



# Vista 2035 – East Palo Alto General Plan

## Introduction

Adopted on October 4, 2016, Vista 2035 is East Palo Alto's updated General Plan<sup>1</sup>, reflecting the community's values and vision for the future. It emphasizes the city's identity as a diverse, inclusive, and resilient community within Silicon Valley. The plan prioritizes affordable housing while aiming to balance job growth and housing needs. Through strategic policies and implementation, Vista 2035 guides the city's physical and economic development to create a peaceful, healthy, and sustainable future.

## What is a General Plan?

A General Plan in California is a comprehensive, long-term strategy that guides a city or county's physical development. Required by law since 1971, it acts as the "constitution" for all future development, shaping decisions on land use, housing, transportation, public services, and environmental protection. All local zoning, subdivision, and public works must align with it. It is a critical tool for local governance, climate action, and housing policy, and has the following key attributes:

1. Legal Basis: Governed by California Government Code § 65300 and affirmed by the California Courts as the highest local planning policy.
2. Purpose: Connects a community's long-term vision to its planning and decision-making processes.
3. Updates: Must be regularly updated, with housing elements specifically required every 8 years.
4. Amendments: Limited to four per year, with some exceptions.

## Requirements for a General Plan

California law (Government Code § 65300) mandates that every city and county adopt a General Plan to guide long-term growth and development. The General Plan must include seven to nine mandatory elements (Government Code § 65302), with additional optional elements allowed based on local priorities.

Mandatory Elements (East Palo Alto must include 8 elements due to SB 1000 and disadvantaged communities):

1. Land Use – Specifies land distribution for housing, business, open space, etc., including population and building density.
2. Circulation – Covers major transportation infrastructure, aligned with land use plans.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cityofepa.org/planning/page/vista-2035-general-plan>

3. Housing – Addresses housing needs across income levels; updated every 8 years as part of Regional Housing Needs Allocation (RHNA) process.
4. Conservation – Focuses on natural resource use and preservation.
5. Open Space – Plans for recreational and ecological land preservation.
6. Noise – Evaluates and plans to reduce noise pollution.
7. Safety – Identifies and plans for natural hazards and emergency evacuation.
8. Environmental Justice (SB 1000) – Targets pollution reduction, public health, and access to equitable facilities for disadvantaged communities.
9. Air Quality – Required in some jurisdictions.

Optional Elements - Local governments may include elements like economic development, climate change, urban design, or public health to address community-specific needs.

Guiding Principles of a General Plan:

1. Internal Consistency – All elements must align and be regularly updated.
2. Long-Term Perspective – Should guide growth over 15–25 years.
3. Comprehensive Coverage – Must include wide-ranging goals and policies.
4. Public Participation – Community involvement is essential throughout the process.

### **Relationship of a General Plan to Zoning Code**

In California, the General Plan and Zoning (Development) Code are legally connected but serve different purposes. The General Plan is a long-term, policy-oriented document guiding land use over 15–25 years, while the Zoning Code is a detailed, regulatory tool that implements the General Plan's policies. State law (Gov. Code § 65860(a)) mandates that zoning, particularly in general law cities, must align with the General Plan. If inconsistencies arise, either the Zoning Code must be amended, or the General Plan revised. The General Plan functions as an overarching long-range planning document, often referred to as the "constitution" for land use, while the Zoning Code serves to implement the General Plan at the parcel level.

### **Why is a General Plan Important?**

A General Plan is essential for cities or counties because:

1. Legal Compliance – State laws require cities and counties to have a General Plan to guide growth and development consistently with land use approvals.
2. Budgeting and Capital Planning – It helps shape priorities for city budgets and infrastructure projects based on community values and goals.
3. Visioning – It reflects the community's values and aspirations, providing a long-term vision shaped through public engagement.
4. Stakeholder Involvement – It allows residents and stakeholders to participate in setting goals, evaluating policies, and ensuring coordination across city planning efforts.

Overall, a General Plan serves as a foundational tool for organized, community-driven growth and development.

## **Community participation in General Plan implementation**

Community participation in implementing the General Plan involves public input through staff work and regular Commission and Council hearings. City departments report annually on the progress of implementing the General Plan's goals, objectives, policies, and programs to the City Manager and at public hearings to the City Council.

## **Concise summary of the Vista 2035 General Plan**

The Vista 2035 General Plan, adopted on October 4, 2016, after extensive community involvement, is a comprehensive policy guide for East Palo Alto's growth and development over the next 20–30 years. It includes all eight mandatory elements and some optional ones, ensuring internal consistency.

Key Chapters of the Vista 2035 General Plan:

1. Vision and Guiding Principles - East Palo Alto aims to be a vibrant, inclusive, and sustainable city, emphasizing affordable housing, equity, environmental stewardship, and community engagement. The plan promotes revitalization of key areas like Ravenswood, Bay Road, and University Avenue, supported by 16 guiding principles focused on equity, safety, housing, arts, education, infrastructure, and participation.
2. Major Strategies - The plan's long-term strategies focus on equitable growth, infrastructure improvements, and community well-being. Key initiatives include transit-oriented development in Ravenswood/4 Corners, pedestrian-friendly Bay Road, revitalized University Avenue, affordable housing preservation, redevelopment of Gateway 101, new office and education hubs, parks expansion, and addressing traffic and flooding.
3. History and Planning Process - East Palo Alto has a rich history from indigenous Puichon people to European settlement and industrial development. Incorporated in 1983 after grassroots efforts, the city adopted its first plan in 1986 and updated it in 1999. The 2016 Vista 2035 Plan replaced the outdated 1999 version to reflect demographic, economic, and infrastructure changes, emphasizing equity, health, and community-driven development.
4. Plan Elements - The Plan includes eight mandatory elements (Land Use and Urban Design, Transportation, Health & Equity /Environmental Justice, Parks, Open Space and Conservation, Safety and Noise, and Housing) and optional ones (Economic Development, Infrastructure, Westside Area Plan, and Implementation). The Housing Element is maintained as a separate volume updated more frequently.

Overall, Vista 2035 is a forward-looking, community-centered framework designed to guide East Palo Alto toward a resilient, inclusive, and thriving future.

## **Maintenance and Currency of a General Plan**

Maintaining the relevance of a General Plan in California involves two key processes: annual amendments and comprehensive updates. Annual amendments are targeted revisions that are typically allowed up to four times a year and address immediate needs like zoning changes or legal compliance, offering flexibility for local governments. These amendments are limited in scope and relatively quick to implement.

In contrast, regular updates occur every 15 to 25 years and involve a full-scale review of the plan to align with long-term community goals, changing demographics, economic shifts, climate impacts, and new legal requirements. These updates are strategic, involve significant public engagement, environmental analysis, and coordination with various agencies, and are far more costly.

The distinction lies in purpose and scale: amendments are reactive and tactical, while updates are proactive and strategic. Both are essential: amendments keep the plan responsive in the short term, while updates ensure its long-term relevance and cohesiveness.

The Vista 2035 General Plan, adopted in 2016, remains relevant as it enters the middle phase of its 20-year horizon. Few amendment requests, apart aside from the Woodland Park and Ravenswood updates, and those driven by state law, indicate that the plan continues to reflect East Palo Alto's community values and priorities.