

INTRODUCTION

This section summarizes the purpose of the General Plan, how to use the general plan, and the natural and institutional environment of Windsor.

This chapter is organized into the following sections:

- What is a General Plan? (Section 1.1)
- Using the General Plan (Section 1.2)
- Setting (Section 1.3)
- Institutional Environment (Section 1.4)

SECTION 1.1 WHAT IS A GENERAL PLAN?

State law requires every city and county in California to prepare and maintain a planning document called a general plan. The general plan serves as the jurisdiction’s “constitution” or “blueprint” for future decisions concerning land use and resource conservation. Decision-makers in the Town will use the General Plan to provide direction when making future land use and public service decisions. All specific plans, subdivisions, public works projects, and zoning decisions must be consistent with the Town’s General Plan.

The Town of Windsor’s General Plan update will serve several purposes:

- Provide the public opportunities for meaningful participation in the planning and decision-making process;
- Provide a description of current conditions and trends impacting the Town;
- Identify planning issues, opportunities, and challenges that should be addressed in the General Plan;
- Explore land use and policy alternatives;
- Ensure that the General Plan is current, internally consistent, and easy to use;
- Provide guidance in the planning and evaluation of future land and resource decisions; and
- Provide a vision and framework for the future growth of the Town of Windsor.

The General Plan is not to be confused with zoning. Although both the General Plan and the Zoning Ordinance designate how land may be developed, they do so in different ways. The General Plan has a long-term outlook. It identifies the types of development that will be allowed, the spatial relationships among land uses, and the general pattern of future development. Zoning regulates development through specific standards such as lot size, building setback, and allowable uses. However, the land uses shown on the General Plan Diagrams will typically be reflected in the local zoning maps as well. Development must not only meet the specific requirements of the Zoning Ordinance but also the broader policies set forth in the General Plan.

A general plan typically has three defining features:

- **General.** As the name implies, a general plan provides general guidance that will be used to direct future land use and resource decisions.
- **Comprehensive.** A general plan covers a wide range of social, economic, infrastructure, and natural resource factors. These include land use, housing, circulation, utilities, public services, recreation, agriculture, biological resources, and many other topics.
- **Long-Range.** General plans provide guidance on reaching a long-range vision for the Town's future. To reach this envisioned future, the General Plan must include policies and actions that address both immediate and long-term needs. For Windsor, the General Plan is designed to look out to the year 2040.

SECTION 1.2 USING THE GENERAL PLAN

A primary objective in updating the Town of Windsor General Plan is to make the plan user-friendly. To do this, the General Plan has been divided into several documents so that its goals and policies can be easily referenced, while detailed background and environmental information are also easy to find and use. The Windsor General Plan is comprised of the following:

Background Report. The Background Report takes a “snapshot” of current (2014) conditions and trends in Windsor. It provides a detailed description of a wide range of topics within the Planning Area, such as demographic and economic conditions, land use, public services, and environmental resources. The report provides decision-makers, the public, and local agencies with context for making policy decisions. Unlike the Policy Document, the Background Report is objective and policy-neutral. The Background Report also serves as the “Environmental Setting” section of the Environmental Impact Report (EIR) prepared for the General Plan.

Policy Document. The Policy Document is the essence of the General Plan. It contains the goals and policies that will guide future decisions within the Town. It also identifies a set of implementation programs that will ensure the goals and policies in the General Plan are carried out.

In addition to the General Plan Background Report and Policy Document, the Town must prepare an environmental impact report (EIR). The EIR responds to the requirements of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) as set forth in Sections 15126, 15175, and 15176 of the CEQA Guidelines Act. The Planning Commission and Town Council will use the EIR during the General Plan Update process to consider potential environmental implications associated with implementing the General Plan and identify feasible mitigation measures.

SECTION 1.3 SETTING

Regional Setting

The Planning Area for the General Plan is roughly bounded by the Russian River on the west, the Coastal Range ridgeline to the north (at the intersection of Old Redwood Highway with the Northwestern Pacific Railroad), the PG&E transmission lines to the east, and Airport Creek to the south. The Planning Area follows physical boundaries around the Town to analyze the resources, hazards, and land use policies that will ultimately affect Windsor's development pattern.

The Windsor Planning Area is in central Sonoma County, approximately 20 miles east of the Pacific Ocean. The City of Healdsburg is approximately five miles to the northwest and Santa Rosa, the Sonoma County seat, lies seven miles to the southeast. Regional access is provided by U.S. 101, a major north-south limited

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access freeway. U.S. 101 bisects the Planning Area and the Town and connects California's northern coastal counties with the San Francisco metropolitan area. The Northwestern Pacific Railroad parallels U.S. 101 and is approximately one-quarter mile west of U.S. 101. The Sonoma County Airport is located one-quarter mile south of the Town.

The Windsor Planning Area includes about 13,200 acres. A majority of the area is relatively flat, bordered by hills to the east, north, and west. Surface drainage through the area is towards the southwest; streams drain from the higher hills to the east and flow into Mark West Creek and the Russian River. Elevations within the Planning Area range from about 100 to 500 feet.

