

EXISTING CONDITIONS REPORT



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I INTRODUCTION

This report presents existing conditions information about the City of Novato. It is intended to function as a reference document to be used by all participants in the General Plan Update process. The report provides background information necessary for informed decision-making and consensus building during the General Plan Update process.

Included in this report are 17 chapters covering a diversity of topics. These topics were selected based upon State General Plan content requirements, the requirements of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), the contents of Novato's existing General Plan, and key issues anticipated for the General Plan Update. Most chapters begin with an overview of applicable federal, State and local laws, followed by a summary of existing conditions in Novato related to the topic. Chapters include maps and tables as needed to present information and illustrate key concepts. The report was initially prepared by the City's former consultant, Design, Community & Environment, in 2009 and has been recently updated by City staff.

This Existing Conditions Report frequently refers to conditions within Novato's Sphere of Influence (SOI). The SOI is a concept established by State law to encourage communities to plan for orderly growth. The SOI represents the area that will ultimately be served by City services, which the City expects to annex at some point in the future. The SOI is determined by the Marin County Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO). As shown on Figure 1-1, Novato's SOI extends beyond its city limits to the southwest, southeast, and northeast. Land outside the city limits is under the jurisdiction of Marin County. However, the City is allowed by law to establish future land use designations for areas outside its city limits but within its SOI, as a way to communicate to the County and other agencies that Novato is affected by and has an interest in the future of these areas.

To provide context for this existing conditions information, the following sections identify the purpose of a General Plan, describe the existing Novato General Plan, and summarize Novato's General Plan Update process.

A. What is a General Plan?

The General Plan is the principal policy and planning document to guide Novato's future conservation, enhancement and development. The General Plan serves as the City's "constitution" for land use and community development. That is, it provides the legal foundation for all zoning, subdivision and public facilities ordinances, decisions and projects—all of which must be consistent with the General Plan. The General Plan is also a statement of the community's vision for the future. The General Plan addresses all aspects of development including land use, transportation, housing, public services, economic development, and natural resources, among other topics.

California State law requires that the General Plan be comprehensive, internally consistent and long-term. Although required to address certain issues specified in State law, the General Plan may be organized in a way that best suits the City. The plan must be clearly written, available to all those concerned with the community's development, and easy to administer. To be useful, the General Plan should define a realistic vision of what the City intends to be in the long-term, usually over the next 10 to 20 years. The plan should serve as a comprehensive guide for making policy decisions yet contain a general level of information to allow for flexibility of future conditions and ideas.

The General Plan, and the process of updating and amending it, is an important tool for educating community members about opportunities and challenges in the city. In addition to policies, the General Plan includes specific actions the City will take in order to meet its goals. City staff and elected officials are responsible for implementing these actions over

