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## **City of San Diego General Plan**

### **Critique and Evaluation**

#### **A Brief History:**

In the 1960s, the City of San Diego started to draft its first General Plan. After countless meetings between city planners, architects, and engineers, the City released a document in which it considered to be its first General Plan in 1967.

In the succeeding years, the City frequently revised the General Plan in hopes of improving it. Some of the revisions were: the 2010 amendments to the Land Use and Community Planning, Public Facilities, Services and Safety, and Recreation elements and Glossary, 2012 amendments to the Conservation element, 2015 amendments to the Land Use, Mobility, Economic Prosperity, Public Facilities, Services and Safety, Recreation, and Noise elements, and 2018 amendments to the Public Facilities, Services and Safety element. One of the ideas that significantly influenced the revisions of the General Plan was Kevin Lynch and Donald Appleyard's book, *Temporary Paradise*; the book emphasized that "new growth [should] complement the regional landscape to preserve its previous natural resources and San Diego's high quality of life" (Introduction, i). Not only that, exponential growth in the City of San Diego also affected the revisions. Residents wrote ballot initiatives, documents, and programs regarding

the increasing issue of growth. One such document came to be known as the Regional Growth Management Strategy. Today, the current City of San Diego's General Plan consists of 10 elements, all of which place a large emphasis on the global climate change.

### **Current and Projected Profiles:**

#### **2030 Population, Housing and Employment Forecast**

	2000	2010	2020	2030	% Change 2000-2030
Total Population	1,223,400	1,365,130	1,514,336	1,656,257	35%
Housing Units	469,689	518,063	574,254	610,049	30%
Civilian Employment	742,904	850,543	926,382	980,374	32%

**Figure 1**

	Population	Percent of Total	Population < Age 18
Hispanic	360,021	27%	121,939
White	612,953	47%	28,609
Black	95,756	7%	26,188
American Indian	4,309	<1%	941
Asian	189,384	14%	40,383
Hawaiian & Pacific Islander	5,617	<1%	1,588
Other	3,562	<1%	1,312
Two or More Races	45,145	3%	17,816
All Ethnic Groups	1,316,837	100%	238,776

**Figure 2**

Estimates per 2007 predict that the population will grow to 1,656,257 million in 2030, a 35% increase from 2000. Housing Units will increase from 610,049 in 2030, a 30% increase from 2000. The general plan also predicts that the civilian employment within San Diego will increase to 980,374 in 2030, a 32% increase from 2000 (Introduction, IV).

As the population of the City of San Diego is increasing, so is the number of housing units. Essentially, this is to meet the demands of the influx of people coming into San Diego. Currently, there is an abundance of housing construction that is tailored for high-income families. However, there are not enough housing for low-income families. Affordable housing is

an apparent issue as it is close to nonexistent in the high-cost-of-living City of San Diego.

Therefore, while the number of housing units are increasing, the number does not work in favor of certain groups of people, especially low-income families.

**Main Goals, Challenges, and Opportunities:**

The SWOT analysis for the City of San Diego includes many interesting subjects. First of all, let us address some crucial strengths that the city possesses. San Diego is known to be business-friendly because according to the City of San Diego Economic Development, “the City of San Diego offers significant economic advantages for businesses in comparison with other large cities in California. The City has the lowest Business License Fees of the nine largest California cities. The City charges no Utility Users' Taxes”. San Diego City’s other perk involves the Partial Sales Tax Exemption. This tax exemption “affords businesses a 4.19% state sales tax exemption to reduce the tax on manufacturing and research & development (R&D) equipment purchases. The exemption is administered by the California Board of Equalization (BOE)” (City of San Diego Business Expansion, Attraction and Retention). This city is also known to be a huge tourist hotspot as it generates “nearly \$11.5 billion annually” from tourists alone (City of San Diego Tourism Industry). To support this data, “San Diego hosts nearly 35.8 million visitors each year, and is a top U.S. travel destination” (City of San Diego Tourism Industry). Despite these strengths, you will notice that yes, tourism is a big industry for the city and businesses are too but that just tells us that the city consists of a lot of commuters and visitors coming through not residents.

Secondly, here are the weaknesses of the City of San Diego. San Diego consists of too much unaffordable housing, meaning there is a huge shortage of housing for low and moderate

income level people and a huge surplus in above moderate income housing (HE-193). Then, according to residents' experiences, the City of San Diego is quite sprawl, meaning overall, it is still unwalkable. Public transit exists but private cars are still more convenient when it comes to longer distances than 5 miles. Finally, San Diego has an hourglass economy which means that the city contains many high and low wage jobs but has a shortage of middle wage jobs. To this day, I feel like San Diego still has not found an effective way to solve any of these weaknesses.

