

## Planning Commission Annual Report for 2023

January 3, 2024

This Planning Commission Annual Report to the City Council is intended to provide information regarding progress on various goals, how community needs are being met, how the Commission's responsibilities are being fulfilled, the effectiveness of the policies and procedures, and any recommendations for change. The Council adopted the content of the report by resolution, which was most recently adopted in 2019. The Planning Commission approved this report on December \_\_\_\_, 2023.

### Goals

The Commission assists in implementing City Council Goals. In addition, the Commission sets goals for itself. This section outlines the Commission's and Council's goals and progress during 2023. It also sets goals for 2024.

#### Planning Commission Goals

- 1) **Update the General Plan.** Public engagement around updates to the General Plan and targeted rezoning, including the Arcata Gateway Area Plan, are nearing completion. The Commission discussed the General Plan or the Gateway Code at every meeting in 2023. In addition to the 19 regular and special meetings the Commission held, there were four Joint Study Sessions with the City Council to discuss the Commission's recommendation on the General Plan update.

The Commission developed and implemented a framework for efficiently reviewing and making a formal recommendation on General Plan edits. The Commission believes its work is largely complete on this major, multi-year goal that will set the City up for success for the next 20-year planning period.

- 2) **Finalize the Local Coastal Program.** The Commission was unable to focus on the Local Coastal Program in 2023. The Commission would like to see the update to the Local Coastal Program completed in 2024. The Commission will make special meetings as necessary to ensure staff has the resources needed to complete the public engagement and obtain the necessary approvals to finish this longstanding update.
- 3) **Streamline Permitting Appropriately.** The Commission has an ongoing goal to ensure the public's resources are best used to achieve appropriate planning efficiently. The Planning Commission will continue to work towards improving the process, making necessary code amendments, and reviewing policy to ensure it aligns with community goals and vision.

With the anticipated adoption of the General Plan comprehensive update in early 2024, the Commission looks forward to concentrating on the necessary amendments to the Land Use Code, the City's zoning ordinance, to implement the new vision and goals.

- 4) **Regional Planning.** The Commission was unable to review the Climate Action Plan during 2023. The Commission would like to focus on regional efforts on sea level rise and hazard and resiliency planning in 2024.
- 5) **Targeted Redevelopment.** The Commission anticipated adoption of the General Plan in 2023 and transitioning to working on targeted redevelopment outside of the Gateway Area. When the General

Plan is complete, the Commission will shift its focus to the remaining Infill Opportunity Zones and the newly designated Commercial Mixed-Use districts. Pending funding, the Commission would like to see Form-Based Codes in the Infill Opportunity Zones, starting with the Valley West Opportunity Zone, and then the Downtown/Uniontown Opportunity Zone.

- 6) **Historic Preservation.** The Commission was not provided the opportunity to work with the Historic Landmarks Committee to identify effective programs for historic preservation in planning this year but looks forward to this as a future goal.
- 7) **Training.** The Commission was offered the opportunity to attend the Institute of Local Governments' Planning Commissioners' Training in October of 2022 and the American Planning Association California Environmental Quality Act annual training and update in November of 2022. There were no trainings offered in 2023. The Commission would like more formal training to better understand its roles and responsibilities, as well as technical capacity, for the decisions it makes. Training and subscription services, electronic or otherwise, will need to be budgeted to accomplish this goal. The Planning Commission would like the Council to consider a regional collaboration for high-impact training for Planning Commissioners.

### **City Council Goals**

The City Council Goals and Priority Projects are adopted on a fiscal year, while the Commission reports on a calendar year. For that reason, this report references the Council's 2022/23 and its 2023/24 Goals and Priority Projects.

2022/23 (Jan-Jun) **6.a Prioritize Future Planning.** The Commission has continued outreach and engagement surrounding the Strategic Infill Plan, Gateway Draft Plan, and General Plan updates. The Commission has provided several opportunities for the public to engage with these plans to create plans that reflects the wants and needs of the community while meeting regional housing and transit goals focusing on walkability, bike/pedestrian safety, varied and affordable housing options, and mixed-use communities.

2023/24 (Jul-Dec) **7.a Prioritize Future Planning.** The Council's goal identifies completion of the General Plan update, including the Gateway Plan and Local Coastal Plan. The Commission has made great progress on the General Plan and has made recommendations on the Gateway Code. The Commission supports the Council's goal to complete this work during this fiscal year. The Commission supports adoption of the General Plan by April 2024.

