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Morph! A 5-Year Review Becomes a Comprehensive Update

In fits and starts over the course of 16 years, the County's "review" of the 2000-2020 General Plan has morphed into a comprehensive plan "update" with a planning horizon to the year 2040. To effectively participate in the review of the draft 2020-2040 General Plan, county residents must have a clear understanding of how this transformation came about.

Every city and county in California has a general plan. Such plans envision the character and scope of future development and serve as the legal underpinnings for land use decisions.

Historically, because decisions regarding the future growth of the state have been left to local jurisdictions, it is not surprising to find that state law gives cities and counties a great deal of latitude in choosing both the format and content of their individual plans. The Government Code has few mandates — only that general plans contain elements that address land use, housing, circulation, conservation, open space, noise and safety. Since Fresno County lies within the boundary of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District and contains identified disadvantage communities, the State requires the County's plan to have an air quality element and an environmental justice element.

Although the Government Code explicitly describes the required elements of general plans, with few exceptions, there is no guidance regarding when to update them. Across the state, it is widespread practice for general plans to be updated every 15 to 25 years. In its Annual Planning Survey Report for 2020, the Governor's Office of Planning and Research reported that the average length of time between updates is 18 years.

So when should general plans be updated? Clearly, they should be updated whenever they are no longer in step with current laws, social values and environmental conditions.

And is it now time to "**update**" the plan? Definitely, yes.

And is the County doing that? Yes, it is, although the Board of Supervisors is not on record as saying that the General Plan is being "**updated**." Officially, the project is still titled a "*General Plan Review & Revision*."

Here's the story. The County's General Plan was last updated in 2000. The plan was designed with a 20-year planning horizon — so a plan update should be eminent.

Written into the General Plan was Implementation Program LU-H.E, which required the County to review and fine-tune the plan every five years — in 2005, 2010 and 2015. The intent was to keep the plan in sync with changing state laws and shifting local priorities.

And so, in compliance with this General Plan directive, the County initiated its first five-year review of the plan in 2005 by setting aside \$600,000 for that purpose, with completion expected within a year. However, that review was never completed. The first proposed revision of the General Plan Policy Document appeared in 2010, followed by six other proposed revisions (#2 in 2012, #3 in 2013, #4 and #5 in 2014, #6 in 2017 and #7 in 2021). None of the proposed General Plan revisions were approved by the Board of Supervisors.

About the time of the fifth revision, County planners and the Board of Supervisors recognized that the five-year review begun in 2005 would never be completed and that it would soon be time to update the plan. And so in 2015, the County revised its agreement with the EIR consultant, directing that the next draft revision (2017) "*reflect a revised planning horizon (e.g., 2040)*."

When county residents pressed the County as to whether the County was conducting a five-year review of the 2000-2020 plan or was creating a plan update for 2020-2040, the County did not respond. However, at a Board of Supervisors meeting in 2017, County planners did state that the review of the General Plan had "morphed" into a more complex project and that staff was "*going through the process to extend...planning assumptions out an additional twenty years*."