

# WHO'S WHO AND WHAT DO THEY DO?

*“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, concerned citizens can change the world.*

*Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”*

Margaret Mead,  
anthropologist



We've all heard the saying, "You can please some of the people some of the time, but not all of the people all of the time." Although a good General Plan (GP) will try to reconcile conflicting community values, creating a plan that is all things to all people is virtually impossible. Only clear communication and collaboration among elected and appointed officials, professional staff, and the public can assure a workable plan.

**Elected Officials:** A city council or county board of supervisors initiates the General Plan process. Although they may delegate a planning commission to advise them, these elected officials are the ones who approve and adopt the General Plan. They are answerable to you, the voter. They hold regularly scheduled meetings with time allotted for public comment.

**Planning Commission:** A board of supervisors or city council may form a planning commission. The commission has to have at least five commissioners appointed by the board or council. Once appointed, commissioners become local government officers who must act in the public interest. A member cannot hold an incompatible office nor have a conflict of interest. Planning Commission meetings are open to the public.

**Planning Department:** Planning departments are staffed with professionals who provide the information and data necessary to the planning process. Every city or county in California must have a planning agency to help develop, implement, and monitor the General Plan.

**Special Districts:** Called "special" because they provide only certain services within restricted boundaries, these districts perform up to 30 different kinds of functions, the most common of which are water and sewer service, solid waste disposal, and fire protection. Special districts implement many General Plan requirements on the ground. They are managed by boards of directors who are elected by residents within the district. Their meetings are open to the public.

### Local Agency Formation

**Commission:** LAFCo is a key connecting organization that helps the special districts and any cities within the county figure out who should be doing what along with where so that services are efficient and cost effective. The commission is also charged with helping to prevent sprawl and trying to preserve agricultural lands. LAFCo Commission makeup differs from county to county but usually includes two members from the board of supervisors, two members from city councils in the county, two members representing special districts, and one member at large. LAFCo meetings are open to the public.

### Community and Neighborhood Groups:

Churches, civic and service clubs, educational institutions, non-governmental organizations, and business groups can all make valuable contributions to the planning process. A comprehensive planning process should reach out to all these groups so their perspectives can be incorporated into any planning decisions.



*Ideally, citizens should drive the planning process. The ultimate success of a general plan depends on public acceptance.*



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**You:** Ideally, citizens should drive the planning process. The ultimate success of a General Plan depends on public acceptance. If they are left out of the planning process, citizens may challenge the legitimacy of a plan. Nobody likes to feel that a decision has been made without a chance to put in his or her two cents. In the worst cases, citizens may challenge planning decisions through legal action, or they may use ballot initiatives to overturn all or part of a General Plan.

State law requires two public hearings before a city council or board of supervisors adopts or amends a General Plan—one by the planning commission and another by the legislative body. This is the bare minimum. Most planners do not consider two meetings to be sufficient for effective public participation.

Under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), adopting or revising a General Plan often requires an Environmental Impact Report. The act contains its own public participation requirements. (See *CEQA fact sheet #12 for details.*)

Any public meetings should strive for inclusiveness. They should be scheduled in different places at different times to attract a cross-section of the population.

In addition to any organized planning meetings, state law allows the public to attend all meetings of appointed advisory bodies, planning commissions, and local legislative bodies, with a few limited exceptions. These groups must publish a public notice stating when and where they are meeting and what's on the agenda. Meeting agendas, meeting minutes, staff reports, and backup information are all open to the public.

### Practice Your Values



Get to know your elected officials. Attend city council or board of supervisors meetings. Vote!

Attend planning commission meetings. Call your city or county planning department for contact information, meeting times, and dates.

If you have a particular interest or area of expertise, volunteer to sit on an advisory board or council.

Learn what special districts you belong to. You may have several—one for fire protection, another for water and sewer services, etc. Vote in board elections, or run for office yourself.

Attend Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCo) meetings. If you can't attend, read the meeting minutes—they are public documents.

Discuss community values with your family, friends, neighbors, and co-workers. Host a get-together and invite elected officials or agency staff to address your group.

**Educate yourself.** Consult the #1 *References and Resources* fact sheet along with others in the *University of California Cooperative Extension Land Use Fact Sheet Series* available from Plumas-Sierra Cooperative Extension Office in Quincy or online.

Written by Delaine Fragnoli and Holly George.  
<http://ucanr.org/landusefactsheets>