

City of Atwater General Plan



CITY OF ATWATER
750 Bellevue Road
Atwater, California 95301



Adopted: July 24, 2000

Prepared by:



City of Atwater
General Plan

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1. INTRODUCTION

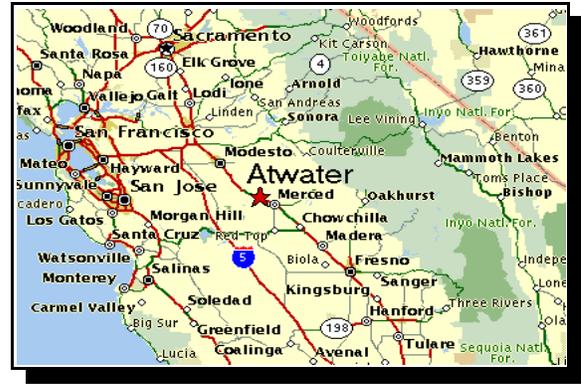
**GENERAL PLAN
INTRODUCTION**

This is the City of Atwater's 2000 General Plan. It is a public document that presents a vision of the city in the future, arising from a consensus by the community. It is a guide for both citizens and City officials to be used in discussions about community growth and development, and provides a framework for decisions on those issues. While physical development is not the only factor in the creation of a livable and attractive community, it is one of the most significant factors. Therefore, the General Plan focuses primarily on the physical development of the community. The anticipated horizon for this General Plan is the year 2020. However, periodic review and amendment of the Plan should occur to ensure that it remains accurate and consistent with the community's desires, as changes in circumstances or unexpected opportunities occur.

It is a premise of this General Plan that growth and development are desirable. It is also a premise that growth development need guidance so as to maximize their benefits and minimize their impacts. The General Plan provides the framework necessary for decision-makers to handle future development proposals and challenges in a manner that is consistent with the community's desires and values as a whole. The General Plan is not a mere statement of intentions, but an action plan to be followed by the City from the moment of its adoption.

**COMMUNITY LOCATION AND
CHARACTERISTICS**

The City of Atwater is located in Merced County in central California. It is situated within the San Joaquin Valley, part of the Central Valley. The City is approximately 8 miles northwest of the City of Merced, the county seat. State Highway 99 goes through the southern portion of the City, and the former Castle Air Force Base lies to the



Regional Location

northeast. The population of Atwater, according to January 1998 Department of Finance estimates, is 21,992.



City of Atwater

BACKGROUND FOR PLANNING

As noted in Table 1-1, The City of Atwater adopted its first General Plan in 1958. Recent updates to the Land Use, Circulation, Open Space/Conservation, and Housing elements occurred in 1992. However, the City's Safety, Noise, and Scenic Highways elements have not been updated since 1981.

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**Table 1-1
Atwater General Plan History**

Element	First Adopted	Major Revisions
Land Use	1958	1968, 1981, 1992
Circulation	1958	1968, 1982, 1992
Open Space/ Conservation	1981	1992
Housing	1981	1981, 1986, 1992
Noise	1981	
Safety/ Seismic Safety	1981	
Scenic Highways	1981	
Southwest Area Plan (Applegate BP)	1987	1991
Downtown Bus. District Plan	1979	

As described above, previous planning efforts have generally taken an intermittent approach with modifications to individual and/or groups of elements occurring periodically. The 2000 General Plan update has taken a comprehensive approach which revises all elements at once.

Although the City's Land Use and Circulation Elements had been updated as recently as 1992, a number of major events have occurred within Atwater itself and the region which have led to the need for a comprehensive look at the community. These events include:

- The closure of Castle Air Force Base as a military facility and its conversion to civilian uses and development.
- The development of a prison facility just northeast of Castle Airport.
- The selection of a site for a new UC campus northeast of Merced near Lake Yosemite.

- Plans to develop a University Access System that will link Atwater and the City of Merced to the University.
- Plans to construct a new interchange at the intersection of Highway 99 and Westside Boulevard.

