
Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1 What is a General Plan?

California state law requires that each city and county adopt a general plan “for the physical development of the county or city and any land outside its boundaries which bears relation to its planning” (California Government Code, Section 65300). The plan can be understood as an expression of a community’s values and its vision for the future, a “blueprint” for anticipated growth and development, both public and private, which forms the basis for most local government land-use decision making. In a larger sense a county general plan is a “constitution for future development,” which is how the California Supreme Court has described it.

The general plan establishes the kinds, locations, and intensities of land uses as well as applicable resource protection and development policies. Land use maps are used to show land use plan designations, constraints, and public facilities.

According to California law, a general plan must contain at least seven elements: land use, open space, conservation, housing, circulation, noise, and safety. It may also contain other elements that a county wishes to adopt. The law also requires periodic review and revision as necessary.

1.2 Purposes of a General Plan

In addition to expressing a community’s goals, visions, and policies for future land uses, the process of preparing, adopting, implementing, and maintaining a general plan serves to:

1. Identify the community’s land use, circulation, environmental, economic, and social goals and policies for land use and development.
2. Provide a basis for local government decision making, especially decisions on development approvals.
3. Promote equal opportunities for citizens to participate in the planning and decision-making processes of their communities.
4. Inform citizens, developers, decision makers, and other cities and agencies of the policies and standards that guide development within a particular community.
5. Establish a basis for subsequent planning efforts such as formulating specific development ordinances, preparing individual community plans, rezoning property, and conducting special studies.
6. Balance economic and social needs of the public with inherent characteristics of the land, plant and animal life, and air and water conditions.

1.3 Updating the Humboldt County General Plan

Humboldt County has relied on a general plan to guide its development since 1965. The general plan in effect prior to the adoption of this Plan was the Framework Plan. It was adopted by the Humboldt County Board of Supervisors in 1984 and was designed to cover a 20-year planning period. Among the hallmarks of the Framework Plan was a set of criteria intended to limit future plan amendments and thereby ensure the long-term integrity of the plan. The Framework Plan allowed amendments only in cases where circumstances had clearly changed, an error was detected, or a pre-existing nonconforming use was identified.

This General Plan represents a comprehensive update and revision of the 1984 Framework Plan. It reflects and responds to changes that have occurred in the County with respect to land use, resource management, community needs, and community values. It also ensures that the Plan is consistent with current law, and relies on the latest data (e.g., population changes, growth projections, and economic indicators) and modernized mapping.

The criteria for Plan amendments contained herein seeks a greater degree of flexibility. It relies on a set of guiding principles and goals that will determine whether future amendments are necessary (see Chapter 3 for more detail). This approach recognizes land use planning as both dynamic and yet necessarily anchored to fundamental principles.

A Cumulative, Collaborative Process

This General Plan represents a multi-year effort on the part of the County Planning and Building Department in collaboration with the Humboldt County community at large, the Board of Supervisors, the Planning Commission and various County departments. The Plan was developed through the use of the following six-phase process:

Phase I – Critical Choices

In this phase, the citizens of Humboldt expressed their views of the future of the County and the issues that should be addressed in the General Plan. Outreach was conducted through 40 public meetings and numerous discussions with organization and agency representatives. This phase resulted in the Critical Choices Report.

Phase II – Technical Background Reports

This was a data collection and analysis phase to develop a deeper understanding of the issues and trends that were identified in the Critical Choices Phase. Fourteen studies were published to inform citizens and decision makers.

Phase III – Selection of Preferred Sketch Plan

After comprehensive public input and review of a report entitled Sketch Plan Alternatives, the Board of Supervisors chose Sketch Plan “B” from among four growth and development pattern alternatives.

Phase IV – Draft Preliminary Plan and EIR

In this phase, the chosen alternative was used as a guide for writing preliminary drafts of each chapter of the General Plan Update. The preliminary chapters were prepared and presented to the Planning Commission for review and public comment. This round of input guided the preparation of the consolidated final Hearing Draft Plan and draft Environmental Impact Report.

Phase V and VI – Public Review and Adoption of Final Plan and EIR

During this phase, the Planning Commission held public hearings and developed Planning Commission recommendations for the preferred General Plan and EIR alternative. The Planning Commission preferred alternative was submitted to the Board of Supervisors for a final round of public input, modification, and decision making. The final General Plan and EIR were adopted by the Board of Supervisors

1.4 Guiding Principles

Guiding Principles are presented in this section to provide a statement of community values and of the overall objectives of the General Plan.