Thirdly, despite San Diego's strengths and weaknesses, it still contains many opportunities. One opportunity that San Diego has is a proposal "of a citywide, comprehensive Parks Master Plan to guide park and open space acquisition, design and development, recreational programming and needed maintenance over the next 20-30 years" (City of San Diego General Plan: Recreation Element, RE-6). Basically, the City of San Diego seems to have a worked out plan to maintain and improve the infrastructure and environment of the city. Another opportunity includes a sustainable plan in which the city wants to focus "development and density near transit stops [as that] can improve public transit even further; It allows for a more cost-effective expansion of transit services; it can also relieve congestion" (City of San Diego General Plan: Strategic Framework, SF-3). A third opportunity that we found is that, "changing regulations to encourage mixed-use buildings and increasing density can reduce sprawl by making it easier to plan where public transit should be" (City of San Diego General Plan: Strategic Framework, SF-5). For example, the trolley that is currently expanding from Santa Fe to University City and the rapid bus transportation is being connected from South Bay to Downtown San Diego. With these future transit built, hopefully San Diego becomes easier and more convenient to commute and travel around. I feel like if San Diego steps up the game and

build more than the 2% mixed use buildings that it has now, then transit will actually improve whereas if it keeps the mixed use buildings it has now, we may get better but not by much as San Diego is still sprawl.

The fourth and final part of the SWOT analysis include threats. The threats that we found were rising sea level and the fact that San Diego is in an earthquake zone. Global warming is causing the rising sea level and humans are contributing to this threat. Rising sea levels could impact the development of coastal communities in San Diego and it will have economic consequences in the long run. It could also cause displacement of residents on the coast. Furthermore, the Rose Canyon fault line in San Diego, is susceptible to earthquakes which specifies the second threat. If there is a big earthquake or if the rising sea levels overwhelm the current coastline, no matter how many plans of sustainability or increasing density that we come up with, it will change the geography of the City of San Diego forever, never mind the residents of the coast.

### Existing Land Uses vs. Proposed Land Uses:

TABLE LU-1 Existing Land Uses (May 2006)

General Plan Land Use Category	Existing Uses	
	Acres	% of Total
Agriculture	6,055	2.8
Commercial Employment, Retail, and Services	7,887	3.6
Industrial Employment	8,928	4.1
Institutional, Public and Semi-Public Facilities <sup>1</sup>	37,103	16.9
Multiple Use	--	--
Park, Open Space and Recreation <sup>2</sup>	60,654	27.6
Residential	52,389	23.9
Roads / Freeways / Transportation Facilities <sup>3</sup>	31,291	14.3
Water Bodies <sup>3</sup>	6,932	3.2
Vacant <sup>3</sup>	8,002	3.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>219,241</b>	<b>100.0</b>

<sup>1</sup> This land use category includes 26,547 of existing acres of military use.

<sup>2</sup> This land use category includes 2,578 acres of water bodies that are recreational areas and located within park and open space areas.

<sup>3</sup> Not a General Plan land use category, however, it is included to provide an accurate account for total acreage in the City. Water bodies identified here are not for recreational purposes.

Source: SANDAG's Regional Land Use Database

TABLE LU-2 Planned Land Uses

General Plan Land Use Category	Existing Uses	
	Acres	% of Total
Agriculture	3,670	1.7
Commercial Employment, Retail, and Services	6,114	2.8
Industrial Employment	12,278	5.6
Institutional, Public and Semi-Public Facilities <sup>1</sup>	36,545	16.7
Multiple Use	4,534	2.1
Park, Open Space and Recreation <sup>2</sup>	62,686	28.5
Residential	55,987	25.5
Roads / Freeways / Transportation Facilities <sup>3</sup>	30,495	13.9
Water Bodies <sup>3</sup>	6,932	3.2
Vacant <sup>3</sup>	--	--
<b>Total</b>	<b>219,241</b>	<b>100.0</b>

<sup>1</sup> This land use category includes 26,547 of existing acres of military use.

<sup>2</sup> This land use category includes 2,578 acres of water bodies that are recreational areas and located within park and open space areas.

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Source: SANDAG's Regional Land Use Database

### Figure 3

### Figure 4

In comparing the City of San Diego's tables of existing (left) and proposed (right) land uses, we noticed differences in six General Plan land use categories: "agriculture," "multiple

use,” “residential,” and “industrial.” There will be an exponential increase in residential areas. Similarly, there will be a slight increase in industrial areas in the north and south parts of the City; businesses like manufacturing and distribution facilities choose to situate their headquarters there because of the vast availability of land. On the other hand, agricultural land that is typically in the northern and southern parts of the City of San Diego will see a decline. Furthermore, multiple use will surface, especially in downtown.