Some of these events have created impacts on the economic foundation of the City, and others have created some significant opportunities. In order to ensure that the City's General Plan accurately reflected these changes in circumstances and presented the community's current desires relative to growth, the City initiated a comprehensive General Plan update in 1998.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN THE GENERAL PLAN UPDATE PROCESS



To assist in the General Plan update process, the City utilized an 18 member Technical Work Group made up of representatives from various City Departments, and other local public agencies including: the City and County of Merced, the Merced County Association of Governments (MCAG), and the Castle Joint Powers Authority (CJPA). The core group's input was also augmented by representatives from local school districts, businesses, and community organizations.

The group provided input to City staff and the General Plan consultant, through survey responses and other information requests, relative to existing conditions in Atwater and issues of both local and regional concern. Input from the Working Group and other individuals and agencies was used to prepare the first two publications developed as part of the General Plan update process. These documents, referred to as, the *Due Diligence Working Paper for the Atwater General Plan Update* and *General Plan Market Study* were published in November of 1998.

Findings of the *Due Diligence Working Paper* and the *Market Study* were used to develop a

number of growth scenarios for lands to the west, east, and south of the City. These scenarios and the findings of the documents were presented at the first of two City-wide public workshops on February 24, 1999.

After considering input from the first City-wide workshop, City staff and the consultant team began preparation of the "Preferred Land Use Alternative" for the City. This alternative incorporated desirable aspects from a number of the alternatives to form a composite plan. This plan was qualitatively tested by the consultant team through the preparation of an *Opportunities and Constraints* analysis. The findings of the analysis and the recommended "Preferred Alternative" were presented to the Planning Commission at another public hearing conducted May 26, 1999.

Following Planning Commission selection of the "Preferred Alternative," the consultant team distributed a Notice of Preparation for the General Plan EIR and solicited input regarding potential environmental issues through two public scoping sessions.

After the completion of a number of technical studies, the *Public Review Draft General Plan* and accompanying *General Plan Draft Environmental Impact Report (EIR)* were released for public review and comment in April 2000.

A number of public meetings were also conducted in the communities of Franklin-Beachwood, McSwain, and Winton during the public review period to facilitate additional community input.

Modifications to the Plan and the Final EIR, which responds to environmental comments, were considered by the Planning Commission and the City Council during a series of public hearings leading up to EIR certification and Plan adoption on July 24, 2000.

California Government Code Section 65351 states that during the preparation of the General Plan, "...opportunities for the involvement of citizens, public agencies,

public utility companies, and civic, education and other community groups" be provided "through public hearings and any other means the City deems appropriate." As demonstrated in the above paragraphs, the City of Atwater has actively sought citizen and public agency participation throughout the General Plan update process.

PURPOSE AND NATURE OF THE GENERAL PLAN



Under State law, all cities and counties must prepare a general plan. The general plan is a legal document that serves as the "constitution" for a community's land use and development activities.

California Government Code Section 65300 requires that the general plan be a comprehensive, long-term document for the physical development of the city.

State law specifically requires that the General Plan address seven general topics or "elements." These mandatory elements include:

- *Land Use* - Designates the general distribution and intensity of all uses of land in the community.
- *Circulation* - Identifies the general location and extent of existing and proposed major transportation facilities. This element also addresses general infrastructure such as sewer, water, storm drainage facilities, and utilities.
- *Housing* - Involves a comprehensive assessment of current and projected housing needs for all economic segments of the community. This element also embodies policies and programs for providing adequate housing.
- *Conservation* - Addresses the conservation, development, and use of natural resources, including water, forests, soils, rivers, and mineral deposits.

General Plan Introduction

- *Open Space* - Identifies plans and measures designed to preserve open space for natural resources, the managed production of resources, outdoor recreation, and public health and safety.
- *Noise* - Identifies and appraises the existing and projected noise environment. Includes policies to protect the community from the harmful effects of noise.
- *Safety* - Establishes policies and programs to protect the community from risks associated with seismic, geologic, flood, and fire hazards.