Throughout the process of updating this General Plan, the residents of Humboldt County have expressed their interest in preserving the County's unique character and quality of life. They want the County to retain a small town feel; a place to raise a family; a place with quality housing, schools, and recreational facilities. Residents also value the existing rural and natural character of their communities and, through an appropriate balance of regulations and incentives, want to protect forest and agricultural lands for continued timber and agricultural production. They also desire improved streets and roads and expanded pedestrian and bicycle access. Additionally, they want to grow and diversify the economy to create increased high-quality job and career opportunities that can support families. They want a range of housing opportunities and recognize there is a significant shortage of affordable housing in existing urbanized areas. Though they seek to discourage sprawl, they desire to encourage new development by simplifying and streamlining the development review process to minimize the risks and financial costs of getting new construction approved.

State of California General Plan guidelines indicate, "a principle is an assumption, fundamental rule, or doctrine guiding general plan policies, proposals, standards, and implementation measures. Principles are based on community values, generally acceptable planning doctrine, current technology, and the general plan's objectives." The Guiding Principles delineated below are the direct result of the public process involved in developing this General Plan. The principles have been used to guide the drafting of the goals and policies in each plan element, to create a vision for the future, and to serve as the basis for evaluating future amendments.

1. Ensure that public policy is reflective of the needs of the citizenry of a democratic society as expressed by the citizens themselves.
2. Preserve and enhance the diverse character of Humboldt County and the quality of life it offers.
3. Promote and facilitate the creation of affordable housing opportunities to meet current and future demands for all income levels.
4. Cooperate with service providers and promote efficient use of roads, water, and sewer services by encouraging development that is consistent with Land Use maps contained in the General Plan. Support home construction methods and alternative wastewater systems that are proven to minimize threats to human health and safety with a goal of reducing energy and water usage.
5. Support the County's economic development strategy and other efforts to retain and create living-wage job opportunities.
6. Encourage, incentivize and support agriculture, timber ecosystem services and compatible uses on resource lands.
7. Support individual rights to live in urban, suburban, rural or remote areas of the County while using a balanced approach to protect natural resources, especially open space, water resources, fisheries habitat and water quality in cooperation with state and federal agencies.

8. Adhere to practical strategies that can be implemented utilizing constructive cooperation and common sense.
9. Provide a clear statement of land use values and policies to provide clarity in the County's permit processing system and simplify review of projects.
10. Maximize the opportunities to educate the public about the planning process, in order to have meaningful participation in the development and maintenance of the Plan.
11. Support a broad public participation program at all levels of the decision making process; including study, workshops, hearings, a citizens handbook and plan revisions.

1.5 Planning Area

Humboldt County is among California's northern most counties, serving as a gateway to the vast boreal forests of the Pacific Northwest and alternatively to the legendary California wine country to the south (see Figure 1.1). The County's strikingly rugged coastline spans approximately 100 miles and includes Cape Mendocino, one of the western most portions of the continental United States. Offshore is an area of intensive ocean upwelling and rich marine productivity. It is also an area where three tectonic plates converge, creating one of the most seismically active areas in the world.