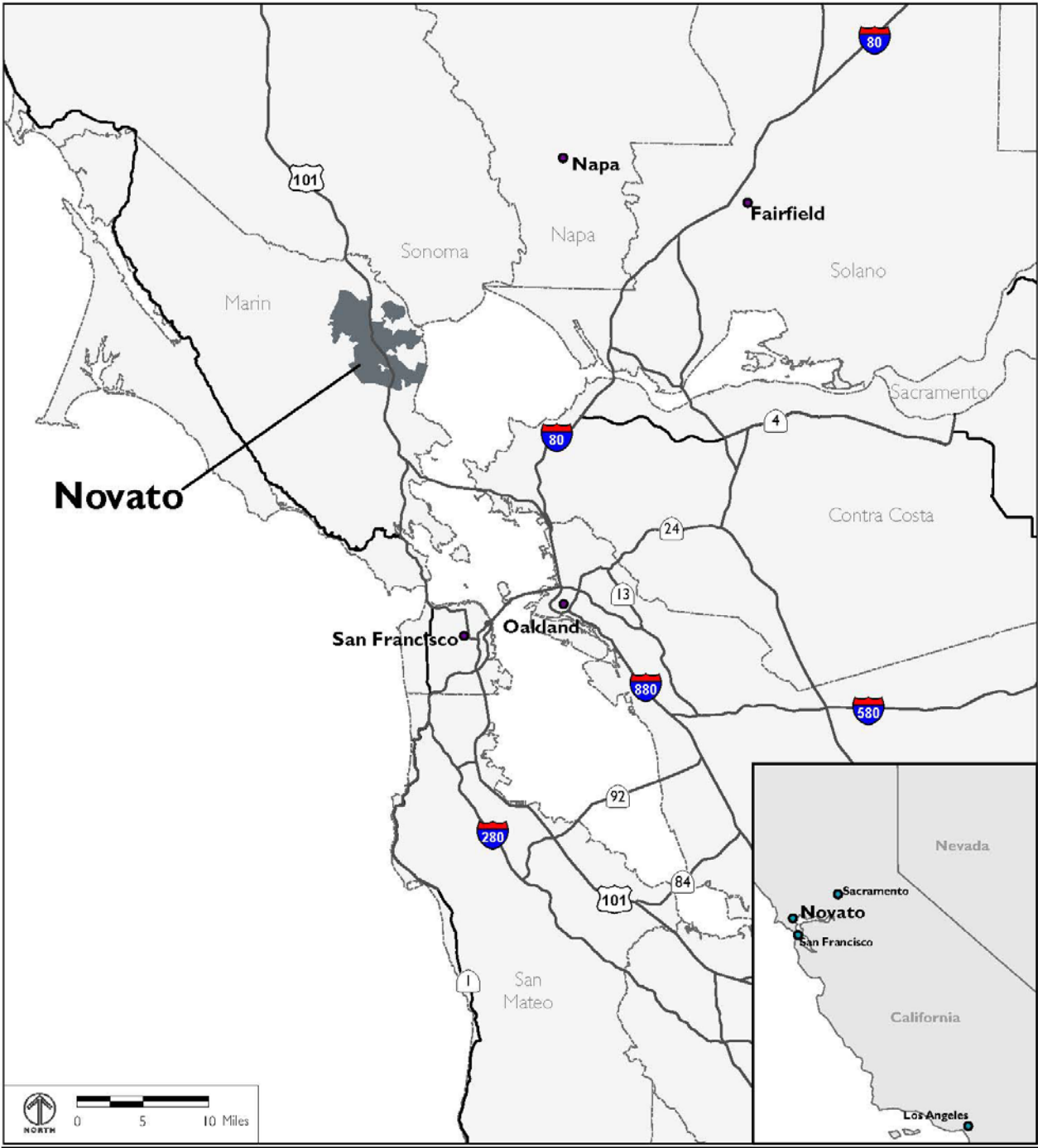


FIGURE I-1
REGIONAL LOCATION

the life of the General Plan. The General Plan also serves to advise neighboring cities, County government, and regional and State agencies about the City's goals and positions.

B. The Existing Novato General Plan

Novato's General Plan was last comprehensively updated in 1996. The existing General Plan contains nine chapters:

- ◆ Land Use
- ◆ Transportation
- ◆ Housing
- ◆ Environment
- ◆ Safety and Noise
- ◆ Economic Development and Fiscal Vitality
- ◆ Human Services
- ◆ Public Facilities and Services
- ◆ Community Identity

The existing General Plan is available on the City of Novato's website and at City offices.

C. The General Plan Update Process

The General Plan Update process is expected to take approximately three years to complete. The major phases of work are described below:

- ◆ Update of the Existing Conditions Report (Summer/Fall 2013).
- ◆ Evaluation of Existing General Plan Policies and Programs (Fall/Winter 2013-2014): City staff are in the process of identifying those policies and programs that have been implemented, those that have not (and the reasons why not), and those that are no longer relevant. This work will inform the future redrafting of the General Plan elements and their evaluation by the City's boards and commissions. Once the Existing Condition Report is updated and evaluation of current policies and programs completed, the information will be brought to the applicable boards and commissions for review and discussion.

Identification and Resolution of Significant Policy Options – “White Papers” (Winter 2013 to Fall 2014): There are several issues that will benefit from an analysis, discussion, and resolution of policy options before being incorporated into the draft General Plan. Staff will be drafting “white papers” on these subject areas that will be presented to the Planning Commission, City Council, and to the appropriate City boards and commissions.

- ◆ Land Use Alternatives and Development Criteria for Focus Areas (Fall 2013 to Winter 2014): Staff recognizes that there are specific areas of the community that are likely to change and could benefit from careful planning. Staff identified several areas for potential focus areas and gathered public input to prioritize these areas. In October 2013, the City Council approved the following focus areas: North Redwood Boulevard Corridor, North-North Redwood Boulevard, Northwest Quadrant Neighborhood, and Hamilton (provided that federal land use restrictions are lifted).
- ◆ Draft General Plan Policies and Programs (Spring 2014 to Spring 2015).
- ◆ Prepare an Environmental Impact Report for the General Plan (Spring 2016).
- ◆ Adopt the General Plan (Winter 2016).

D. Public Participation

One of the most important aspects of the General Plan Update process is public involvement in the decision-making process. The City wants to ensure that all of its citizens have an opportunity to have a voice in the future direction of the City.

The City will host community workshops on selected focus areas and potentially on some white paper topics. To engage the community, the City will utilize existing communication tools, including the e-notification system, website, social media, e-news, and media outreach. Additionally, the City will use Open Novato, a recently launched online civic engagement tool, which allows participants to weigh-in online on the various aspects of the general plan update. The City will use Open Novato to gather community feedback on specific questions, preferences and options for focus areas and white paper policy options.

Public participation will also be facilitated through the City's boards and commissions, including, as appropriate, the Design Review Commission, the Recreation, Cultural & Community Services Advisory Commission, the Economic Development Advisory Commission, the Multi-Cultural Advisory Commission and the Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Committee. The City will utilize these boards and commissions to review updated existing conditions reports, assist in evaluating existing general plan policies and programs, provide input for white paper topics, and develop new policies and programs for the General Plan Update. City staff will also be available to attend meetings of community organizations on topics of interest.

The City will notify the public about workshops and meetings through newsletters, newspaper notices, postcards mailed to residents, posters, and e-mail. All meetings, meeting materials and project documents will be available on the General Plan Update project website at <http://www.ci.novato.ca.us/Index.aspx?page=1116>.