In addition, Government Code Section 65303 allows for the inclusion of other elements in the general plan which, in the judgment of the local legislative body, relate to the physical development of the City. All elements of the general plan, whether mandatory or optional, have equal legal status.

DISCUSSION OF PLANNING BOUNDARIES

According to California Government Code Section 65300, the General Plan must cover the territory within the boundaries of the adopting city, as well as “any land outside of its boundaries which in the planning agency’s judgement bears relation to its planning.”

When establishing its Planning Area, cities typically use their Sphere of Influence, as established by the Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO), as a starting point. However, in many cases it is desirable to extend the Planning Area to lands outside the Sphere when development in those locations could either impact the City or affect its planning.

Since 1978, the “Urban Centered Concept” has been a guiding land use principle for the County of Merced. According to the Merced County Year 2000 General Plan “the urban centered concept is directed at utilizing cities and unincorporated communities or centers to accomplish anticipated urban expansion in an orderly manner, based on the ability of these communities to furnish public services along with land needs based on population

demands in balance with employment-generating land uses.” The goal is, “to provide for intensive urban development and to protect agricultural and open space land from sprawling urban development.”

The County applies the urban centered concept through the designation of Specific Urban Development Plans (SUDP), Rural Residential Centers (RRC), Highway Interchange Centers (HIC), and Agricultural Services Centers (ASC).

Although the City agrees with the overall principle of the Urban Centered Concept, Atwater’s 2000 General Plan utilizes the terms and boundaries described within the state General Plan Guidelines to define its planning related boundaries. These terms include:

City Limits - Incorporated territory where land use is controlled by the City.

Sphere of Influence - Incorporated and unincorporated territory which encompasses the City’s ultimate probable service area.

Planning Area - Unincorporated territory bearing a relation to the City’s Planning.

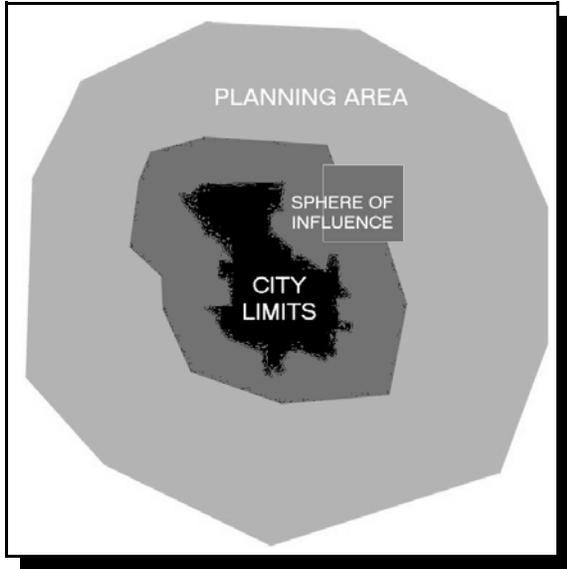


Figure above illustrates the relationship between *city limits* (center), *sphere of influence* and *planning area*. Note: boundaries are conceptual only for this illustration.

Portions of the Planning Area outside of RRC's and SUDP's identified by the County of Merced have been noted as "Areas of Interest" to lay the groundwork for future land use agreements with the City and County of Merced.

GENERAL PLAN THEMES

The overriding themes of the City of Atwater's 2000 General Plan are *transition* and *diversification*. The primary challenge facing the City is how to successfully guide Atwater's transformation from a former military based community to one that appeals to a broad range of businesses, industries, and residents.

Atwater has long been recognized for its friendly small-town atmosphere, which is a valued characteristic that is desirable to maintain. However, in order to maintain a sustainable community, it must also find a way to attract a variety of industries, local and region serving commercial development, and provide housing opportunities that will appeal to all demographic categories ranging from university students and faculty to retirees and young families.

In order to meet these objectives, the General Plan focuses on a number of basic themes that are reflected in goals and policies throughout the document.