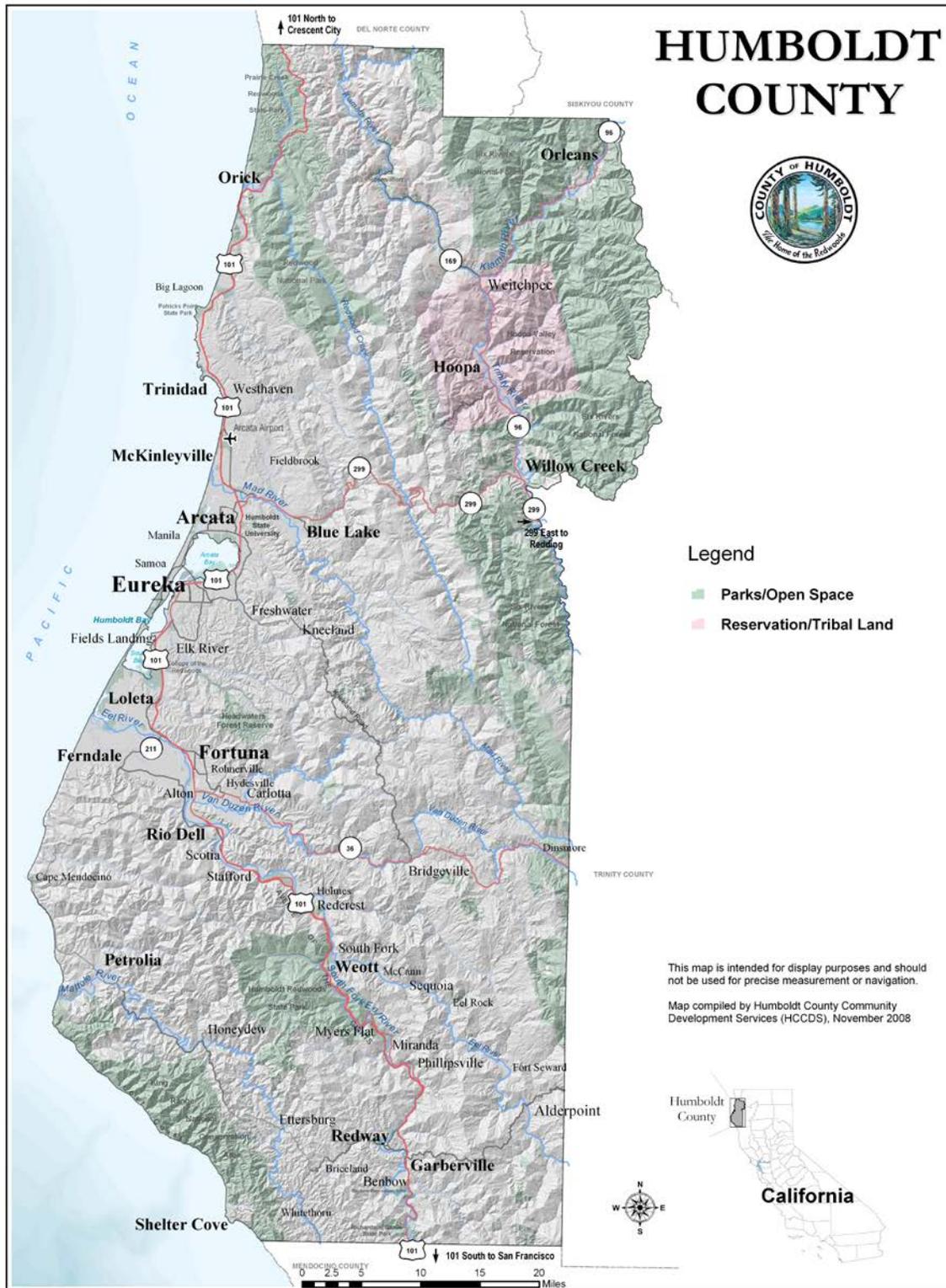
The sheltered waters of Humboldt Bay serve as an economic focal point, functioning as the principal port and a center of commerce. It is also a significant natural resource area featuring extensive wetlands, fertile bottomlands, and wildlife habitat, including the Humboldt Bay National Wildlife Area.

Moving inland, the Coast Range Mountains rise quickly and dominate most of the County's interior and include the Eel, Van Duzen, Mattole, and Mad River drainages in the central and southern areas, and the Redwood Creek drainage in the northwest. In the furthest northeastern reaches of the County, the Klamath Mountains represent some of the higher elevations, with steep slopes that feed the Klamath and Trinity rivers.

Eighty percent of the County's 2.3 million acres are forested. Fifty percent of this acreage is private commercial timberland (the County typically has led the state in timber production), and 35 percent is state or federal public land, including Redwood National and State Parks, Six Rivers National Forest, the King Range National Conservation Area, and Humboldt Redwoods State Park. While Douglas fir represents the most predominant forest type, the more emblematic tree is that of the Coast Redwood, whose towering groves thrive in the County's moist temperate climate.

Though forests are a defining feature, agriculture is a key part of the landscape and remains an important base industry. Approximately one-quarter of Humboldt County (634,000 acres) remains agricultural.

Figure 1.1 Planning Area



1.6 Economy

The Humboldt County economy has undergone significant diversification and restructuring. Resource production has declined but timber, dairy farming, cattle ranching, and fishing continue to contribute substantially to the economy and serve as its export base, while new local industries have emerged that generate more knowledge-based, specialty, and technology-driven products and services. Habitat restoration, sustainable forest management, organic milk production, and computer network services are all examples of innovative local products and services.

