

Planning Commission Annual Report for 2025

January 27, 2026

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 January 27, 2026.

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 accomplishments for 2025 and identifies goals for 2026.

Planning Commission Goals

1) **Update the General Plan and Associated Ordinances.**

2025 Accomplishments. The Commission adopted Resolution No. PC-25-01 recommending City Council adopt the Density Bonus and Inclusionary Zoning land use code text amendments ordinance. The Commission also provided direction and adopted Resolution No. PC-25-06 recommending establishment of a Community Benefits Program to the City Council.

2026 Goal. The Commission anticipates working on the zoning amendments to the Land Use Code to ensure consistency between the General Plan and implementing zoning. In addition, the Commission looks forward to working on objective design standards for the Valley West neighborhood, as well as updates to the Accessory Dwelling Unit ordinance. This planning work is funded by the HUD PRO Housing Grant.

2) **Finalize the Local Coastal Program.**

2025 Accomplishments. The Commission provided direction and made recommendations on the City's Local Coastal Program. Staff has continued working with Coastal Commission staff to complete their review.

2026 Goal. Complete review of the comprehensive update of the Local Coastal Program, including the Gateway Area Plan certification in the coastal zone.

3) **Streamline Permitting Appropriately.**

2025 Accomplishments. The Commission has an ongoing goal to ensure the public's resources are best used to achieve appropriate planning efficiently. The Planning Commission continues to work towards improving the process, making necessary code amendments, and reviewing policy to ensure it aligns with community goals and vision. While there were few discretionary projects to review in 2025, the projects that came before the Commission were completed in one hearing typically.

2026 Goal. With the adoption of the General Plan comprehensive update, 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. The Commission will review the effectiveness of

the ministerial hearings called for in the Gateway Code and make recommendations to Council in 2026.

4) **Regional Planning.**

2025 Accomplishments. The Commission had no activity in this area in 2025. The Commission was focused on internal work in 2025.

2026 Goal. The Commission looks forward to reviewing and recommending adoption of the Climate Action Plan in 2026. In addition, the Commission would like to pursue regional sea level rise work in 2025.

5) **Targeted Redevelopment.**

2025 Accomplishments. The Commission had no activity in this area in 2025 but anticipates review and recommendations on the Valley West Opportunity Zone objective design standards in 2026.

2026 Goal. The Commission will focus on the Valley West Infill Opportunity Zone in 2026. Adopting new standards in this zone will help spread the impact of development throughout the City. The Commission would like to see Form-Based Codes or codes based on objective design standards in the Infill Opportunity Zones, starting with the Valley West Opportunity Zone, and then the Downtown/Uniontown Opportunity Zone.

6) **Historic Preservation.**

2025 Accomplishments. The Commission did not have the opportunity in 2025 to work jointly with the Historic Landmarks Committee to identify effective historic preservation programs but looks forward to this as a future goal.

2026 Goal. The Commission would like to hold a joint study session with the Historic Landmarks Committee to learn more about historic preservation and how to best implement the updated General Plan Historic Preservation Element, including how to amend the zoning ordinance to more effectively implement historic preservation. In addition, the Commission is interested in pursuing adoption of the Plaza as a state historic place.

7) **Training.**

2025 Accomplishments. Training resources were limited in 2025 and did not fully support the range of training opportunities requested by the Commission.

2026 Goal. The Commission seeks more formal training to better understand its roles and responsibilities, as well as technical capacity, for the decisions it makes. Specifically, the Commission requests training on coastal planning, adaptation planning, and climate change. Training and subscription services, electronic or otherwise, 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. The Commission would like to see a dedicated Commission training budget of at least \$7,500.

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 2024/25 and its 2025/26 Goals and Priority Projects.

2024/25 (Jan-Jun) 7.a Prioritize Future Planning. This goal identifies completion of the Local Coastal Program as a priority. The Commission reviewed and made recommendations on the Local Coastal Program during 2025 and anticipates completing its review and recommending approval in 2026.

2025/26 (Jul-Dec) 12. Incorporate smart growth technology, design, principles and practices in the advancement of a sustainable city. The Commission looks forward to reviewing projects under the Gateway Area Code in 2026.

Community Needs

While the Commission’s work was largely focused on long-range planning, the Commission did hold public hearings on discretionary permits. Three design review permits were before the Commission this year. That number is similar 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 2024. 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 to balance input with accomplishments.

Recommendations

The composition of the Commission was stable over 2025, but many members are relatively new having been appointed in 2024. This affords an opportunity for the members to become familiar with the new General Plan and Gateway Code, as well as to build its knowledge and understanding of its role and the legal and procedural tenants it must adhere to. To do this, the Commission would like more training budget and opportunities to learn to better serve the community. Specifically, the Commission could benefit from training in the Brown Act, CEQA, planning law, coastal policy, climate change and adaptation planning, and engagement training.