

# CITY OF EL CENTRO



# FINAL GENERAL PLAN

**FEBRUARY 2004**



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# INTRODUCTION

E L C E N T R O G E N E R A L P L A N

## Need for a General Plan

Today, El Centro is a vibrant and dynamic community of nearly 40,000 residents that is the regional center for shopping, eating, health care, and recreational and cultural activities for the 154,000 residents of Imperial Valley. Additionally, the City is a multi-cultural community with a rich agricultural history as the City is surrounded by thousands of acres of prime farmland.

Since the last comprehensive update of the General Plan in 1989, the City has continued to grow, though at a slower rate than the region as a whole. According to the California Department of Finance, since the previous General Plan, the City population has grown 27 percent to 39,342 residents in 2002. Comparatively, the population of Imperial County grew at a rate of 44 percent in the same period. With its relatively low cost of living and high quality of life, the City will continue to increase in size and population during the next 20 years.

It is important to periodically update the City's General Plan as it is founded upon the community's vision for the future and expresses the community's long-term goals. Implementation of the General Plan will ensure that future development is consistent with the community's goals and that adequate urban services are available to meet the needs of new development. Future planning outlined in this General Plan focuses on stimulating new economic growth, revitalizing older areas, assuring public safety, finding new uses for underutilized land, and enhancing the amenities and cultural resources that define El Centro.

## El Centro Planning Area

El Centro Planning Area includes the City's incorporated area as well as land identified within its sphere of influence. The sphere of influence includes areas that are currently under the jurisdiction of Imperial County but are anticipated to be incorporated into the City at some time in the future. The total Planning Area contains approximately 25 square miles of land (or about 16,000 acres) and is located near the Mexican border on the Interstate 8 between Calexico and Brawley. El Centro shares its northern border with the City of Imperial, while the City of Mexicali is located

10 miles to the south just beyond the border, and the City of Yuma, Arizona is 60 miles to the east. Figure I-1 shows El Centro's regional location.

## History of the Community

The arrival of water in the Imperial Valley over 100 years ago is critical to understanding El Centro today. Decades of speculation regarding the Colorado Desert Valley's agricultural potential eventually lead to approval of the region's first irrigation project in 1900. On May 14, 1901, water was diverted from the Colorado River into the Salton Basin, establishing the agricultural industry in Imperial Valley that resulted in a population boom for the region. By 1904, the need to transport goods and persons into the region lead to construction of a Southern Pacific railway branch line extending from present day Niland to Calexico. Fifteen years later, the San Diego and Arizona railway connected El Centro to the Pacific Coast.

In order to facilitate economic development and foster growth, lands associated with the Imperial Valley were separated from San Diego County and organized into present day Imperial County in 1907. In 1906, W.F. Holt and C.A. Barker purchased the land on which El Centro was eventually built and invested in its improvement. As one historian of Valley life put it, "in only five months, El Centro went from a barley field to a city..." In 1908, El Centro, along with the neighboring towns of Calexico, Brawley, and Holtville, incorporated its local government.

Early growth in El Centro was brisk as the City's population tripled between 1910 to 1920, reaching 5,646 residents. One potential reason for this was the City's successful bid to obtain the County seat. Winning the County seat was a significant prize as Valley cities were in heated competition for the reputation as the region's leading city.

By the mid-1940s, El Centro had become the second largest city in the Imperial Valley, with a population of about 11,000 persons. At this point in the City's history, its economy revolved around agriculture as fruit and vegetable packing and shipping yards, ice plants, box factories, and concrete pipe and brick yards, and a flax fiber plant were the major employment centers. El Centro also became the principal wholesale center of the area and the location of the Imperial Irrigation District (IID) administrative offices.

By the 1970s, agriculture was still an important part of the City's economic life. Imperial County had become one of the most agriculturally productive areas in the country and many growers and shippers still operated in El Centro. However, by the early 1980s, the two largest employment sectors in the El Centro labor market areas were government and wholesale/retail trade, reflecting El Centro's emerging role as a regional administrative and commercial center.

Figure I-1

## Vision for the Future of El Centro

El Centro's Vision for the Future provides the foundation of the General Plan and an expression of what the community wants to maintain or become. In 1998, the City Council adopted the following statement of their vision for the future of El Centro:

*El Centro will.....*

- *be known for its expanding, innovative lifestyle and economy which reflect both its central location in agriculturally rich Imperial County and its leading role in developing new trade related opportunities with urban Mexicali.*
- *be recognized for its ability to dynamically address new challenges as opportunities to enhance the community.*
- *mature into a modern, technologically advanced, socially cohesive community which celebrates its diversity and openness to change while remaining a wholesome place to raise a family.*
- *thrive as a regional focus for the advancement and enjoyment of the arts, culture, leisure, and recreational activities.*

As part of the General Plan update program, these themes were expanded and the following discussion provides additional description of the community's vision for the future of El Centro:

*As growth occurs within El Centro, public facilities and services are in place to meet the needs of the community. As one of the necessary public facilities, the local circulation system meets the travel and recreational needs of drivers, pedestrians, and cyclists, as well as supporting a viable public transit system. To ensure a high quality of service, adequate financial resources are available to provide necessary public services and facilities.*

*El Centro is a place where people feel safe living and working in the community. A diversified economy provides long-term economic stability and a range of employment opportunities. Businesses that are beneficial to the City locate and thrive in the community providing employment opportunities and additional revenue for City services.*

*A variety of rental and ownership housing is available to meet the needs of the entire community. Existing development is well maintained so that the community remains an attractive and enjoyable place to live and work. New development and redevelopment is compatible with and sensitive to the existing community.*

*Recreational opportunities are available to meet the needs and interests of all members of the community, especially the younger and older populations. The City's youth are valued and involved in the community. Community members participate in governmental and community decision making and are aware of important issues in the community.*

Together, these statements form the community's vision for the future of El Centro and are the basis for the goals and policies contained in this General Plan.

