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1. Executive Summary

1.1 EL CENTRO GENERAL PLAN 2040

The City of El Centro adopted a General Plan Update in summer of 2021. The scope of the update includes a complete rewrite of the Land Use Element and Mobility Element (formerly referred to as the Circulation Element); the addition of a new Environmental Justice (EJ) Element; and the preparation of a Program Environmental Impact Report (PEIR). The previous General Plan was adopted in 2004.

The El Centro General Plan update was funded through a Sustainable Communities Grant, administered by the State Department of Transportation (Caltrans), which encourages local and regional planning that furthers state goals of Safety and Health, Stewardship and Efficiency, Sustainability, Livability and Economy, System Performance and Organizational Excellence.

What is the Vision of this community?

The vision statement in the sidebar provides the foundation for this update of the General Plan. It was created during the preparation of the City’s Vision 2050 Strategic Plan in 2015. It represents a collaborative process which included a Steering Committee appointed by the City Council, community outreach events, informal surveys, youth engagement, and previous planning efforts such as Project Shape, the Park and Recreation Master Plan, the 2004 General Plan, and the City’s 5-year Strategic Plan. This vision was adopted by the City Council with the overarching goal to make the City a better place to live, work and play.

What is 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, called the Sphere of Influence (SOI). In essence, a city’s General Plan serves as a blueprint for future growth and development. As a guide 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 and policies. 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 mobility (circulation), housing, conservation of natural resources, preservation of open space, consideration of the noise environment, and protection of public safety (Section 65302 of the California Government Code). The General Plan is required to be internally consistent, meaning any conflicts with policies in the various elements should be resolved.

Senate Bill 1000 (2016) established environmental justice requirements under Government Code 65302 (h), and provided guidance for determining whether disadvantaged communities are present in a local jurisdiction, and whether an EJ Element or the equivalent is required. For jurisdictions with disadvantaged communities, environmental justice must be addressed when a City or County updates two or more General Plan Elements concurrently. Because the City of El Centro meets this criteria, this General Plan update includes the addition of a new EJ Element.

### General Plan 2040 Highlights

- **Sustainability** – The updated General Plan promotes sustainability through goals and policies that support compact, mixed use development that promotes biking and walking and reduces vehicle miles traveled (VMT) and greenhouse gas emissions (GHG’s).

- **Economy** – Outdated and inflexible land use designations in the Land Use Element were replaced by those that expand economic opportunity.

- **Social Equity** – The updated plan includes a new Environmental Justice Element that is designed to ensure that all land use and transportation planning in the City is fair and meaningful for people of all races, cultures and incomes. Environmental justice also works to ensure that all El Centro residents are treated equitably with respect to environmental regulations, and are protected from disproportionate environmental and health burdens, such as exposure to air pollution or limited access to health care facilities.

- **Health** – The new General Plan elements discuss how the built environment affects the health of the community, and not only encourages walking and biking throughout the community, it emphasizes walkable community design in new growth areas.
Emerging Strategies and Technologies - An important addition to the updated Mobility Element is the emphasis on alternative and emerging transportation strategies and technologies, including transportation demand management, transportation system management, and emerging technologies, designed to reduce vehicle miles traveled (VMT), and therefore greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. The inclusion of consideration of emerging technologies positions the City to be in tune with industry shifts, such as shared micro-mobility devices and Neighborhood Electric Vehicles (NEV’s).

Preservation – The updated General Plan supports neighborhood preservation and enhancement, thereby improving quality of life.

Public Involvement – Considerable emphasis was placed on fostering public involvement throughout the development of the plan. The plan emphasizes the importance of inclusion in City affairs, and to provide for meaningful and effective participation, especially for underrepresented groups in the community.

Balanced Growth Strategy – The balanced growth strategy is twofold: to encourage infill development and direct new growth to the Opportunity Areas (see below).

Opportunity Areas (OAs) – The updated General Plan directs most of the City’s new growth to the OAs. OAs identify locations where the City wants or anticipates land use change or growth to occur during the planning period. Several OAs are areas of existing development that can benefit from targeted plans and policies to help guide transformation, while others are proposed for property that either has not yet been developed and/or where growth is expected or proposed to occur. Five key OAs were identified for focus on Land Use and Mobility. A key element of each OA is the correlation of land use and site design with proposed improvements to the mobility infrastructure, including right-sizing existing roadways, adding new roadways, improving sidewalks, adding multi-use trails and bicycle facilities, and facilitating transit.

