parks and natural resources; agriculture; and critical facilities, buildings, services, and infrastructure in unincorporated Sonoma County. The findings from this assessment and community engagement will inform the development of climate adaptation goals, policies, and implementation measures for the Safety and Environmental Justice Elements. The CCVA explores vulnerability to extreme heat, drought, wildfire, landslides, riverine and stormwater flooding, and sea level rise.

Systemic inequities render some populations more sensitive to climate change impacts. While all people in a community will experience climate change, some are already and will continue to be more harmed by it than others. Section 4 of the CCVA identifies areas with high concentrations of population groups who are systemically vulnerable to climate change and have fewer resources to adapt to and recover from impacts. The areas with the greatest concentration of sensitive populations are in the Sonoma Valley Springs, south and west Santa Rosa, portions of west County including the lower Russian River, and east Cloverdale (Figure 14, Attachment 4).

Findings

The following provides a high-level summary of the vulnerability findings in the CCVA (Section 5 of Attachment 4).

Populations. Individuals with high outdoor exposure, under-resourced individuals, individuals facing societal barriers, and individuals with chronic health conditions or health related sensitivities are highly vulnerable to wildfire, extreme heat, and flooding (see Figures 18-21, Attachment 4).

Parks and Natural Resources. These assets are highly vulnerable to all climate hazards, particularly wildfire, with impacts to park users, employees, and ecological resources including wildlife, plants, and habitats.

Critical Facilities, Buildings, Services, and Infrastructure. These County assets are highly vulnerable to exposure and damage from all climate hazards. Wildfire, sea level rise, and landslides could directly damage structures and infrastructure. Drought may strain water reliability and service. Extreme heat could have impacts to County services, strain electrical infrastructure, and damage transportation infrastructure.

Agriculture. Agricultural land is highly vulnerable to extreme heat, drought, wildfire, and landslides. Flooding and sea level rise may also impact agricultural land near the Russian River and low-lying lands along the coast.

Community Engagement to Date

The project team designed its community engagement strategy to garner broad and detailed input throughout the planning process, provide opportunities for reciprocal sharing of ideas, remove barriers to meaningful participation, and ensure that feedback is integrated in project outcomes.

All engagement activities included opportunities to hear directly from participants on their own ideas in addition to providing input on County-developed materials. Written summaries of engagement activities are available in Attachment 5 and the Appendix of the Climate Change Vulnerability Assessment (Attachment 4). Where possible, demographic information of participants was collected at the pop-up events and in the online survey.

The following summarizes engagement efforts to date:

Equity Working Committee (EWC)

At the beginning of the project, the County project team convened a group of 19 members of the public to serve as community advisors to the project on the project's [Equity Working Committee](https://permitsonoma.org/equityworkingcommittee) <<https://permitsonoma.org/equityworkingcommittee>>. Equity Working Committee (EWC) members were selected through an application process and chosen for their experiences as community leaders with varied personal and professional expertise in community change advocacy, housing, emergency preparedness, conservation, and more. The project team has held 5 meetings with the EWC since December 2022 to involve and collaborate with members on key decision points in the project.

The EWC directly shaped the methodology for identifying Environmental Justice Communities for the EJ Element; contributed to the identification of systemically sensitive population groups for the Climate Change Vulnerability Assessment; provided guidance to staff on best practices for engagement; and spent two meetings refining draft policy concepts. Staff will return to the EWC to review final draft policy language prior

to adoption.

Focus Groups

The project team held six focus groups with County department and agency staff (including but not limited to the Department of Emergency Management, the Regional Climate Protection Agency, the Climate Action and Resiliency Division, and Health Services), as well as community leaders and organizations between December 2022 and July 2023. Focus groups with County staff were held to understand the constraints facing the County organization in providing resources or programs. Focus groups with community members helped identify and understand community barriers to accessing resources and public amenities.

Pop Up Events

To hear directly from EJ Community members across the county, the project team set up a booth at six community events including farmer's markets, emergency preparedness fairs, and townhalls at a mix of times and locations. These events allowed staff to connect with members of the public that may not typically be engaged in the process. All engagement materials were provided in both English and Spanish, and Spanish-speaking staff were available. The project team also joined several community group and organization meetings to listen to their experiences and hear ideas on specific topics such as food access. The pop up events and meetings were held between May 2023 and June 2024.

Survey

The project team hosted an online survey in Spring 2023 to learn more about the types of actions Sonoma County community members have already taken to prepare for natural disaster emergencies and climate change, what prevents them from preparing, communication and evacuation challenges they've experienced during past emergencies, and how the County should provide resources and programs. A total of 560 individual respondents participated in the survey.

