



## 2. Introduction

### Overview

This chapter describes the purpose and content of the General Plan, as well as forces, values, and processes that have shaped the City over time.

### Setting the Stage – A Moment in Time

This updated General Plan represents the East Palo Alto community's statement of its core values and vision for its future. Much like the creative, adaptive and resilient people that make up East Palo Alto, this General Plan establishes this community as a unique city within Silicon Valley and the Bay Area. Embracing its roots as a place that is welcoming to all people, from all walks of life, the City is committed to providing a strong base of affordable housing for the region but accomplishing this in a way that advances the jobs-housing balance vision of the City.

While the City has per capita income that is lower compared to surrounding jurisdictions, the City is rich in social capital, cultural history, and neighborhood character. East Palo Alto's resiliency and optimism stem from its social cohesion and continued economic progress and quality of life improvements. The City is a small and tightly knit community, and this characteristic is one of the most valuable resources the City has. This unity has created great community leaders and provides immeasurable benefit to its residents. Maintaining this structure and sense of identity, and ensuring that it is not lost as the City evolves over time, is a critical component to the General Plan Update.

As with many Bay Area cities, there is very little undeveloped land in the City for new development or parks, and therefore new housing and jobs must come from redevelopment, infill, densification, or adaptive building reuse. This General Plan has a vital role to play in governing how the City's growing population is housed, employed, and serviced. The population is also changing demographically, reflecting the shifts occurring in the country at-large. Stepping back and looking at the City's history, it is evident that East Palo Alto needs better access to jobs, and the wealth of economic and financial resources available in Silicon Valley. This General Plan seeks to improve the public health and welfare of residents, while preserving what is great about the City and maintaining the core values of affordability, community, and diversity.

Having recently celebrated the 32<sup>nd</sup> Anniversary of its incorporation; the City is at the threshold of charting a bold new course in diversity and equity. While there has been improvement over time regarding crime reduction, some of the City's challenges have persisted since its founding in the 80s, such as unemployment, and sluggish economic development. Indeed, the City is in great need of better paying jobs, additional tax revenue, and improved infrastructure. This General Plan provides economic development strategies that promote a more diverse mix of uses, better access to jobs and education, and an improved quality of life for all.

The course that this General Plan charts will have an effect not just on the City and its residents, but other communities in the region. With an understanding of both the difficulties and opportunities facing the City, the community of East Palo Alto has set to update their General Plan, thoughtfully strengthen its identity, further define and broadcast its vision, and move into the future as a forward-looking and equitable city.