Town History

The Town of Windsor was originally situated on a county road leading from Santa Rosa to Healdsburg east of the present U.S. 101. Settlement was spurred by the Gold Rush in northern California starting in 1849, which prompted such activities as fruit and grain cultivation, vineyards, ranching, and dairy farming. Windsor was named for its majestic oak trees which reminded early settlers of the Windsor countryside in England. In 1855, Hiram Lewis established the first post office for the Town's population of approximately 250 people. In 1872, the San Francisco-Northern Pacific Railroad was extended through the area and triggered the establishment of a new commercial and retail center to the west of the original Town site, next to the existing railroad tracks. The Windsor area remained a rural, agricultural community throughout the latter part of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century.

The allure of Sonoma County's high quality of life and the availability of affordable housing and land spurred Sonoma County's growth over the past 30 years. In the 1970s, Windsor, still an unincorporated area in the County, also began to feel the pressures of urbanization. In response to these demands, the Windsor Environs Plan was written in 1975. The Plan was the first real step towards incorporation and listed 52 people among its committee members. Rapid growth continued and prompted the preparation of the Windsor Specific Plan, a twenty-year (1985-2005) policy plan for future development in the Windsor area. Sonoma County adopted the plan in 1986, amid increasing interest by local residents to incorporate. Between 1980 and 1990 the Windsor area experienced the highest growth rate in Sonoma County.

Throughout its history, Windsor has evolved with the times and changed its direction based on market preferences and the needs of its residents. Originally the Town was known for its prunes, hops and other agricultural commodities produced for local populations. With the coming of the railroad in 1877, Windsor had a strategic transport link helping to fuel growth and encourage new enterprise. Windsor successfully incorporated in July 1992. In January 1998, Windsor voters approved a 20-year urban growth boundary.

Today the greater Windsor area, and Sonoma County as a whole, has successfully reinvented itself as a winegrowing region with more than 260 wineries, placing it on a par with Napa County and distinguishing it as a major destination for travelers. Thirty-two wineries are located within a five- to ten-minute drive from Old Downtown Windsor.

The Windsor Town Council consists of five citizen-elected Council members, one of whom is chosen by the Council to serve as Mayor and one as Vice Mayor for a one-year term. The Council also serves as the Board of Directors for the Windsor Water District.

Natural Environment

Natural amenities help define the physical extent of the Windsor community by providing natural boundaries in all directions from the Town limits. Recognition and preservation of these boundaries can help Windsor avoid the extensive development pattern that typifies urban sprawl.

Significant Landforms

Windsor is located in the northern end of the Santa Rosa Plain, between two ridges of the Coast Range mountains. As seen in Figure 2-4, the valley extends north and east to the foothills and is relatively level and cultivated with vineyards. The foothills to the east gently slope to a peak approximately 700 feet in elevation. The northern ridgeline rises approximately 600 feet above the valley floor and represents a visually prominent landform that defines the northern Planning Area boundary. The Russian floodplain defines the western border of the Planning Area. The Town of Windsor sits on the valley floor, approximately 50 feet above the Russian River floodplain.

Because of Windsor's relatively level terrain, the hills and ridges to the east, west, and north loom over the valley and form a scenic backdrop for the Town. These distant views provide a sense of place for the community.

Natural Resources

Throughout the Planning Area, along hillsides, roadways and open pastures, large majestic oak trees are the community's most distinctive vegetation feature. Riparian corridors are prevalent for significant reaches of Windsor Creek and Pool Creek and their tributaries. They are wooded areas which extend away from the stream banks in certain locations and function as linear oases among many of the developments in the community. In addition, they serve to define boundaries among neighborhoods and provide visual relief and open space resources.

Community Separators

As part of the Sonoma County General Plan, community separators have been established in the Windsor area along the U.S. 101 corridor. Community separators are intended to preclude continuous urbanization of the County along this corridor. They are also important jurisdictional boundaries used by the County and the Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO) in determining areas appropriate for urban development through adoption of Spheres of Influence. Two community separators in the Windsor Planning Area separate Windsor from Healdsburg to the north and from the unincorporated Larkfield/Wikiup area and Santa Rosa to the south. These areas help define an urban/rural interface, provide visual relief from the urban centers along U.S. 101, and preserve views of the foothills to the north and east.

Agriculture

The Windsor area has rich agricultural soils. Vineyards are a mainstay of the area's agricultural economy and local wineries are recognized internationally. Pasture land and orchards account for most of the other agricultural uses within the Planning Area. Farmlands are a significant visual resource, providing a sense of open space and a link to Windsor's agricultural heritage.

SECTION 1.4 INSTITUTIONAL ENVIRONMENT

Town Council

The Town Council is the political body which formulates and implements policies in Windsor. It is the Council, through its decision-making authority that will affirm the policy direction and priorities contained within this General Plan. The Council is ultimately responsible for adoption of the Plan, as well as the regulations, capital improvement programs, administrative and review procedures, and financing mechanisms that are proposed by the Plan. The Council's authority to establish policy, set funding priorities, and enact ordinances is critical for implementation of the General Plan.

The Planning Commission

The Planning Commission is responsible for shaping the General Plan and forwarding it to the Council for its approval. After the General Plan is adopted, the Commission must ensure that all subsequent development applications are consistent with the goals, objectives, and policies expressed in the Plan. Through this authority, the Planning Commission and the Town's planning staff ensure that the Plan is implemented on a day-to-day basis so that: appropriate land uses are proposed in the proper locations, appropriate levels of service are provided, proposed land uses conform to development regulations, and the environment has been adequately protected

All Town departments look to the General Plan for policy guidance as pertains to their operations and planning for future service levels. The General Plan is a resource for all Town services and provides an internally consistent checkpoint for assessing priorities and alternatives for the Town's future.

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