

Planning to Be Tobacco-Free:

Addressing Tobacco in General Plans



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This guide is intended for **California Planners in Rural or Semi-Rural parts of the state**. It will cover how to include evidence-based tobacco prevention goals, policies, and implementation measures in city and county General Plans. Considering the tremendous devastation that tobacco addiction has cost families and local governments, creating a plan for your community to reduce tobacco addiction makes economic sense and improves community health. The recommendations included in this guide are not required under state law, but many, as noted below, are recommended by various agencies and organizations, including the Office of Planning and Research for the State of California, American Lung Association, ChangeLab Solutions, and others.¹

The Importance of Planning for Health

An individual's health is affected by personal choices, environmental factors, genetics, luck, and more. It may seem intuitive that health is the result of personal lifestyle choices, however, as more data and studies are released about the chronic diseases that affect modern societies, opinions are changing. People are becoming increasingly aware that health is greatly impacted by the environments in which we live, work, and play—and that environments have a much bigger influence than we previously believed. Those who live in a community free from tobacco, with access to healthy food, preventative and emergency care, clean parks, and well-maintained streets have much better odds of leading a healthy lifestyle than those who do not. Planners and advocates have the power to improve those odds by addressing health in General Plans.

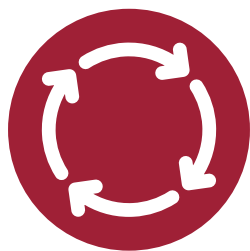
What Are General Plans?

General Plans are an important process that communities undertake to create a long-term vision. A General Plan is a blueprint or written vision that guides future growth for a city or county. All elements, or chapters, of the General Plan must meet many legal requirements to ensure it is a long-term, comprehensive, and consistent plan. General Plans are typically written for a 20- to 30-year timeframe. A comprehensive update can take 1-3 years to complete. The housing element is the only element required to be updated every 5-7 years.

General Plans consist of mandatory elements and optional elements. There are eight mandatory elements for California cities and counties:



Land Use



Circulation



Housing



Conservation



Open Space



Noise



Environmental Justice



Safety

The environmental justice element is only mandatory for cities and counties that have identified disadvantaged communities. Disadvantaged communities will be explored more in a bit.

Goals, policies, and implementation measures are the heart of General Plans. These are the steps that local jurisdictions have agreed to take to achieve the vision as laid out by the plan. Plans may also include background research, information, vision statements, maps, etc.; however, the goals, policies, and implementation measures are what hold local decision-makers accountable.

The connection between health and environment is becoming more widely known and accepted. General Plans have been required by the state of California since 1934, and while General Plans do have a big impact on community health, it has not been a traditional focus of planning documents. This is changing, however, as evidenced by the adoption of SB 1000—the Planning for Healthy Community Act—in 2016.

The Planning for Healthy Communities Act

The 2016 Planning for Healthy Communities Act², or SB 1000, is a California law that recognizes that low-income communities and communities of color often bear a disproportionate burden of pollution and associated health risks. The law requires local governments with disadvantaged communities to address Environmental Justice in their General Plans. This can be achieved either by adding an Environmental Justice element, or including Environmental Justice-related goals, policies, and objectives throughout existing elements in the General Plan.

An Environmental Justice element is designed to address the needs of disadvantaged communities must meet the following seven criteria:

- Prioritize Improvements and Programs that Meet the Needs of Disadvantaged Communities
- Increase Civic Engagement
- Reduce Pollution and Improve Air Quality
- Ensure Access to Public Facilities
- Improve Access to Healthy Food
- Ensure Safe and Sanitary Homes
- Promote Physical Activity

These criteria lay a foundation for communities to promote environmental justice in neighborhoods that have been burdened by environmental injustices for many decades.

What is a "Disadvantaged Community"?

