

# FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

## General Plans

### *What is a General Plan?*

A General Plan is a high-level document outlining how the City plans to meet the community's long-term vision for the future. A general plan is typically made up of community goals and actionable policies, and includes an implementation plan to guide the achievement of that vision.

The State guides the content of many parts of the General Plan and requires it to include goals and policies for the topics of land use, housing, mobility and transportation, open space and natural resources management, noise, natural hazards safety, and environmental justice. Individual cities and counties may also include other topics that are community priorities to the General Plan.

## Environmental Justice

### *Why is the City of Berkeley preparing a new Environmental Justice Element?*

Senate Bill 1000 amended State law to require jurisdictions with “disadvantaged communities” to include environmental justice policies in their general plans. Disadvantaged communities, which the City of Berkeley will be referring to as Environmental Justice, or EJ, Communities, are neighborhoods that encounter systemic challenges, lack resources, are unequally exposed to pollution, and are disproportionately deprived of common community services.

Berkeley has a longstanding commitment to addressing inequities created by past harmful government policies and promoting environmental justice. Developing an Environmental Justice Element aligns with the City’s ongoing efforts to create a more equitable, healthy, and sustainable community for all.

### *What is Environmental Justice?*

Environmental justice is about making sure that all communities have equal access to a healthy environment, and reducing health risks in communities that have been historically underserved by social and government institutions by decreasing pollution exposure, increasing community assets, and improving overall health. The State specifically defines environmental justice as “the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of people of all races, cultures, incomes, and national origins, with respect to the development, adoption, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies.” In the context of land use planning, this means that no neighborhood should be unfairly burdened with more pollution or lack important resources like parks, clean air, and safe housing.

For example, as a result of unfair housing practices some neighborhoods might be near factories or busy highways, which can lead to more pollution and health problems for the people

living there. People may live in neighborhoods that do not have nearby places to buy healthy food or play outside. Environmental justice seeks to address these imbalances by ensuring that city planning decisions are transparent and that all communities benefit from clean and safe environments. This involves actively working to reduce pollution in overburdened areas, providing better access to healthy food, green spaces, safe housing and other services and amenities, and promoting civic engagement in government decisions that contribute to a healthy and vibrant community.

### *What is the purpose of the Environmental Justice Element?*

There is broad recognition that health is heavily influenced by where you grow up and live your day to day life. Social determinants of health, or the conditions in the environment that can effect health outcomes, can be grouped into five categories, including economic stability, education access and quality, neighborhood and built environment, healthcare access and quality, and social and community context. Financial stressors, as well as an environment that is polluted, are the largest obstacles to good health.

Planners and policy makers acknowledge the importance of addressing past injustices and institutionalized discriminatory decisions. While many of these practices are no longer in effect, their lasting impacts can still be seen in our community today and must be addressed.

The Environmental Justice Element will have strategies that seek to reduce pollution and improve quality of life in the areas most under-resourced or impacted by these inequities. These strategies will be developed in close partnership with the Ecology Center and affected community, and will inform citywide programs and actions, as well as the annual City budget that directs money to these efforts. This focus will help advance improvements in environmental justice neighborhoods and throughout Berkeley. By focusing on equity and environmental justice in our General Plan, we can create a more inclusive and healthier environment for all.

### *How will the City consider equity when drafting the Environmental Justice Element?*

Long before the term "environmental justice" was coined, communities across California experienced unequal and unjust land use practices. From the Spanish colonizers who institutionalized the Mission system and intentionally disrupted tribal culture and environmental stewardship, to the practice of redlining in cities during the 20th century, these practices along with many others have left a lasting impact.

The State of California formally designates certain areas as "disadvantaged communities" using CalEnviroScreen, a mapping tool that provides statewide data that can be used to identify communities who are disproportionately impacted by, or at risk from exposure to, environmental pollution and contaminants. However, the City recognizes that this State designation may not fully capture the unique historic, environmental, and socioeconomic contexts of communities in Berkeley. In developing the Environmental Justice Element, the City is collaborating with affected communities to create a more localized and comprehensive identification of environmental justice areas and groups to ensure our efforts are tailored to the specific needs and realities of historically marginalized Berkeley community members.