Visual Enhancement Areas (VEA’s) – VEA’s are areas such as corridors, districts, gateways, and other activity nodes that would benefit from a coordinated design plan for streetscape improvements, amenities, and elements in the public rights-of-way. The Land Use Element features illustrative photo simulations for several of these areas.
1.2 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Community outreach efforts were a critical component of this General Plan Update. The objective of the outreach activities was to engage a broad cross-section of the community, with special emphasis on involving people who typically do not participate in local decision-making processes. Activities included a project website maintained and updated throughout the duration of the project, community survey provided in English and Spanish, two in-person “Pop-up” outreach events, four meetings with a Community Advisory Committee (CAC), and focused outreach sessions with both governmental and non-governmental agencies who work on topics centered around environmental justice issues.

When the public health crisis that started early in 2020 prevented public gatherings, the City quickly pivoted to an on-line community outreach format, and conducted three “virtual” public workshops within the month of May 2020. The first was a community-wide workshop focusing on topics related to Downtown El Centro. Two joint Planning Commission/City Council (PC/CC) workshops were held later in May 2020, approximately one week apart. At the start of the Program Environmental Impact Report (PEIR) a virtual Notice of Preparation (NOP) Scoping meeting was held. Outreach efforts culminated with the adoption hearings for the new General Plan Elements and certification of the PEIR by the City Council.

1.3 PLANNING PROCESS

This plan acknowledges the strong correlation that exists between land use and mobility planning. Specifically, SB 375 which became law effective January 2009, supports the State’s climate action goals to reduce GHG emissions through coordinated land use and transportation planning and to create sustainable communities. The Land Use and Mobility Elements are closely aligned, while also taking into account the important environmental justice and social equity considerations that form the basis for the EJ Element.

The planning effort commenced with a coordinated effort by staff and the consultant team to collect and review documents and data related to the update. Current demographic data was collected and analyzed, and two Existing Conditions Reports were prepared.

Existing Conditions Reports

Land Use and Environmental Justice Existing Conditions Report: This Existing Conditions Report, which addresses land use and environmental justice, serves as an essential component for updating the goals, policies, and Land Use Policy Map of the Land Use Element, preparing the new EJ Element, and preparing the Program
Environmental Impact Report (PEIR). The analysis is intended to assist the City and the public in identifying the opportunities and issues affecting El Centro during the twenty-year planning horizon. It should be noted that this Existing Conditions Report provides a “snapshot” of existing conditions and potential opportunities and issues to consider during the update process, and is an appendix to the Land Use Element and EJ Element.

**Mobility Existing Conditions Report:** The Mobility Existing Conditions report summarizes the existing transportation network and its operational conditions for pedestrians, bicycles, public transit, and roadways in El Centro. The report also provides an overview of the analysis methodologies utilized and identifies current mobility-related opportunities and challenges. This existing conditions review provides the background information needed to formulate decisions and recommendations in support of the Mobility Element Update, and is an appendix to the Mobility Element.

**Updated General Plan Elements: Overview**

**Land Use Element** – Sustainable planning principles, also known as “Smart Growth,” provide the framework for the Land Use Element, and it directly correlates with the Mobility Element and equity policies of the EJ Element. The Land Use Element promotes achieving and maintaining a diverse, yet balanced mix of land uses, including residential; commercial; industrial; mixed-use; public and civic; and parks, recreation and open space to enable residents to live and work effectively within their community. It promotes economic prosperity, and emphasizes the importance of quality of life, health, safety, and compatible development patterns. The Land Use Element emphasizes the importance of aesthetics, design, and community character.

An updated land use policy map illustrates the intended use and distribution of land in the El Centro Planning Area, which includes all property within both the city limit and the Sphere of Influence, during the 20-year planning period of this Land Use Element. The color-coded land use designations on the Land Use Policy Map are organized via a classification system that has 15 land use designations and four overlay designations. This classification system provides an ordered approach to land use development and maintenance of public uses and open space by identifying the types and nature of uses and development allowed in particular locations throughout the planning area. The Land Use Element also explains the relationship between land use and zoning in El Centro.