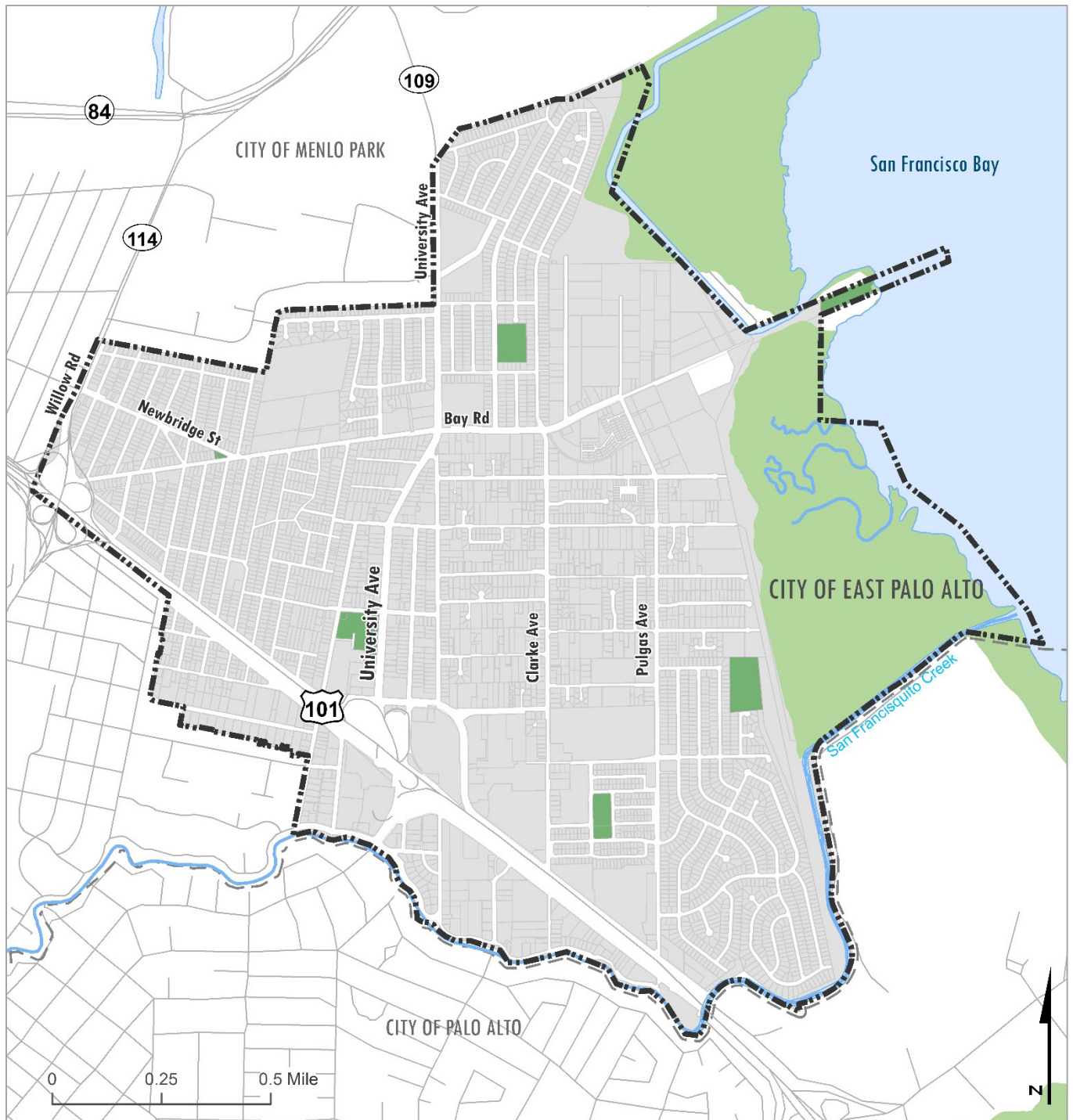
## Geography and Location

The City of East Palo Alto is located in the southern corner of San Mateo County and borders Santa Clara County, as shown in Figure 2-1. Neighboring cities include Menlo Park to the west and Palo Alto to the south. The Planning Area for the General Plan is defined by the East Palo Alto city limits. The City is comparatively small at 2.6 square miles (see Figure 2-2). While located in the technology-rich Silicon Valley, the City is relatively isolated from neighboring communities due to natural and human-made features. The City borders the San Francisco Bay on the east and San Francisquito Creek forms the southeast border.

Figure 2-1: East Palo Alto in the Region



Figure 2-2: City Boundary



## Brief History of East Palo Alto

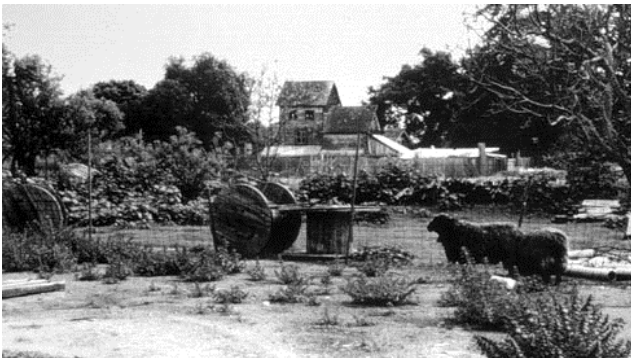
### Native Inhabitants

The area that is now East Palo Alto has supported human settlement for over two millennia. Various tribes of Costanoan Native Americans – also known as the “Ohlone” – were the first known human inhabitants in the San Francisco Bay Area, benefiting from its rich resources and temperate climate. The Ohlone tribe that made its home in the area of modern-day East Palo Alto is known as the Puichon.

### First European Settlement

The first European settlers in the area were Spanish ranchers and Gold Rush-enriched land speculators. In 1849, a wharf was built at the foot of Bay Road – then just a dirt cart road – and the community of “Ravenswood” grew around it. The community was primarily agricultural in nature but there was also some shipping activity through the wharf, largely related to the bricks produced at a local factory. The area remained generally in agricultural use through the rest of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Eventually the wharf changed ownership and became known as Cooley Landing, a name that still survives today in East Palo Alto’s Cooley Landing open space area.

### Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Agriculture and Community Development



Early 1900s agriculture in East Palo Alto.

The year 1916 included the initiation of Runnymede, the Weeks Poultry Colony. Runnymede was intended as a utopian alternative to industrialized urban living, and was a community of relatively self-sufficient small farmers.

The Runnymede colony initially prospered with a population of about 1,200 by the early 1920s, but then began to collapse after Weeks sold his demonstration farm and left Runnymede to start a second colony near Los Angeles. Disillusioned by the substantial work required to operate a small poultry farm and amid rising property values and contaminated well water supplies, many colonists began selling off their properties.

After the poultry farms closed, floriculture predominated in East Palo Alto from the 1930s through the 1950s, following a trend that had swept all of San Mateo County. Locally-grown chrysanthemums, violets, carnations, and lilies were transported to markets throughout the country on refrigerated “flower trains.” With construction of the Highway 101 in 1932, businesses catering to automobile travelers opened along the highway and some of East Palo Alto’s major streets. By 1939, the community had 11 service stations, most located immediately off the highway. University Avenue became the community’s primary commercial corridor, attracting a variety of cafes, drive-ins, and restaurants. A portion of University Avenue near University Circle gained the nickname “Whiskey Gulch” because of its many bars and liquor stores – a result of Palo Alto zoning laws that restricted alcohol sales within two miles of Stanford University.



One of several establishments that collectively represented the lively “Whiskey Gulch.”

## Industrialization

Industrial development, mostly associated with the area's agriculture, was located on large lots at the north end of town that was served by a railroad spur of the Dumbarton Cutoff. A few businesses opened along this Southern Pacific spur line in the 1910s and 1920s, including a cutlery company, chemical plant, and lubrication products company. Heavy industry expanded in the area after World War II, particularly in the northern part of the community. A helicopter manufacturing plant opened on Willow Road, while the Peninsula Transit Lines had a bus garage and maintenance facility near the end of Bay Road, and there was a steel factory located near the intersection of Pulgas Avenue and Weeks Street. Northern portions of East Palo Alto remained primarily industrial in use throughout the twentieth century.

## Residential and Post-War Construction

The City's evolution into primarily a residential suburban community began as Runnymede declined, and escalated after World War II. Housing tract developers acquired larger tracts from nearby farms along with some of the colony lots and began subdividing them into much smaller, densely populated residential parcels. Buyers included year-round residents, as well as San Franciscans seeking a vacation or summer home in East Palo Alto's warmer climate. Along with the development of more traditional housing tracts, poultry farms in Runnymede were replaced with residential developments.



*Gertude Wilks, prominent city leader in the 1960s.*

## Highway Construction and Impacts

In addition to its residential core, East Palo Alto has been defined by its proximity to Highway 101 (the Bayshore Highway) since the highway's construction in 1932. Despite linking the community of East Palo Alto to major cities throughout the San Francisco Bay Area, Highway 101 created significant traffic, health and socio-economic problems for East Palo Alto. Within the first few years after it opened, several people were killed or injured in traffic collisions while attempting to cross the then four-lane highway. Residents subsequently fought to lower the speed limit, build pedestrian underpasses, and add traffic signals. While their efforts were initially successful, the widening of Highway 101 into a six-lane divided freeway in the 1950s undid their work. The only crossings over the wider freeway were University Avenue and Willow Road, which remain today. Highway 101 also created a physical border that contributed to an emerging economic disparity between Palo Alto and East Palo Alto in the mid-twentieth century.

## City Incorporation

East Palo Alto was incorporated in 1983, and is one of the most recently formed cities in the entire Bay Area. Prior to 1983, it was part of unincorporated San Mateo County, as were other large tracts of land that were annexed by Menlo Park and Palo Alto from the late 1940s to the early 1960s. Efforts for City incorporation began as early as the 1920s, followed by more serious incorporation efforts in the 1960s. These efforts remained unsuccessful until a vote was held on June 7, 1983 and the incorporation initiative finally passed by a fifteen vote margin. Following the contentious decision, lawsuits were waged in court from 1983-1987. In 1987, the United States Supreme Court refused to hear an appeal of the California Supreme Court's decision to affirm incorporation issued in 1986, thereby ending the legal battle over incorporation and confirming passage of the incorporation ballot measure. The successful campaign for East Palo Alto's incorporation was a major event in the life of the East Palo Alto community, and one that many of the City's residents and leaders still look back to with pride and inspiration. In many ways, the incorporation effort was a movement for social and fiscal self-determination, following years of

marginalization and neglect by outside powers. During and just before this time, the City endured a tremendous demographic shift as African Americans became the ethnic majority in the City (later, at the end of the millennium, the City would experience another ethnic shift, with Latinos becoming the majority population).