### *What will be included in the new Environmental Justice Element?*

The Environmental Justice Element will include maps, data, and strategies that are aimed to improve access to safe housing, facilities and services, healthy food and physical activity; reduce exposure to pollutants; and encourage and facilitate community engagement in the planning processes. To develop these strategies, the Element will:

- Identify communities that face more pollution and environmental problems
- Assess how vulnerable Berkeley's communities are to these issues
- Lay out policies to improve the health, safety, and resilience of these communities
- Encourage and strengthen meaningful community engagement in the City's planning process

### *What other efforts is the City of Berkeley working on to promote environmental justice?*

Several existing community-led projects and programs are working to advance environmental justice in Berkeley. This work must continue to be elevated through supportive goals and policies that inform future data gathering, projects, and funding priorities. Some of these plans are listed below. You can find them on the Adopted [Plans page of our website](#).

- Age-Friendly Berkeley Action Plan (2018)
- 2020 Pedestrian Plan City of Berkeley (2021)
- Berkeley Bicycle Plan – Executive Summary and Chapter 2: Goals and Policies (2017)
- Berkeley Climate Action Plan (2009)
- Berkeley Electric Mobility Roadmap (2020)
- Berkeley Strategic Transportation Plan (2016)
- Streets and Open Space Improvement Plan (SOSIP) (2013)
- Vision Zero Action Plan (2019)
- City of Berkeley Consolidated Plan for Housing and Community Development (2020)
- City of Berkeley General Plan Housing Element (2023)
- City of Berkeley General Plan Environmental Management Element (2002)
- City of Berkeley General Plan Citizen Participation Element (2002)

## Safety Element

### *What is the Disaster Preparedness and Safety Element?*

The City's existing General Plan includes a Disaster Preparedness and Safety Element, which fulfills State requirements to address and mitigate natural hazard risks. Berkeley's Disaster Preparedness and Safety Element expands on this and has rules and actions to help reduce the impacts from disasters, whether natural or human-made. It also provides a policy framework to support the City's efforts in preventing human-made disasters, responding to emergencies, dealing with disasters, and recovering after these events. The last comprehensive update to this element was in 2002.

### *What will be included in the updated Disaster Preparedness and Safety Element?*

The update to the Disaster Preparedness and Safety Element will include new information to comply with recent State laws, and to reflect the updated vision of a safe and resilient Berkeley.

The Element will:

- Identify known hazards and risks, assess vulnerability to them, and discuss ways to reduce those risks, including climate-change related hazards
- Include strategies to improve disaster event notifications, communications, and evacuation
- Lay out policies for improving community safety and responding to climate change

You can watch videos about the hazards and risks that will be covered in the update to this Plan on the [Local Hazard Mitigation Plan Update](#) webpage.

### *How is the Disaster Preparedness and Safety Element related to a Local Hazard Mitigation Plan (LHMP)?*

The Disaster Preparedness and Safety Element provides the high-level framework to guide the City's future efforts in preventing disasters, responding to emergencies, and recovering after events. The [LHMP](#) is a part of the Disaster Preparedness and Safety Element and provides a more comprehensive analysis of natural and human-caused hazards and vulnerability of the population and critical assets, as well as a targeted five-year plan to reduce risk. The LHMP also keeps the City eligible to receive Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) hazard mitigation grant funding. How is climate change and resilience being considered in this project?

Berkeley is preparing a climate adaptation assessment to determine potential risks to the most vulnerable members of the community to the effects of climate change, including flooding, wildfire, drought, extreme heat, sea level rise, and storm activity. The findings of this assessment will inform the development of climate resilience and community adaptation policies in the Environmental Justice and Disaster Preparedness and Safety Elements.

The City is collaborating with the community to find out what measurements would best show success in achieving climate change action and resilience goals. The end result will be the creation of a plan to track Berkeley's progress in meeting climate goals that is fair and transparent to all our community members. A new dashboard will show an easy-to-understand summary of important measurements and indicators to more clearly show progress.

*How can I participate in the update process?*

Partnership and collaboration with the community is crucial to ensure the policies and programs reflect the priorities, resources, and values of all of Berkeley.

Here are some ways to be involved:

- Sign up for General Plan project email updates.
- Contact the project team with questions.
- Reach out to a local community leader through the advisory committee
- Participate in upcoming engagement opportunities such as surveys, focus groups, public meetings, or other events (dates will be announced via email and posted on the [home page of this site](#)).