The Land Use Element establishes OAs as discussed above in the General Plan highlights section, and Visual Enhancement Areas (VEA’s), which are areas such as corridors, districts, gateways, and other activity nodes that would benefit from a
coordinated design plan for streetscape improvements, amenities, and elements in the public rights-of-way. Specific implementation programs for the Land Use Element are located in the General Plan Implementation Program (to be included in the Final document).

**Mobility Element** – The Mobility Element identifies a long-range vision for a balanced, multimodal transportation system that accommodates future growth while preserving the local character of El Centro. It sets forth goals and policies and a series of transportation networks intended to improve connectivity and adequately support existing and planned land uses. The Mobility Element encompasses users of all travel modes, including pedestrians, bicyclists, public transit users, motorists, and goods movement. It emphasizes “Complete Streets” policies to provide streets in an equitable manner that are safe and accessible by users of all ages and all abilities.

The Mobility Element also stresses the importance of efficient vehicular operations in a manner that is direct and safe. It evaluates the current roadway network and makes recommendations for future network additions and improvements. An important feature is the most recent SB 743 to shift transportation impact metrics from levels of service to vehicle miles traveled. These metrics were referenced throughout development of the Mobility Element and influenced the policy and network recommendations.

The Mobility Element supports the Land Use Element in a number of ways, including providing mobility recommendations for each of the unique OAs identified for special consideration. Sample pedestrian and bicycle treatments are identified that can be used in the OAs and citywide. The Mobility Element encourages the use of the public transit system, including enhanced connections to the pedestrian and bicycle network.

The Mobility Element also includes a discussion of the thoroughfares (corridors) in the City, and presents additional design considerations to improve traffic operations and safety in key locations. Conceptual plan view designs are provided for five specific areas to illustrate the anticipated future appearance of these thoroughfares. Specific implementation programs for the Mobility Element are located in the General Plan Implementation Program (to be included in the Final document). The Mobility Technical Report is also an appendix to the Mobility Element.

**Environmental Justice (EJ) Element** – The EJ Element is a required addition to a General Plan under state law for any city or county in the State of California that includes disadvantaged communities. For the purposes of environmental justice, a disadvantaged community is defined as: “An area identified by the California Environmental Protection Agency (CalEPA) pursuant to Section 39711 of the Health
and Safety Code or an area that is a low-income area that is disproportionately affected by environmental pollution and other hazards that can lead to negative health effects, exposure, or environmental degradation.”

The EJ Element addresses civic engagement, pollution exposure, public facilities, food access, physical activity, safe and sanitary housing, and any other unique or compounded health risks not otherwise included in these topic areas. Due to the broad and interdisciplinary nature of environmental justice issues, this element directly relates to each of the other General Plan elements. Specific implementation programs for the EJ Element are located in the General Plan Implementation Program (to be included in the Final document).

Program Environmental Impact Report (PEIR) – A PEIR was prepared for the General Plan Update, which evaluates the environmental impacts that implementation of the changes identified in the General Plan may have on the City and identifies ways to reduce them via mitigation measures. Per the PEIR, implementation of the General Plan would result in significant and unavoidable impacts on the following issues: Agriculture and Forestry Resources, Air Quality, Biological Resources, Cultural and Tribal Cultural Resources, Greenhouse Gas Emissions, Noise and Transportation. For each significant impact identified, the City must:

- discuss whether the measure avoids or substantially reduces the significant environmental effect;
- identify responsibility for implementation;
- discuss the basis for selecting the particular measure; and
- discuss significant side effects associated with implementation of each mitigation measure.

Mitigation of these impacts will be tracked through a mitigation monitoring and reporting program. The PEIR can be used to comply with CEQA on subsequent development projects in future years.

Implementation Plan – Each General Plan Element has associated implementation programs which identify specific actions to achieve the adopted goals and policies, and are compiled into a single Implementation Plan. The Implementation Plan is reviewed periodically to update the specific actions, schedules, responsible parties, and measures to ensure implementation of the General Plan.