Identification of Future Growth Areas - With the exception of the former Castle Air Force Base, now referred to as the Castle Airport and Aviation Development Center (CAADC), Atwater's existing Sphere of Influence provides little opportunity to accommodate future growth. Through the General Plan update, the City has identified four primary growth areas and a new proposed Sphere of Influence designed to meet both short- and long-term development demands.

Land use designations applied within these growth areas have been designed to accommodate a variety of employment generating uses, small- and large-scale commercial development, and provide a broad range of housing opportunities for existing and future residents.

Maintenance of Community Identity - Atwater is surrounded by a number of small unincorporated communities including Winton to the north, Franklin-Beachwood to the east, and the McSwain area located directly south of the City. In addition, the incorporated City of Merced is located approximately 8 miles to the southeast. One of the important focuses of the Plan is to lay the groundwork for agreements with the City and County of Merced that will ensure the establishment and maintenance of long-term agricultural and open space buffers between the referenced communities.

Community Entrances - Most visitors to the region view Atwater from the Highway 99 corridor. Few landscape improvements currently exist along the corridor or at key entrance points into the City. The Plan identifies a number of gateways into the community and discusses opportunities to enhance their visual appearance, as well as the view of Atwater from Highway 99.

Quality Development - The appearance of a community can directly affect the attitudes of

General Plan Introduction

its citizens and how it is viewed by visitors and potential investors. One of the cherished characteristics of older residential neighborhoods within Atwater is their tree-lined streets. As Atwater continues to grow, it is important that similar features be incorporated into new development. Throughout the City, enhanced landscape and design standards are encouraged to improve the appearance and quality of both newly developed and redeveloped areas.

Revitalization and Enhancement of the Downtown - Downtown Atwater, like many other downtowns across the country, continues to struggle to maintain its economic viability and emphasis as the core of the community. Implementation of a variety of strategies will be necessary to bring new life and focus to the downtown. These include land use planning strategies, redevelopment activities, and aggressive marketing.

As part of this effort, it needs to be acknowledged that Downtown will not compete with regional-scale commercial development. Rather, Downtown should focus on its role as the cultural, entertainment, government, office, financial, and social center of the community.

Strategies designed to achieve this goal include: applying land use classifications and policies that will result in a compact mixed-use development pattern; investing in physical improvements to enhance the pedestrian orientation and distinctive appearance of downtown streets and places; improving access to downtown buildings; broadening the allowable range of uses within downtown districts; and creating physical spaces to accommodate social activity.

Economic Development - As the City transitions from the historic economic foundation generated by the former Castle Air Force Base, it must focus its economic development efforts on both the retention and expansion of existing businesses, as well as the attraction of new industries. Leakage of retail sales activity to nearby Merced has also been a long standing dilemma which needs to

be addressed. Finally, the City's overall economic development strategy must recognize and attempt to capture the market opportunities created by regional forces including major infrastructure improvements and the establishment of region serving uses (i.e. UC Merced and a new federal prison).

ORGANIZATION OF THE PLAN



The City of Atwater's 2000 General Plan is organized into nine chapters covering all of the elements required by State law and optional issues of concern to the community. Table 1-2 identifies the title of each General Plan Chapter, its mandatory or optional status, and most closely related elements.

**Table 1-2
Organization of the
Atwater General Plan**

Chapter	Legal Status	Most Closely Related Chapters
1 - Introduction	N/A	N/A
2 - Land Use, Public Facilities and Community Infrastructure	Mandatory	All
3 - Circulation	Mandatory	Land Use, Noise
4 - Conservation and Open Space	Mandatory	Land Use, Seismic and Public Safety
5 - Seismic and Public Safety	Mandatory	Land Use, Conservation and Open Space
6 - Noise	Mandatory	Land Use and Circulation
7 - Economic Development	Optional	Land Use
8 - Glossary	n/a	All
* Housing	Mandatory	Land Use

* The Housing Element will be prepared under a separate cover.

As shown in Table 1-2, the City has chosen to expand the Land Use Element to address closely related topics including public facilities and community infrastructure. The Conservation and Open Space Elements have been combined into a single chapter because of the overlapping topic areas required to be addressed in each. An optional Economic Development Element has also been incorporated because of the importance of this topic to the community.