The campaign for incorporation was led by an ethnically diverse coalition of residents who believed their future and their children's future would be brighter if they were in charge of it. As East Palo Alto continues to evolve, it can look to its founding as an inspiring and inclusive exercise in democracy, and an important milestone in its history.



*Swearing in of the first East Palo Alto City Council, shortly after incorporation in 1983.*

## Need for the General Plan Update

The City adopted its first General Plan in 1986. The last comprehensive update of the General Plan was in 1999. There have been some amendments to the General Plan between those time periods and since 1999, such as multiple revisions to the City's Housing Element. Since the 1999 East Palo Alto General Plan was created, there have been significant shifts in economic and housing markets, demographics, land use, the transportation system, community character, and infrastructure demands. Other portions of the 1999 General Plan are outdated, unable to adapt to existing conditions, or no longer reflect the community consensus for the future. These changes and overall conditions in the City were documented in the Existing Conditions Report prepared as part of the comprehensive General Plan update process. This report is available on the City's website and in the Community and Economic Development Department offices. This General Plan Update seeks to bring the plan up-to-date by:

- Responding to socio-economic and demographic changes.
- Engaging community members to express their collective values to create a common vision for the City's future.
- Creating updated policies for land use, community design, transportation, infrastructure, and quality of life.
- Prioritizing community health and equity throughout the General Plan.
- Creating a stand-alone Westside Area Plan to address key issues such as housing.
- Incorporating the vision and policies of the adopted Ravenswood/4 Corners TOD Specific Plan.
- Updating the Zoning Code to bring the development standards and regulations into conformance with the General Plan.

## Statutory Requirements & Authority

Legally, the State of California requires that “each planning agency shall prepare and the legislative body of each county and city shall adopt a comprehensive, long-term general plan for the physical development of the county or city.” (Gov’t Code § 65300). Within this general requirement, some aspects of the general plan are tightly prescribed, while others are left to the discretion of individual cities or counties. In sum, the general plan:

- **Must set forth a “statement of development policies” that includes “objectives, principles, standards, and plan proposals,” and must include seven mandatory elements – land use, circulation, housing, conservation, open space, noise and safety – as well as any optional elements the City chooses. (Gov’t Code § 65302).**
- **Must be an “internally consistent and compatible statements of policies.” (Gov’t Code § 65300.5).**
- **“. . . may include any other subjects which, in the judgment of the legislative body, relate to the physical development of the county or city.” (Gov’t Code § 65303).**
- **Should “accommodate local conditions and circumstances” (Gov’t Code § 65300.7)**
- **“. . . may be adopted in any format deemed appropriate or convenient by the legislative body, including the combining of elements,” provided it meets other minimum requirements (Gov’t Code § 65301).**

This General Plan meets the above legal requirements and also introduces some discretionary elements the City has deemed appropriate (i.e., Health and Equity Element and an Economic Element as well as discretionary sections of elements). Throughout the Elements, this General Plan also addresses the cross-cutting themes of economic development and sustainability.

## Maintenance and Update of the Plan

The East Palo Alto General Plan will be implemented over an extended period of time (20+ years, with a time horizon of 2035). During this time, the long-range planning efforts for East Palo Alto will continue using the goals and objectives as a guide. However, a general plan is a living document, and presents the outcomes desired by the community based on their current goals and local conditions. As the City grows and changes, it may become necessary to amend specific policies and implementation actions as economic and demographic conditions change while new ideas about growth and conservation are formed. In fact, State Law encourages annual reviews of implementation actions and recommends that the entire General Plan be thoroughly reviewed every five years to ensure it is still consistent with the community’s goals.

Any part of a general plan may be amended to accommodate changing conditions. Property owners, the Planning Commission, the City Council, or City staff may propose amendments. Proposed changes must be reviewed by the Planning Commission and the City Council at public hearings and the potential of environmental impacts must be evaluated in accordance with the California Environmental Quality Act.

