



General Plan Audit and Strategic Analysis

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General plans provide strategic policy direction for development and redevelopment for municipalities. The 2008 General Plan *Build-Out & Beyond* was adopted by city council on June 26, 2008 and ratified by voters on November 4, 2008.

In January of 2015, the city of Chandler embarked on an update to the General Plan. The intent is to ensure that the General Plan:

- Expresses community intentions and aspirations for long-term community development to preserve Chandler's quality of life;
- Is the official policy document to guide physical development and community conservation;
- Designates type, location, and intensity of land uses, roads, parks, transit, etc.; and,
- Contains strategies on how to achieve the community's intentions and aspirations.

Re-adoption or updates to general plans are required every 10 years per state statutes. The process requires revised plans to be adopted by councils after significant public dialogue and then to be ratified by voters. The mission statement which describes the core purpose and focus of the 2015-2016 Chandler General Plan Update process is as follows:

The 2016 Chandler General Plan Update validates, and if necessary refines, the vision and strategic direction of the adopted and citizen-ratified General Plan *Build-Out & Beyond* (2008). The Update presents a build-out strategy that will guide the city of Chandler as it continues to mature. This build-out strategy directs the remaining infill growth and future redevelopment while maintaining and enhancing the quality of Chandler's existing neighborhoods and development.

Purpose of Analysis

This paper documents the current plan's effectiveness and highlights areas that could be reconsidered or modified during the General Plan Update. The intent of this analysis is not to offer solutions but to present potential opportunities for further consideration. It is important to stress that, overall, the current General Plan has served the city of Chandler well; in fact, during the seven years since its adoption and ratification, the General Plan did not require any major updates. The General Plan is strategically designed and staff, commissions, elected officials, and land owners effectively use it to guide policy.

In developing this paper, interviews were conducted with planning staff, questionnaires were completed by city departments, and discussion facilitated with the General Plan Update Citizens' Advisory Committee and public at the first Planning Lab. Additionally, the project consultant team reviewed the current General Plan using the combined planning expertise and experience to further inform this analysis.

Findings

Chandler General Plan Format

State law specifies a series of “elements” that need to be addressed in a general plan based on the size of Chandler’s population. These topical areas are described in the current plan as chapters under the heading “Elements.” There are 17 elements (three combined with other elements) in the current document. While general plans must address all the required elements, state law does not dictate the format or layout of how these issues are discussed.

Effective community long-range planning must reflect how unique concepts (or elements) are inter-related and connected. Presenting general plan elements as independent concepts (and distinct chapters) hinders an effort to depict a collaborative planning effort and can result in contradictory concepts or policies. For example, the interrelationship between land use, transportation, and economic development is critical; land use and transportation are handled separately in the current General Plan. While economic development is not a required element, it is a fundamental priority for Chandler and is not currently addressed in any great depth even though there are related goals and objectives in the Land Use Element.

Some of the comments expressed about the General Plan format include:

- Current format is cumbersome and could be simplified.
- There is a lack of consistency from one element to another.
- The current plan is not user-friendly for someone reading the hard-bound copy or trying to use it electronically.
- The current plan does not have graphics and only a few maps—these can be great tools to illustrate points and tell a story.

Policies and Definitions

Policy Framework

Ensuring that the reader understands policies and definitions is critical to the ability of the general plan to be implemented. The current plan does a good job in defining “build-out” and the importance for the city of Chandler to focus on planning for build-out. It is clear that build-out is the organizing theme for the 2008 plan. For purposes of this update effort, build-out does not represent a date-certain but a recognition of the need to ensure proper usage of limited land and community resources.

Within each of the elements in the current General Plan there are “Build-Out Policies”. It is hard to distinguish or connect policies to the series of “Goals and Objectives” expressed in each element chapter or which takes precedence. The current plan’s structure is highly dependent upon the framework of goals, objectives, and policies and it appears confusing in how the statements are intended to be interpreted and/or used.

Policies are defined in the document as “intentions to implement goals and objectives and to protect and preserve valuable community characteristics.” The only definitions for goals and objectives are in the glossary. Goals (glossary page 4) are statements of fundamental aims for civic accomplishments through public and private action. Objectives (glossary page 6) are specific steps toward achieving the planning goals – including programs (such as street widening) or performance standards (as accident reduction). Further, the glossary (page 6) offers a different definition for policies/strategies than expressed in the body of the plan; here, policies/strategies are defined as “criteria established by the local government that support accomplishment of objectives and goals.” To further complicate this framework, each element has a series of “Implementation Recommendations.” There is no definition for implementation recommendations or a correlation between the aforementioned goals, objectives, and policies. Without clear definition of these statements, interpretation inconsistency may occur over time.

Family of Plans

City departments use the current General Plan to understand expected and future land use so that development of and coordination with specific planning efforts can be accomplished for a variety of city functions such as water resources, road widening, infrastructure prioritization, etc. Department or functional master plans, such as water and wastewater, depend on the guidance from the general plan particularly as it relates to land uses because it directly relates to development intensity. Additionally, water demand planning projections or capital improvement programming is based on the plan’s guidance. This more detailed planning requires consistency in general plan interpretation over time to ensure that adequate public resources can be provided. The city of Chandler is led by long-serving managers with considerable institutional knowledge that has ensured consistency in plan interpretation and implementation. However, it is critical that the city have a general plan that is constructed so that it can be interpreted consistently without reliance on the wisdom of seasoned staff.

The current General Plan attempts to explain the relationship between it, area plans, and specific department studies or master plans (page 16). This is a critical component of how the city of Chandler implements long-range planning. However, the relationship particularly between area plans and the General Plan is not clearly defined in the document and, therefore, is not easily understood without explanation from staff.