CONSISTENCY OF THE GENERAL PLAN

Internal Consistency

California Government Code Section 65300.5 requires that the "General Plan and elementscomprise an integrated, internally consistent, and compatible statement of policies." This means that all goals, policies, standards, and implementation programs outlined in one element of the General Plan must agree with those outlined in all other elements. Otherwise, there will be confusion regarding community policies and standards. In addition, all maps and diagrams within the General Plan must be consistent with the text. The General Plan of the City of Atwater has been prepared in compliance with these internal consistency requirements.

Consistency With Other Planning Processes

To be an effective guide for future development, the General Plan must provide a framework for local development that is consistent with the policies of appropriate State, regional, and local programs and regulatory agencies. This General Plan takes into consideration the following plans or regulations:

- Surface Mining and Reclamation Act.
- Sphere of Influence as regulated by the Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO).
- San Joaquin Valley Air Quality Attainment Plan.

- Merced County Hazardous Waste Management Plan.
- Integrated Solid Waste Management Plan.
- Merced County Regional Transportation Plan.
- Merced County Congestion Management Plan.
- Regional Housing Needs Assessment
- Comprehensive Land Use Plan for Castle Airport.

In addition, the potential impacts of the General Plan must be evaluated in compliance with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). A separately bound Environmental Impact Report (EIR) has been prepared to evaluate and disclose the environmental impacts associated with implementation of the General Plan in compliance with CEQA requirements.

GENERAL PLAN IMPLEMENTATION



The General Plan provides the basic policy foundation for land development. Land use regulations and plans enacted by a local government, including but not limited to, zoning ordinances, subdivision ordinances, design guidelines, specific plans, and redevelopment plans, are the principal means by which the goals and policies of a General Plan are implemented. Therefore, all such regulations and plans must be consistent with the General Plan.

Following adoption of the 2000 General Plan, the City will review all existing land use regulations and plans for consistency with the General Plan and modify those documents as necessary to resolve or eliminate any inconsistencies that are found. Ensuring that existing ordinances and plans are consistent with the General Plan is one method of implementing its policies. Other methods

General Plan Introduction

include development of new ordinances and plans, financing programs, capital improvement decisions, and enforcement actions.

State law also defines how cities should maintain their Plan as a contemporary policy guide. Section 65400 (b)(1) of the California Government Code requires that each planning department report annually to the City Council on "the status of the Plan and progress in its implementation, including its progress in meeting its share of regional housing needs and local efforts to remove governmental constraints to the maintenance, improvement and development of housing."

To implement this requirement, the City Council should review the General Plan on an annual basis to ensure consistency with current Federal, State, and local regulations and policies. The status of the General Plan will be presented to the City Council and at minimum address the following items:

- A list of approved/denied General Plan amendment requests.
- A summary of capital projects that have been constructed in accordance with the Circulation Element or other appropriate component of the Plan.
- Recommendations for resolving any identified inconsistencies with applicable Federal, State, and local regulations or policies.
- A summary of the number of housing units constructed during the year according to each income category and the number of remaining units necessary to meet the City's fair share allocation.
- A list of specific efforts made to remove governmental constraints to the maintenance, improvement or development of housing.
- A summary of implementation programs completed during the prior year.

- A schedule identifying implementation programs to be completed during the upcoming year.

The Housing Element is the only element which has a mandatory schedule for review and updating. This time frame has typically been every five years, although modifications to that schedule and/or extensions have been approved in the past by the Legislature. The City will continue to review and update the Housing Element as necessary in accordance with State law.

Although the General Plan should be designed to provide clear guidance for development in the Planning Area, it is also meant to be a flexible planning tool for the community. Community needs and values, environmental conditions, and Federal and State policies can change over time. The General Plan needs to be able to respond to these changes. State law permits up to four amendments per year of a City's General Plan. It is also anticipated that the City will undertake a comprehensive review of the General Plan approximately every 10 years. This will allow the community to reassess its situation and revise its goals, policies, and programs accordingly.