

8 Governance

Vision Statement

Palo Alto will maintain a positive civic image and be a leader in the regional, state, and national policy discussions affecting the community. The City will work with neighboring communities to address common concerns and pursue common interests. The public will be actively and effectively involved in City affairs, both at the Citywide and neighborhood levels. Where appropriate, the City Council will delegate decision-making responsibilities to local boards and commissions. The Council will also assign advisory roles to these bodies as well as other community groups. Residents, businesses, and elected and appointed officials will work collaboratively to address the issues facing the City in a timely manner. This inclusive, participatory process will help build a sense of community.

Introduction

The Governance Chapter of the Comprehensive Plan is a new non-mandatory section that addresses community involvement and participation in the city planning process. The chapter provides guidance to citizens and neighborhood groups seeking to participate in this process. It also provides guidance to those carrying out the policies and programs in this Plan. The chapter is intended as a vehicle for implementation rather than a Plan “element” in the traditional and legal sense. Consequently, it is not subject to the State requirements for consistency and comprehensiveness that apply to the earlier sections of the Plan.

The Governance Chapter begins by describing the framework within which local planning decisions are made. It profiles the City’s governing bodies and major departments as well as the funding sources for municipal activities. This sets the stage for the goals, policies, and programs that follow.

Framework for Local Decision-Making

FORM OF GOVERNMENT

Palo Alto was incorporated as a Chartered City in 1909. The City has adopted a strong City Council/City Manager form of government. The City Council is comprised of nine members who each serve four-year terms. The mayor and vice-mayor are elected to one-year terms by their fellow Council members. The City Council has two standing committees: the Finance Committee and the Policy and Services Committee. In addition to their legislative duties, Council members represent the City on a variety of local, county, regional, and statewide boards, commissions and other organizations. These include the Santa Clara County Cities Association, the Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority (VTA), and the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, among others.

BOARDS AND COMMISSIONS

The City Council has created a number of boards and commissions to advise the City Council on policy issues. These boards and commissions serve a variety of specific functions like development review, protection of historic buildings, and youth relations. Board and commission functions are summarized in the table below:

Boards and Commissions

Board or Commission	No. of Members	Term Length	Requirements for Membership	Purpose	Supporting Dept. or Division
Architectural Review Board (ARB)	5	3	3 members must be architects, landscape architects, building designers or other design professionals	Promote orderly and harmonious development, enhance the desirability of residence or investment, encourage the most desirable use of land and improvements, enhance living conditions, and promote visual environments of high aesthetic quality and variety.	Planning Division
Historic Resources Board (HRB)	7	3	3 members must be architects, landscape architects, building designers or other design professionals, one member must own and occupy a historic structure in Palo Alto and one member must possess academic education or practical experience in history or related field.	Designate, preserve, protect, enhance and perpetuate those historic structures, districts and neighborhoods that contribute to the cultural and aesthetic heritage of Palo Alto.	Planning Division
Human Relations Commission (HRC)	7	3	Palo Alto residency	Foster public awareness and understanding of human relations problems. Address issues of human rights, discrimination and other related human service issues.	Office of Human Services
Planning Commission	7	4	Palo Alto residency	Prepare, adopt and make recommendations to the City Council on the Comprehensive Plan and Zoning Ordinance. Make recommendations to Council regarding land use policies & specific development applications.	Planning Division
Public Art Commission (PAC)	7	3	Member ARB, or professional, scholar, educator or collector of the visual arts	Acquire and site permanent works of art, specifically outdoor sculpture; advise the City in matters pertaining to the quality, quantity, scope & style of art in public places	Arts and Cultural Division
Utilities Advisory Commission (UAC)	5	3	Utility customer or authorized representative of a utility customer.	Advise the City Council on long-range planning and policy matters relating to the electric, water & gas utilities	Utilities Department