As stated above, the Commission has not been able to work on the Local Coastal Program.

### **Community Needs**

The Commission has been very responsive to the community. The Commission has committed several study sessions and special meetings to ensure interested community members have access to the General Plan decision making process. The Commission has reevaluated its procedures and modified them several times throughout the year to ensure public access and accountability were prioritized. For example, there were several concerns raised early in the year about the level of detail and accuracy of the minutes. The Commission set an agenda item to discuss this in February and took action to modify the level of detail in the minutes to address concerns. Another example was the Commission's decision to adopt a framework for decision making

for the General Plan. The process involved public input and several modifications to improve transparency and accountability. Yet another example was the Commission's decision to end special meetings in favor of changing the regular meeting time to 5:30 p.m. to provide more opportunities for the public to provide comment on agenda items.

While the majority of the Commission's work was focused on long-range planning, the Commission did hold public hearings on discretionary permits. Four design review permits were before the Commission this year. That number is down relative to prior years. The Commission provided open public hearings with opportunities for public comment at these hearings.

## **Commission's Responsibilities**

As outlined in the Arcata Municipal Code (Sec. 2208), the Planning Commission's responsibilities include:

- A. To serve in an advisory capacity to the City Council and City staff on all matters pertaining to planning and the physical development of the City and surrounding areas.
- B. To provide recommendations to the City Council regarding the preparation, adoption, amendment, administration, and implementation of the General Plan and its various elements, the Local Coastal Plan, and Specific Plans.
- C. To provide recommendations to the City Council regarding preparation, adoption, amendment and implementation of the City's land use, zoning, subdivision, development review, design review, environmental review, and other related policies, ordinances, and standards.
- D. To review and take action to approve, approve subject to conditions or modifications, or to deny various applications for development or use of land as provided in the City's zoning ordinances codified at Title IX.
- E. To review and make decisions or recommendations on Negative Declarations, Environmental Impact Reports, and other environmental documents prepared for private and public projects.
- F. To review and make decisions regarding the consistency of proposed acquisition or disposition of real property by the City with the General Plan and any applicable Specific Plans, as provided by state law.
- G. To review and make decisions with respect to the consistency of proposed capital improvement projects and programs with the General Plan and any applicable Specific Plans, as provided by state law.
- H. To exercise any other powers and duties as may be assigned by state law or by the zoning ordinances codified at Title IX.
- I. To conduct all powers, duties and functions of the Historic and Design Review Commission as codified in the City's Land Use Code, Title IX, including the implementation of the Historic Preservation Element of the General Plan.

The Commission has been dutifully exercising these responsibilities over 2023. The Commission made the consistency finding for the Capital Improvement Program updates, held four design review hearings, and has focused hundreds of hours collectively providing recommendations to the Council on the General Plan and Gateway Area Plan. The Commission looks forward to finalizing recommendations on the Environmental Impact Report in the coming months to support the Council's adoption of the updated General Plan and Gateway Code.

## **Effectiveness of Policies and Procedures**

The Commission is subject to the Brown Act and conducts its hearings pursuant to City practice and protocol using parliamentary procedures for most of its work. These procedures are effective at managing public meetings to ensure fairness and transparency. But the Commission recognizes that they also place limits on public engagement and involvement. Notably, the public comment component of meetings is not satisfactory to many who feel that they are not being heard because their comments are often not addressed and do not appear to the public to affect the outcomes. The Commission recognizes the purpose of the policies and procedures and has attempted to provide feedback to let the public know that they are hearing, reading, and understanding public comment.

The Commission has also requested or overseen staff recommended modifications of policy and procedure to better serve the community and public process during 2023. Many examples are provided above in the Community Needs section. Some of the policies were modified to improve the efficiency, effectiveness, and transparency of the recommendation process. Others, such as the study sessions and community meetings staff held were designed to improve access to public input and the decision-making process.

## **Recommendations**

The Commission has several new members. The composition of the Commission has changed over the last two years with a majority of Commissioners being newly appointed since the beginning of the long-range planning work. Perhaps now more than any time in the last decade, the Commission would benefit from training. Staff led trainings in the past, and some Commissioners were able to attend trainings provided by various entities in 2022. But the Commission would like support to build its knowledge and understanding of its roll and the legal and procedural tenants it must adhere to. Specifically, the Commission could benefit from Brown Act training, CEQA training, planning law training, and engagement training.