Community members, neighborhood groups and local organizations are encouraged to get involved in the ongoing planning efforts of the City and to participate in the implementation of the General Plan. By active, thoughtful involvement, City residents can be part of the process of shaping and growing East Palo Alto to make it an even more active, prosperous and welcoming city than it is today.

## Plan Organization

This General Plan is comprised of the State-mandated elements, and additional optional chapters (i.e., health and equity, Westside Area Plan, Economic Development, and Infrastructure, Services, and Facilities). While part of the General Plan, the Housing Element is a stand-alone volume updated more frequently than other chapters.



## Chapter 1. Vision and Guiding Principles

The opening chapter of the General Plan lays out what a vision for the City of East Palo Alto is striving to become. The vision is intended to be realized over the course of one or two generations of thoughtful phased growth and development. It is expected that the vision will help guide decisions relating to new development and updates of the City's various plans and ordinances.

## Chapter 2. Introduction

The Introduction provides background on the reasons for updating the General Plan, including a brief synopsis of the challenges and opportunities facing the City. This chapter also describes the role of the General Plan, how it is intended to be used and administered and an overview of the Plan. This chapter of the General Plan also includes a short history of the City through its early settling, struggles for incorporation, and up to the present.

## Chapter 3. General Plan Update Process

The third chapter in this General Plan provides a comprehensive summary of the steps taken during the update process, including a review of all workshops and public outreach, stakeholder interviews, focus groups, General Plan Advisory Committee (GPAC) and Westside Area Plan Advisory Committee (WAPAC) meetings. This chapter is important to identify and recognize the community's contribution to this document.

## Chapter 4. Land Use and Urban Design

This element presents the approach to land use and urban design, in addition to policies regarding the fiscal health of the City. Within this element are the General Plan land use designations, the designation map and goals and policies describing the community's preferences and priorities for the character and appearance of the City. Finally, the chapter includes in-depth policies for each sub-area in the City.

## Chapter 5. Economic Development

This element provides goals and policies related to the continued expansion of economic development in the City. It addresses the potential for new jobs, the need for a jobs-housing balance, the desire for workforce training and the need to improve fiscal resources.

## Chapter 6. Transportation

This element presents the approach to transportation, addressing access and mobility within the City. Included in this element are descriptions of street types and the circulation network map as well as goals and policies addressing existing and future transportation facilities in East Palo Alto for pedestrians, bicycles, and transit.

## Chapter 7. Health and Equity

This element presents the community's priorities for realizing a healthy and equitable community. It includes goals and policies that address existing community health concerns as well approaches to managing new development to prevent future health issues. It covers topics such as environmental justice, mental health, access to healthy food, disease prevention, and physical activity. The chapter also addresses economic development strategies, including unemployment, homelessness, workforce training, access to jobs, and civic engagement.

## Chapter 8. Parks, Open Space and Conservation

This element presents the community's approach for dealing with parks, open space, conservation of historic, archaeological and natural resources, wildlife and biological resources, urban forest, and recreational programs.

## Chapter 9. Infrastructure, Services and Facilities

This element presents the community's intent for the maintenance and expansion of its water, wastewater, stormwater, and energy networks. The element also includes goals and policies that address the provision of public services such as police, fire and education, and

discusses civic properties such as schools, libraries, City Hall, and other government-owned lands and buildings. Finally, the chapter includes goals and policies on climate change and adaptation.

## Chapter 10. Safety and Noise

This element contains the community’s approach to reducing the potential risks resulting from natural and environmental hazards such as earthquakes, floods, fire and extreme weather. The element contains goals and policies that will help guide the City’s decisions related to new development and the risks to the health, safety, and welfare of local hazards. Additional content covers sea level rise and the legacy of contamination in Ravenswood.

This element also addresses the approach for minimizing the community’s exposure to harmful noise levels. The element analyzes and quantifies future noise levels. It includes a map summarizing the results, and presents goals and policies for managing exposure to excessive noise.

## Chapter 11. Westside Area Plan

The Westside Area Plan presents a vision for the future of the Westside area (west of Highway 101), where a substantial amount of the City’s affordable housing exists. It provides a recommended vision, guiding principles, and goals and policies for providing affordable housing, beautifying the area, and connecting it to the rest of the City.