Land use categories seem to be well defined and still relevant, however, there might be opportunity for fine-tuning. For example, “Mixed-Use Developments” definition may need to be clarified so that it includes both vertical and horizontal mixed-use. Additionally, further refinement or update to the South Price Road Employment Corridor and Revitalization/Infill

Growth Areas might be considered as development has changed since the plan's completion in 2008.

Potential Plan Gaps

As stated earlier, the current General Plan has served the city of Chandler well, having been strategically implemented and providing the framework for more detailed planning through master plans and functional department planning. However, the city will be almost 10 years closer to build-out when the update is completed and Chandler will be a very different community than it is today as neighborhoods mature, the downtown continues to develop, and new employment areas are located. How Chandler evolves and changes will be impacted directly or indirectly by regional, state, national, and global trends. A recognition of these impacts are important to planning Chandler's future. Some of the concepts to be discussed and potentially addressed in the General Plan Update are subsequently detailed.

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Healthy Community Initiatives. Since the General Plan's adoption in 2008, there has been extensive research about the health linkage to good community planning. The city of Chandler has made fostering a health community a priority—in part with the Mayor's Health Connect—but could continue to strengthen this commitment through the General Plan Update by incorporating healthy community building principles through many plan elements.

Corridor Development. The linkage between land use, circulation, economics, housing, and neighborhoods are inter-related in the discussion of how major, high-capacity corridors develop. These corridors cannot only be viewed as corridors that move automobiles but how they move people and serve the city effectively. How development occurs in these corridors of the future are critical to Chandler's quality of life and economic sustainability. The General Plan Update should evaluate, reaffirm, or modify the identified Growth Areas currently in consideration of a comprehensive and integrated corridor development approach.

Transit. In 2012, the city completed a light rail feasibility study for Arizona Avenue. The study concluded that in order to support light rail, higher density land uses along Arizona Avenue are needed. The study also recommended enhanced land uses such as transit oriented development (TOD zoning), station area planning must occur, and that the General Plan Update better protect the corridor from incompatible development. The city is currently initiating a light rail study that will examine different land use scenarios and recommend land use densities needed to support light rail transit along Arizona Avenue. It is critical that the General Plan Update process validate and subsequently align and reinforce this concept in order for the city to position the corridor for potential funding.

Housing. Maintaining quality neighborhoods and ensuring a full range of housing to meet future demand is critical to Chandler's success. Housing market trends have changed and will

continue to evolve over time. Quality neighborhoods and the range of quality housing is also closely linked to the city's economic well-being. Historically, Chandler attracted quality jobs and, as a result, quality housing was a bi-product. Future focus on attracting quality employment requires a continued commitment to ensuring that a variety of quality housing is available in Chandler so residents can rent, buy their first home and move up instead of out of the city as their incomes and circumstances evolve.

Water. The city of Chandler is embarking on specific master planning that must be coordinated and appropriately incorporated into the General Plan Update. In 2014, the city updated a water demand study based on the current General Plan. Additionally, an Integrated Water Master Plan was recently initiated (March 2015). Reaffirming or modifying inputs to the water demand study will be critical as well as close coordination with the Master Plan currently underway so that it informs policies related to the updated General Plan's water resources element.

Employment. Since the General Plan adoption/ratification, considerable economic development have occurred. The Chandler Airpark and surrounding industrial land has evolved as well as other key employment centers throughout Chandler. How existing and new employment centers are envisioned and developing appropriate policies or refining existing policies will be an important aspect of the plan's update process.

Parks and Recreation. Historically, parks and recreational programs and facilities have been a key component of what makes Chandlers' quality of life so special. It will be important to revisit this treasured asset within the Update to, at minimum, recognize that the park system is reaching build-out. The focus of this element might set the stage for an update of the Parks and Recreation Master Plan.

Downtown. Downtown Chandler has had great momentum since the 2008 plan's completion. How the downtown further evolves, its connection to surrounding neighborhoods, and how it is situated along and connected to a future high capacity corridor that may include light rail or other high capacity transit will need to be discussed as part of this Update. As the South Price Corridor and Airpark fully develop as employment areas, opportunities for Downtown Chandler should be explored in the General Plan Update. Policies and strategies should be identified for the downtown area to ensure continued expansion.

Neighborhood Revitalization. Neighborhood stabilization, preservation, property maintenance, and remediation of deteriorated and blighted conditions should be addressed in the General Plan Update. These issues are currently addressed in the plans redevelopment element which also included the activities related to the downtown area. Consideration to

whether specific and/or stronger language should be included related to neighborhood preservation should be discussed as part of this Update.

Implementation Guidance

It is unclear how the implementation recommendations identified throughout the 2008 General Plan are used. Many departments have said that they really don't use the current General Plan except to gain high-level guidance. As noted previously, each of the elements have identified implementation recommendations although it is unclear how or if these recommendations are implemented. Typically implementation recommendations are a way to measure performance. The General Plan Update should determine if implementation recommendations are necessary, or if there is a better way to measure how the plan's policies are to be implemented.

Summary

Overall, the current General Plan has served as a strategic document to guide policymakers in decision making about the built environment. It has provided adequate flexibility to respond to changes and trends while providing adequate consistency in maintaining the community's quality of life. While the Update will respond to policy shifts and changes as a result of the community's maturity, it is important to acknowledge that general plans are not intended to be detailed master plans; the approach of using more specific area plans for detailed planning has worked well for Chandler. However, clarifying the relationship between the general plan and other efforts, specifically area plans, is an approach that may need refinement. While the current General Plan provides a solid foundation from which to work, an Update provides an opportunity to streamline, eliminate duplication, ensure consistency, and make the next general plan an easy-to-understand document for elected officials, property owners, planners and citizens alike.