In the Framework General Plan of 1984, the economic development element reflected the realities of the downturn in the timber and fishing industries. The contraction of these sectors has leveled off in the last decade. The fishing industry has shrunk by two-thirds. Though hit hard by the recent national recession, in 2010 the forest products industry provided approximately 11% of the direct payroll in the County, about equal to the education and research and health care industries.

Though the traditional resource production industries have declined, they still play a vital role in the local economy. Their contributions are substantial and can remain so for many decades to come. Therefore, it is vital that the County retain an essential quantity, or "critical mass," of land and infrastructure to allow the forest products, agriculture, and fishing industries to remain viable.

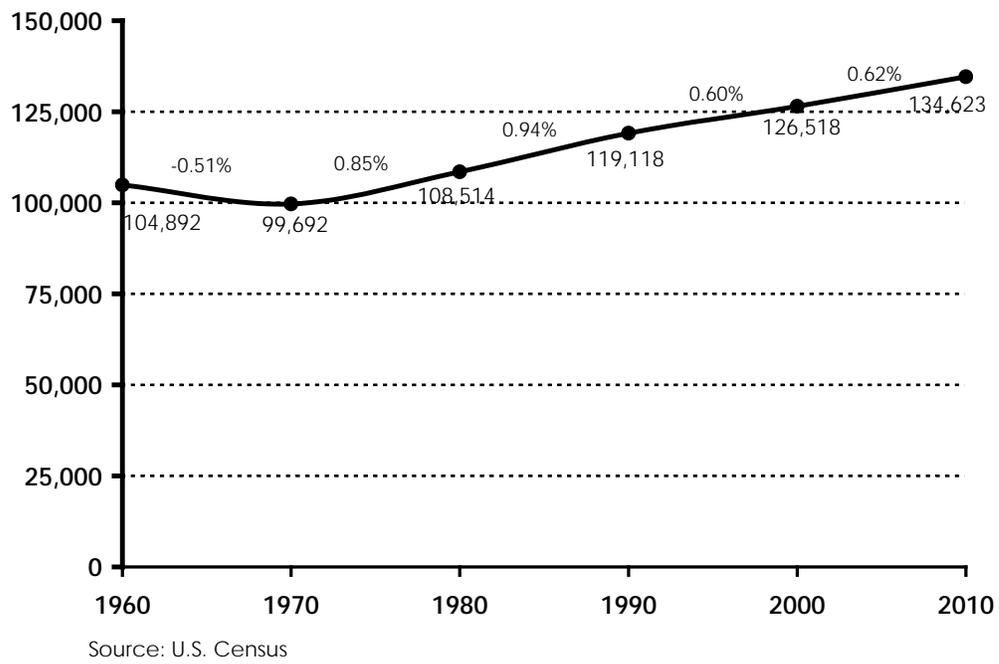
Quality of life is one of Humboldt County's most important assets for economic development. "Quality of life" can relate to almost every aspect of our lives, from public safety to natural beauty, and may be defined differently for different people. In economic terms, quality of life is primarily and inextricably linked to the workforce. It is about the value inherent in the natural, the built, and the cultural environments that attract creative, entrepreneurial talent. Research on rural economies consistently shows that rivers, beaches, forests, mountains, and a community "sense of place" are highly attractive to talented, innovative, creative people who are deciding where to live and start a business. In short, communities that emphasize social and cultural amenities are attractive to talented workers and entrepreneurial businesses.

1.7 Population

Humboldt County's major population centers include the cities of Eureka, Arcata, McKinleyville, and Fortuna. According to the 2010 Census, the total County population was 134,623, an increase of 8,105 from the 2000 Census. In 2016 the California Department of Finance population estimate for Humboldt County was 135,557.

The County's population declined between 1960 and 1970 due to changes in the local lumber industry. Following this decline, the countywide average annual growth rate was approximately 0.75 percent per year between 1970 and 2010, with growth surges above this rate in the 1970's and 1980's and declines to approximately 0.6 percent in the 1990's and 2000's. Demographic data indicates older persons represent an increasing percentage of the populace.

Figure 1.2 Humboldt County Population and Average Annual Growth Rate (1960-2010)



(this page intentionally left blank)