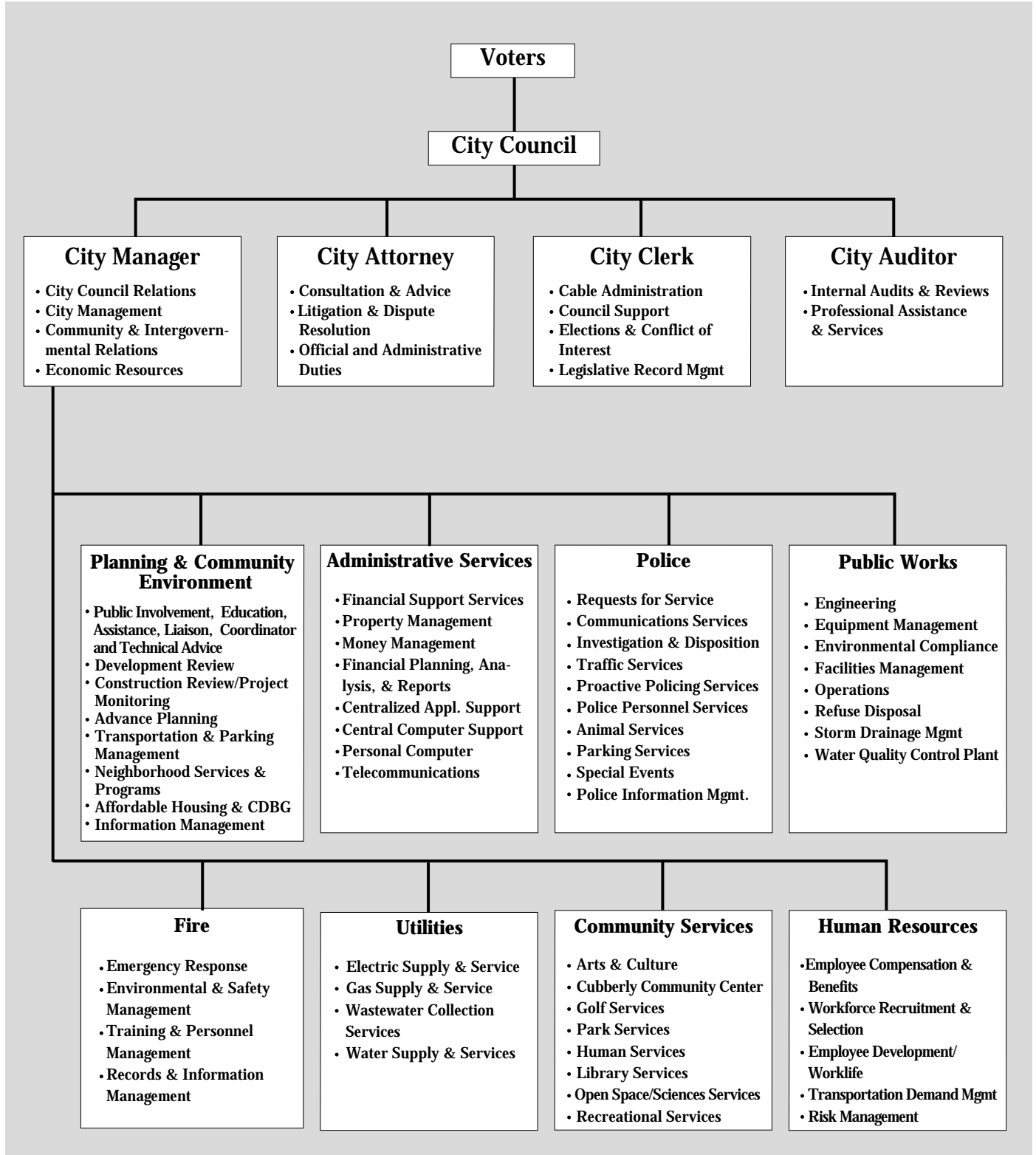
The Palo Alto City Council is assisted by six major boards and commissions with a total of 38 members.



CITY DEPARTMENTS

The City Council is served by four Council-appointed officers: the City Manager, City Attorney, City Clerk, and City Auditor. The organization of City departments and their major functions is illustrated in the chart below.

Organization of City Departments



BUDGET

The City uses a “mission-driven” budget process. Through this process, City services are grouped into functional areas and major activities, each with a defined mission and criteria for evaluating how well that mission is being achieved. Each City department must identify its customers and the services it provides to the public and other City departments. Major components of the budget include the General Fund and the Utilities Fund.