Fortunately, “commercial employment, retail, and services” will stay consistent. Currently, these amenities are equally spaced throughout the City and will continue to do so in the future. “Institutional, public and semi-public facilities” will also remain stable as the majority of educational facilities throughout the City of San Diego are sufficiently used.

**Key Goals and Policies of the Land Use and Community Planning Element:**

Holistically, the main goals and policies of the City of San Diego’s land use element are focused on implementing sustainability through the use of efficient land use. For example, one of the main goals consists of having mixed-use villages that are interconnected through superior transit. In theory, these mixed-use villages are to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by encouraging walkability and transit. The land use element of the City of San Diego does touch base on the majority of locally relevant issues – climate change being one of the main ones. Despite this, the land use element is weak in the sense that it has way too many goals and policies. The thirteen goals and policies make it difficult for the City to hone down and focus on specific ones. Hence, the expectations that the City has for all thirteen of the land use goals and policies are too difficult to achieve, and thus unrealistic.

**Key Goals and Policies of the Mobility Element:**

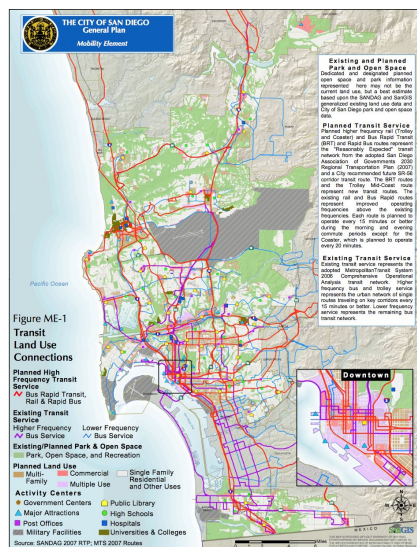
Overall, San Diego aims to become a more interconnected and walkable community. One way planners wish to achieve this is by encouraging the use of forms of transportation besides personal automobiles. The General Plan calls for the improvement and expansion of San Diego's public transit system, including their Rapid Bus System. A significant portion of the proposed expansions would expand into the mixed use land in and near downtown San Diego. Additionally, the proposed expansions would be accessible many of the multifamily units within the city. These public transit improvements, in tandem with the bikeways and city of villages strategy that the city plans to develop, should make San Diego overall a much more interconnected community.

The mobility element also outlines a few actions to take in order to address Transportation Demand Management (TDM). The city wishes to reduce the use of personal automobiles and encourage carpooling and other forms of transportation, such as public transit. They aim to support alternative forms of transportation by offering amenities, incentives, and programs such as bicycle lockers and car sharing vehicles. Interestingly, the city also plans to reduce traffic by encouraging alternative work schedules and telework.

The mobility element doesn't directly mention Transit Oriented Developments (TOD). However, it does cite that future developments for mixed use land through the city of villages strategy should be located along transit routes. This suggests that San Diego is attempting to take a TOD approach with creating creating new developments.

The city of San Diego will work with the San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG) to coordinate long-term transportation improvements through the Regional Transportation Plan (RTP) (ME-5). In the Regional Coordination and Financing Options section

of the mobility city aims to have a process to determine the prioritization of transportation projects, and effective representation of San Diego within all SANDAG decisions. The plan also calls for assured revenues to cover the costs of operating, building, and maintaining transportation facilities and services. The city of San Diego already passed a half cent sales tax through the voters to raise funds for the needed improvements and maintenance. However, the plan also acknowledges that the city still needs to raise more funds to make all the transit improvements they wish to make (ME-56). While the plan doesn't come up with an exact solution for this issue, it does directly acknowledge the issue and suggests that the city should investigate where it can draw in more funds for the desired improvements (ME-57).



**Figure 5**

### **Key Goals and Policies of the Housing Element:**

The current Housing Element of the City of San Diego was last updated on March 4, 2013 and is set for the years 2013-2020. In my opinion, the RHNA, Regional Housing Needs Allocation, and the quantified objectives for housing production are the most fascinating aspects



of the Housing Element. According to the table displaying RHNA statistics, 18,735 units are needed for low-income housing units and 18,362 units are needed for above-moderate income housing units.