Created by California's Office of Environmental Health, the "Cal Enviro Screen"³ map identifies disadvantaged communities by using statewide census data that consider over 20 indicators, including but not limited to: pesticides, toxic releases, drinking water, traffic, hazardous waste, asthma, birth weight, cardiovascular disease rates, education, poverty, unemployment rates, and race demographics. These indicators are converted to percentiles that are used to determine disadvantaged communities. Jurisdictions that have census areas within the top 25% are required to address Environmental Justice within their plans.⁴ To explore your jurisdiction visit: oehha.ca.gov/calenviroscreen.

Communities that are not within the top 25% may still wish to consider addressing the criteria laid out in SB 1000 to improve conditions within their jurisdictions by adopting an Environmental Justice or Health element into their General Plan.

Why Tobacco is an Environmental Justice Issue

Many racial/ethnic groups, rural communities, LGBTQ+ individuals, and identity-based groups such as military veterans continue to use tobacco at higher rates than the general population.⁵ This leads to more tobacco-related sickness in these groups, and often death at an earlier age. Previously, higher tobacco use rates among identity-based groups were thought to be a product of differences in values, cultures, or genetics. **We now know that these higher rates are largely due to differences in environment.** Community-based studies have demonstrated more tobacco industry marketing, and more tobacco retailers in many of the same areas identified by Cal Enviro Screen as “disadvantaged communities” as well as in rural California.

There are also differences in the degree of protections disadvantaged communities are afforded by local government. For example, all public four-year universities in California are smoke and tobacco-free, but many community colleges and trade and technical schools are not. Similar policy disparities exist for smokefree multiunit housing, tobacco retail licensing, restrictions on storefront advertising, and retail density.

These environmental disparities result in higher rates of tobacco use and associated harms in rural and disadvantaged communities. Addressing these environmental differences as part of an Environmental Justice or Health element is essential for health equity and social justice.

From the Office of Planning and Research 2020 General Plan Guidelines for Environmental Justice Elements. ⁶

Tobacco Smoke

Specific policies and programs can also reduce exposure to tobacco or other types of smoke in various land uses or public facilities and amenities. Examples such as designating smoke-free zones in parks and other public places, zoning standards to reduce density of tobacco outlets, and reduction of retail advertising have also been beneficial to protect the health of those most vulnerable in the community.

Recommended Language for General Plans, Health, or Environmental Justice Elements

This section includes recommended goals, policies, and implementation measures that jurisdictions can adopt as part of an Environmental Justice or Health element. These have been organized by the Planning for Healthy Communities Act (SB 1000) criteria.

SB 1000 Criteria: Improve Access to Healthy Foods

Many rural towns and disadvantaged neighborhoods are considered “food deserts” because access to healthy groceries is limited. Many of these areas have more than their fair share of convenience and liquor stores which offer ample unhealthy options, such as tobacco and liquor, with very limited healthy options, such as fruits and vegetables. For children growing up in these areas, having more tobacco retailers in their neighborhoods increases their likelihood of smoking or using tobacco.⁷ This happens because these children are exposed to more tobacco advertisements and more price promotions at the register. In food desert areas, children and community members are exposed each time they visit a store to purchase bread or milk.

Having more tobacco stores also makes it harder for those who want to quit using tobacco to quit. Stores trigger real-time cravings, display cues to smoke, and promote impulse buying of tobacco products, especially discounted products.⁸ Adopting a local tobacco retailer licensing ordinance that includes zoning and conditional use permits reduces the density of tobacco stores near schools, youth sensitive areas, and disadvantaged communities.

Recommended General Plan Language

GOAL: Decrease access to, and promotion of, unhealthy options and increase access to healthy options in food desert communities.

Policy: Limit tobacco, alcohol, and cannabis retail vendors and advertising in food desert communities and around schools.