## Purpose of the General Plan

California law requires each city to adopt a comprehensive, long-term General Plan to guide the physical development of the incorporated area and land outside municipal boundaries that bears a relationship to its planning activities. In essence, a city's General Plan serves as the blueprint for future growth and development. As a blueprint for the future, the plan must contain policies and programs designed to provide decision makers with a solid basis for decisions related to land use and development.

According to State law, the General Plan is the primary document the City uses to regulate land use. Consequently, the Zoning Code, Specific Plans, and individual public and private development proposals must be consistent with the Plan goals, policies, and standards. The El Centro General Plan addresses many issues that are directly related to and influence land use decisions. In addition to land use, State law requires the Plan to address circulation, housing, conservation of natural resources, preservation of open space, noise environment, and protection of public safety (Section 65302 of the California Government Code). These issues are discussed in the General Plan to the extent that they apply to El Centro. The Plan also addresses economic development, a topic of special local interest.

## Organization and Use of the Plan

The City of El Centro General Plan contains goals, policies, and plans that are intended to guide land use and development decisions in the future to achieve the community's vision for the future. The General Plan consists of a Land Use Policy Map and the following eight elements, or chapters, which together fulfill the State requirements for a General Plan:

- Land Use Element
- Economic Development Element
- Housing Element
- Circulation Element
- Public Facilities Element
- Conservation/Open Space Element
- Safety Element
- Noise Element

The El Centro elements sometimes deviate from the State-mandated elements in non-substantive ways. For example, public utilities are included in the State requirements for the Circulation Element, but are addressed in the non-mandated Public Facilities Element of the Plan. Additionally, the Economic Development Element is an integral

component of El Centro’s General Plan and is essential in achieving the community’s vision for the future, though it is not mandated by the State.

In accordance with State Law, the Housing Element was updated in 1999 for the planning period of 2000-2005, and was approved by the California Department of Housing and Community Development. The Housing Element will be updated in 2005, or as required by law.

Table I-1 illustrates the relationship between the eight elements of the El Centro General Plan and the seven State-mandated general plan elements.

**Table I-1  
Relationship of El Centro General Plan Elements  
to State-Mandated Elements**

El Centro General Plan Element	State-Mandated General Plan Element							
	Land Use	Housing	Circulation	Noise	Safety	Conservation	Open Space	Optional
Land Use	◇							
Economic Development								◇
Housing		◇						
Circulation			◇					
Public Facilities			◇					◇
Conservation/ Open Space						◇	◇	
Safety					◇			
Noise				◇				

## **Plan Organization and Use**

The General Plan is comprised of this Introduction and eight elements. Each element is complete in itself, but is an integral part of the General Plan.

The elements, with associated Implementation Programs (Appendix A) will help the City achieve its vision for the future. The elements are organized according to the following format: 1) Introduction; 2) Issues, Goals and Policies; and 3) Plan. The Housing Element is in a slightly different format since it was updated prior to the rest of the General Plan in order to comply with State law.

The Introduction of each element describes the focus and the purpose of the element. The Introduction identifies other plans and programs outside of the General Plan that may be used to achieve specific General Plan goals. The relationship of the element to other General Plan elements is also specified in the Introduction.

The Issues, Goals and Policies section of each element contains a description of identified planning issues, goals, and policies related to the element topic. The issues, goals, and policies are based on input received from the community, members of the Planning Commission and City Council, and City staff.

The issues represent the needs, concerns or desires addressed by the General Plan. The goals are overall statements of community desires and consist of broad statements of purpose or direction. The policies serve as guides to the City Council, Planning Commission, other City commissions and boards, and City staff in reviewing development proposals and making other decisions that affect the future growth and development of El Centro.

Each element also contains a Plan section. The Plan section offers an overview of the City's course of action to implement the identified goals and policies. For example, the Land Use Element contains a "Land Use Plan" indicating the types and intensities of land use permitted in the City. The Circulation Element contains a "Circulation Plan" describing the overall circulation system required to meet the future needs of El Centro. Wherever possible, the Plan contains illustrative maps, diagrams, and tables.

Each element has an associated Implementation Program which identifies specific actions to achieve the goals, policies, and plans identified in each General Plan element. The Implementation Programs (contained in Appendix A) are reviewed and updated periodically to update specific actions, schedules, responsible parties, and measures to ensure that General Plan goals, policies, and plans are implemented.

The Glossary is an appendix of the General Plan (Appendix B) and provides a set of definitions for technical terms used in the Plan.

The organization of the General Plan allows users to turn to the section that interests them and quickly obtain a perspective of City policies on the subject. However, General Plan users should realize that the policies in the various elements are interrelated and should be examined comprehensively. Policies are presented as written statements, tables, diagrams, and maps. All of these policy components must be considered together when making planning decisions.

## Community Participation in the General Plan Program

Public participation played an important role in the El Centro General Plan update. Because the General Plan reflects community goals, citizen input was essential in identifying issues and formulating goals. The City of El Centro held two community workshops, three Planning Commission/City Council joint study sessions and two public hearings to ensure public participation in the General Plan preparation process.

Since public participation has been identified as an important feature of the community's vision for the future, the City will continue to encourage members of the public to participate in governmental activities. To proactively reach out to the public and encourage participation by all members of the community, the City will continue to implement its three year plan, *Engaging El Centro*.

## Direction to the Future

The direction established by the General Plan represents a combination of community values and actions designed to achieve the vision for the future allowing the City to take advantage of opportunities to achieve its goals. The policies and plans in the Elements and the Implementation Program provide guidance for addressing changing conditions and specific actions to optimize community potential.