Whereas RHNA is a data table in which numbers were collected according to what is needed, the City of San Diego has something called the quantified objectives for housing production. In this set of data, it shows the actual number of housing units that were built for each income level. There is a shortage of units of more or less 8,000 units for low income but a huge surplus of units, more or less 16,000 units for above-moderate income. I feel like the reason that this happens is because when developers are required to build a certain percentage of affordable housing on their sites, they lose a lot of profit that way. To counteract that profit loss, developers lean towards above-moderate income housing to gain their profit back. In other words, even moderate income housing isn't going to cut it.

Aside from the developers, the government is trying to make up for the lack of affordable housing for low income people by creating a bunch of programs designed to help low income and homeless people. One such program is called the Rental Housing Assistance Program. This program aims to “break the cycle of poverty by assisting families with paying rent, providing supportive services, and have an individualized case management to encourage economic independence” (HE-75). For whether these programs have done any good or been effective in any way, it is not known yet.

### **Specific Plans (From the Last 15 Years)**

Out of 7 Specific Plans that we found for the City of San Diego, only 3 out of those 7 were either updated or adopted in the last 15 years. The three specific plans include the Quarry

Falls Specific Plan, the Morena Corridor Specific Plan, and the Balboa Avenue Station Specific Plan.

The Quarry Falls Specific Plan was last updated on October 21, 2008. This specific plan concentrates on low and high density residential, multiple-use, and recreational and open space. The Morena Corridor Specific Plan's final draft was posted in January 2019. This specific plan concentrates on the renovation into mixed-use village. The Balboa Avenue Station Specific Plan's latest draft was last updated in July 2019. This specific plan aims to improve transit-oriented development near the Balboa Avenue Trolley Station.

The question of whether the specific plans are consistent or not with the General Plan is understandable. An example of a consistent specific plan is the Balboa Avenue Station Specific Plan. This plan incorporates the "city of villages strategy" that is elaborated in the city's General Plan. The city of villages strategy states that mixed used villages will be built throughout the city and be connected by high quality transportation.

Aside from the Balboa Avenue Specific Plan, the Morena Corridor Specific Plan is also intriguing. When thinking back to the City of San Diego's General Plan, the words, "sustainability," "walkability," "transit-oriented," and "affordable housing," come to mind. These words are also clearly seen in the Morena Corridor Specific Plan. The Morena Corridor Specific Plan suggests a planned transit station that is surrounded with mixed-use buildings in order to promote people to stay within that community when seeking to dine, shop, etc. Therefore, residents of that neighborhoods are discouraged from using their vehicles and instead encouraged to walk.

**The Relationship of the Three Elements/Is It Internally Consistent:**

Overall, San Diego's general plan appears consistent across all elements of the plan. The housing, mobility, and land use elements all make reference to one another and seem to avoid having conflicting agendas. Additionally, the proposed actions from each element actually help the plan achieve some of its goals from its other elements. For example, the Land Use Element's city of villages strategy will encourage walkability and use of alternative forms of transportation, which helps the Mobility Element's achieve its goal of complying with SB 375. The transportation element also aims to expand much of its transit into areas with a significant amount of mixed use land or multi-family housing units. Targeting densely populated areas or areas with a lot of activities allows public transit to be accessible to a larger number of people. Additionally, the land use and housing elements of the general plan work together by making it possible for residents to live near their work through the city of villages strategy, encouraging walkability (ME-2). New mixed use land developments, along with the affordable housing within these villages, will be located near transit routes to promote interconnectedness, walkability, and multi-modal transport, as outlined by the mobility element.

Furthermore, the land use, circulation, and housing developments elements are interconnected with one another, as seen in the City of San Diego. Through the General Plan, it is evident that existing buildings that are intended for residential uses are built near the existing transit stations. This is a clear instance of the idea that land use planning follows transportation planning.

#### **Evaluation of the General Plan's Overall Strengths and Weaknesses:**

There are a few notable strengths that we noticed within the general plan. For example, one strength of the plan is that plans to supply the number housing units that San Diego. Another

strength is that the plan incorporates mixed land use as a significant part of the plan, which helps the city fulfill many of its goals. The plan also makes reference to its hourglass economy and forms some of its policy within its economic prosperity element to promote more middle wage jobs.

One weakness is that the plan supplies a large amount of unaffordable housing. There is a lack of affordable housing within San Diego, and the plan fails to adequately address this issue. Another potential weakness is that the land use element only incorporates mixed land as being about 2% of its land use (LU-2). While this is better than nothing, one could argue it should make up a much more significant part of San Diego's land use planning in order to fulfill many of San Diego's goals, such as complying with SB 375 and encouraging multimodal transport. A final weakness we noticed is that the general plan made no direct mention to how to adapt and deal with the issues posed by rising sea levels.

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