Implementation Measures:



Low readiness: Evaluate community and stakeholder opinions about ease of youth access and exposure to tobacco, alcohol, and cannabis products and advertising, and/or a comprehensive tobacco retail licensing ordinance



Medium readiness: Engage the community and stakeholder to discuss potential vision, goal, objective, and policy language for a comprehensive tobacco retail licensing ordinance



High readiness: Draft and adopt a comprehensive tobacco retail licensing ordinance

SB 1000 Criteria: Ensure Safe and Sanitary Homes

The health and safety of the home is key to physical and mental health. For individuals who live in multifamily housing, exposure to secondhand smoke at home is all too common. Tobacco smoke can easily travel through light fixtures, crawl spaces, and doorways. When a person smokes, secondhand smoke travels into their neighbor’s home. Often, residents of multifamily housing have no rights or recourse even when regularly exposed to secondhand smoke—and moving is not always an option. Children, the elderly, and people living with chronic conditions are more likely to live in multifamily housing and are the populations most in need of protection from secondhand smoke. Secondhand smoke exposure in multifamily housing exacerbates many pre-existing health risks among multifamily residents, further threatening their health.⁹ People living in single family homes often do not have to deal with this issue.

Recommended General Plan Language

GOAL: Reduce exposure to second and thirdhand smoke among residents of multi-unit housing.

Policy: Promote smokefree public and private multifamily housing to reduce the incidence of secondhand and thirdhand smoke exposure.

Implementation Measures:



Low readiness: Evaluate community and stakeholder opinions about secondhand smoke exposure and/or a comprehensive smokefree multifamily housing policy



Medium readiness: Engage the community and stakeholder to discuss potential vision, goal, objective, equitable enforcement, and policy language for a comprehensive smokefree multifamily housing ordinance



High readiness: Draft and adopt a comprehensive smokefree multifamily housing ordinance

SB 1000 Criteria: Reduce Pollution and Improve Air Quality

Because of the disproportionate number of tobacco retailers in rural and disadvantaged communities, these communities often suffer from greater exposure to tobacco product waste. Cigarette filters, or “butts,” are made of the plastic material cellulose acetate, which does not biodegrade, but breaks down into microplastics that move deeper into the food chain and water supply.¹⁰ Used cigarette butts are known to leach toxic amounts of nicotine, pesticides, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, arsenic, and heavy metals such as lead and cadmium, for years. Even unsmoked cigarette butts are toxic to animals, plants, and aquatic life.¹¹

Recommended General Plan Language

GOAL: Reduce tobacco product waste.

Policy: Reduce disposal of single-use plastic tobacco products such as single-use filters and electronic smoking devices.

Implementation Measures:



Low readiness: Evaluate community and stakeholder opinions about tobacco product waste and/or a ban on single use tobacco products such as cigarette filters and single use vaping devices.



Medium readiness: Engage the community and stakeholder to discuss potential vision, goal, objective, and policy language for a ban on single use tobacco products



High readiness: Draft and adopt a comprehensive ban on single use tobacco products

SB 1000 Criteria: Promote Physical Activity

Outdoor areas, such as parks and trails, are places where people undertake physical activity, especially in disadvantaged areas where gym memberships may not fit into household budgets. These laws protect Californians in spaces often frequented by groups who are especially vulnerable to the negative health effects of secondhand smoke. Over the last decade, many California communities have passed tobacco-free laws or regulations that cover outdoor areas. As of November 2021, more than 475 California cities and counties have adopted outdoor secondhand smoke ordinances.¹²

Recommended General Plan Language

GOAL: Reduce outdoor exposure to tobacco product waste and secondhand smoke.

Policy: Prohibit tobacco product use in parks and on trails.

Implementation Measures:



Low readiness: Evaluate community and stakeholder opinions about outdoor exposure to secondhand smoke and tobacco product waste and/or a comprehensive smokefree outdoor policy



Medium readiness: Engage the community and stakeholder to discuss potential vision, goal, objective, and policy language for a comprehensive smokefree outdoor ordinance



High readiness: Draft and adopt a comprehensive smokefree outdoor ordinance

Sources

1. The American Institute of Certified Planners (AICP) includes an ethics code that requires planners not take “sides” on political issues. The hope for this guide is to provide information on the rationale and type of language that planners may include to reduce tobacco use and associated disease in their communities.
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5. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2022). *Burden of Cigarette Use in the U.S.* Accessed December 21, 2022 <https://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/campaign/tips/resources/data/cigarette-smoking-in-united-states.html>.
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