*Three to four story apartment housing is allowed under several new and modified Land Use Designations (see Chapter 4).*

## Chapter 12. Implementation

The General Plan provides a vision for the future of East Palo Alto and guidance about how to attain that future. City staff, the City Council, the Planning Commission, and other boards and commissions, as part of their duties to the City, will carry out the goals and policies of the plan. Plan implementation will be achieved through the adoption, implementation and revision of the municipal development code, annual budget, capital improvements program, and through on-going decisions about development proposals. Indeed, all City programs, policies and actions must be made consistent with this General Plan to meet state requirements.

To assist with the effort of implementing this General Plan, the final chapter, Implementation, provides a list of actions that the City will undertake to carry out the vision. Each action includes a description, a level of priority, a timeframe for accomplishing the tasks, and the responsible parties for each action. This chapter also includes a list of major physical improvements known at the time of writing and indicators to measure the successful implementation of the General Plan.

## Appendix

This General Plan includes Appendix A, the glossary. It includes definitions of terms used in this General Plan.

## Housing Element

In addition to the above chapters, the General Plan also includes the State-mandated Housing Element. Since the Housing Element is updated more frequently than the rest of the General Plan, it is contained in a separate volume.

The Housing Element includes the City’s existing and projected housing needs, and opportunities for new multi-family housing development, in order for the City to meet its share of the regional housing allotment. The element additionally provides related policies on housing affordability (rent stabilization and below market homeownership), housing quality (condition of the housing units), and housing demand (displacement).

## How to Use this General Plan

Each element of the General Plan is organized with the following sections:

- **Statutory Requirements.** A short explanation of the mandatory state requirements for each element – what must be included in the section to be certified as a legally binding document.
- **Issues and Opportunities.** A summary of the issues facing the community. The issues serve as background for the goals and policies and are derived from the Existing Conditions Report prepared as part of this General Plan update available for download on the City’s website.
- **Goals and Policies.** Each element contains goals and policies responding to the key issues associated with achieving the community’s vision, and are intended to provide clear direction in how the City will implement the overall vision of this plan.

Together, the General Plan language creates a hierarchy of goals and policies that will be mandated, encouraged, or allowed by the City over the next 20 years.

### Goals and Policies

Each element of this General Plan contains goals and policies. Implementation actions are included in Chapter 12 “Implementation,” but are organized by the same topics as each chapter. All of these guide decision-making, and are defined as follows.

- **Goal.** Overall statement describing a need, concern, opportunity, or desire. Goals are broad in both purpose and aim, but are designed specifically to establish positions or directions. The following is an example of a goal:

**Goal LU-1: Maintain an urban form and land use pattern that enhances the quality of life and meets the community’s vision.**

- **Intent.** An explanatory statement that provides justification, rationale, and background on the related goal. The intent gives a clearer picture of why the stated goal is important to the wellbeing

and success of the City moving forward, and gives specificity on the desired outcomes.

*Intent: To provide housing, employment, retail and services, recreation, arts, education and entertainment for the City’s residents and businesses in an urban environment that promotes health, equity, prosperity, and well-being.*

- **Policies.** Specific position statements that support the achievement of goals and serve as guides to the City Council, Planning Commission, other City commissions and boards, and City staff when reviewing development proposals and making other decisions. Policies seek to achieve the goals by mandating, encouraging, or permitting certain actions. Certain policies are critical and must be implemented. Thus, compliance with the policy or action is mandatory. Language used to describe this intent includes will, must, require, prohibit, conduct, maintain and implement. Other policies are strongly encouraged by the City but total implementation may not be possible, thus compliance is not mandatory. Language used to describe this intent includes should, may, encourage, consider, explore, allow, discourage and promote. The following are examples of policies in the East Palo Alto General Plan:

**Policy 8.2: High quality construction and architecture.** Prioritize nonresidential development in the City and seek opportunities to convert residential uses to enhance the tax base so long as replacement housing is provided at the same or greater level of affordability and mix of housing types/sizes.

- **Actions.** The Implementation chapter and the Housing Element includes actions, such as physical improvements and programs that implement the vision, goals and policies of the General Plan. The actions differ from policies in that they are intended to be one-time activities, such as creating a plan.

**Small business support.** Develop and staff a program that supports small and local businesses. Prepare and circulate a small business assistance resource guide.