Policy Development

State law for general plans stipulate required topics to be addressed in safety and environmental justice elements through sets of goals, policies, and implementation measures. To assist with the policymaking process, the project team has developed Policy Frameworks for various broad topic areas. The Policy Frameworks were developed based on key findings from the background reports for the project, State requirements and guidance, and community input. Each paper briefly introduces one or more subtopics and related issues identified from background analysis (e.g. the EJ Technical Report); identifies existing County plans already in place that address the issue area; outlines desired outcomes of the planning effort; and lists potential strategies that could contribute to achieving those outcomes. The Policy Frameworks also summarize findings of community input to demonstrate how input relates to the potential strategies.

The Policy Frameworks do not present recommended draft policy language and instead provide a suite of conceptual ideas derived from community input and technical analysis. After the Board workshop, staff will continue to refine the outcomes and strategies in the Policy Frameworks into draft goals, policies, and implementation measures for the Safety and Environmental Justice Elements. Policies will be refined in coordination with other County departments and agencies that will have a role in implementing policies or actions. Because the timing of these individual General Plan updates is in tandem with the launch of a multi-year effort to comprehensively update the General Plan, a primary objective for the Safety Element update and new EJ Element is to reflect ongoing and planned department work. The updates should also set a

foundation of additional priority actions, beyond existing work, that the County should pursue or explore in the next several years prior to completion of the comprehensive General Plan update.

Policy Frameworks are provided for the following broad topic areas (Attachment 2):

- Extreme Heat, Air Quality, and Drought
- Emergency Preparedness & Response
- All Hazards General Public Safety
- Resilient Landscapes (Wildfire)
- Sea Level Rise and Resilience
- Other Natural Disasters (Seismic and Flooding)
- Resilient and Equitable Infrastructure
- Healthy Environments (Pollution Burden)
- Healthy Public Facilities and Physical Activity
- Healthy Food Access
- Safe and Sanitary Housing
- Community Engagement and Language Access

Board Discussion

Staff recommends that the Board receive this informational item, provide feedback on the Policy Frameworks, and highlight Board priorities for the Safety and Environmental Justice Elements. The Board could discuss the relative importance or priority of certain policy topics or conceptual strategies, concerns about the policy direction or strength of any strategy idea, or identify policy or program ideas that may be missing and are recommended.

In particular, the staff project team requests direction on the following:

- Preferred approaches to prioritize improvements in Environmental Justice Communities as required by State law (e.g. capital improvement planning, policies specific to individual EJ Communities versus to all EJ Communities, priorities for public funding investments);
- The degree of specificity that climate adaptation and resilience policies and implementation measures should provide in the General Plan versus within external plans, incorporated by reference; and
- Preferred approaches to incorporate emergency evacuation considerations into policy and implementation measures (e.g. additional existing conditions assessments, land use directives, planning and coordination).

Next Steps

After the workshop, the staff project team will continue to refine the conceptual strategies in the Policy Frameworks into draft goals, policies, and implementation measures for the Safety and Environmental Justice Elements. The team will consult with other County departments and agencies, present the project to municipal and citizen's advisory councils and commissions, then develop draft elements for public review. Once draft elements are released, the team will host a public workshop and a second online survey to obtain feedback on the drafts and return to the Equity Working Committee for a reflection session. The draft elements will then be finalized for consideration for adoption by the Planning Commission and Board of Supervisors at public hearings. Draft elements are anticipated to be released this fall.

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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 for climate change adaptation. The focus of these actions will be to increase overall landscape and species resiliency, reduce the risk of fire and floods, and address sea level rise and biodiversity loss.

Racial Equity:

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

Yes

This is an informational item. A comprehensive Racial Equity Toolkit analysis will be included in the Board item for adoption of the new and updated General Plan elements.

Prior Board Actions:

March 26, 2024 <<https://sonoma-county.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=6583896&GUID=18C842E3-53E0-4F95-8556-E96152B09731>>. First Amendment to the Professional Services Agreement for Consultant Services for the General Plan 2020 Safety and Environmental Justice Updates

December 12, 2023 <<https://sonoma-county.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=6446395&GUID=04FE3E33-FB4D-44B4-A5A8-59CB2E2FBACF>>. Sonoma County Comprehensive General Plan Update Kick-Off

August 22, 2023 <<https://sonoma-county.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=6318630&GUID=F5D1AA7F-A015-4A1B-BB05-697866F7AE02>>. Adoption of the Housing Element Update

September 13, 2022 <<https://sonoma-county.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=5812378&GUID=B14311D4-EA7D-4787-97D4-3D822A487260>>. Original Professional Services Agreement for Consultant Services for the General Plan 2020 Safety and Environmental Justice Updates

FISCAL SUMMARY

Narrative Explanation of Fiscal Impacts:

There are no direct fiscal impacts associated with this informational item.

Narrative Explanation of Staffing Impacts (If Required):

N/A

Attachments:

1. Government Code Sections 65302 and 65302.15
2. Policy Frameworks dated July 2024
3. Sonoma County Environmental Justice Technical Report (2024)
4. Sonoma County Climate Change Vulnerability Assessment and Appendices (2024)

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5. Community Engagement Summaries
6. Presentation

Related Items “On File” with the Clerk of the Board:

N/A