General Fund revenues are generated by sales tax, property tax, and utility user tax collections, along with service fees and other revenues and transfers from the Utilities Fund. Expenditures include general City services (such as administration, fire, planning and public works), school district leases, capital projects, and debt service, among others.

Utilities Fund revenues are generated through rates for various City services including water, sewer, gas, electric, refuse, and storm drainage. Expenditures cover the cost of providing these services.

Goals, Policies, and Programs

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

GOAL G-1: Effective Opportunities for Public Participation in Local Government.

Palo Alto invites and encourages the public to participate in local government affairs. Citizens may serve on boards and commissions and ad hoc committees addressing a variety of civic concerns. Meetings are open and highly interactive so that all members of the community may take part in shaping local decisions. The advent of electronic media and on-line services has created new opportunities for public input and participation. Palo Alto will continue to use these and other emerging technologies to improve access to information.



Citizens are welcome to communicate with their elected and appointed officials, even about matters that are not on the agenda of the meeting. The time for this type of communication is during the portion of the agenda called “Oral Communications.”

POLICY G-1:

Delegate appropriate decision-making to the Planning Commission, with an appeal process to the City Council, to simplify and shorten the project review process for certain types of projects.



The City will consider changes to the City Charter that would delegate more responsibility for land use decisions to the Planning Commission. Many land use decisions now require both Planning Commission and City Council hearings. Delegating more decision-making to the Planning Commission, subject to appeal to the City Council, would streamline the application process and relieve applicants of unnecessary proceedings.

PROGRAM G-1:

Initiate a charter amendment for the ballot that would delegate specific final decision-making authority to the Planning Commission.

POLICY G-2:

Use advisory bodies and ad hoc committees to assist City staff and the City Council on policy issues.

The City Council is committed to delegating more responsibilities to existing boards and commissions. The creation of new advisory bodies by either the City Manager or City Council, when a particular expertise or broader base of input is required, would allow people who are interested to be more effectively engaged in and connected to the civic affairs of the community.

PROGRAM G-2:

Periodically assess the need for citizen input on various policy issues and appoint advisory bodies and ad hoc committees as needed.

PROGRAM G-3:

Use design workshops or charettes to address design issues within the City.

Regular community input on relevant urban design issues can keep the City decision-makers and staff informed as to community concerns early in design processes and can facilitate the solution of urban design problems.

POLICY G-3:

Enhance communication between residents, organizations, and the City Council by providing access to information via electronic media and other methods.

Public access to the City's meeting agendas and staff reports is provided via the Internet at City Hall and at selected public libraries.



PROGRAM G-4:

Establish a City/neighborhood liaison system using electronic and print media to inform residents of current issues and facilitate resident feedback to the City Council and staff.

PROGRAM G-5:

Create electronic bulletin boards to increase opportunities for interaction between citizens and government, including the posting of meeting agendas and other items of broad interest.

PROGRAM G-6:

Provide advanced communication opportunities for the public at City libraries.

CIVIC AND NEIGHBORHOOD ORGANIZATIONS

GOAL G-2: Informed and Involved Civic and Neighborhood Organizations and Residents.

Palo Alto supports the formation and operation of neighborhood and civic organizations. Many individuals find it easier and more compelling to be engaged in their immediate neighborhood than in citywide activities. Many citywide objectives such as emergency preparedness and neighborhood beautification may be more easily achieved through the efforts of individual neighborhood and civic groups than they might be through a centralized City program.

POLICY G-4:

Encourage the formation of neighborhood organizations to facilitate effective resident participation in the community.



Photo courtesy of Will Beckett

The Barron Park Association, shown here, is a neighborhood association that has proven to be an effective intermediary between individual residents of Barron Park and various government agencies. Examples of successes have included clean-up efforts of groundwater contamination originating in the Stanford Research Park, natural creek protection in flood control projects by the Santa Clara Water District, and crime prevention in collaboration with the Palo Alto Police and businesses along El Camino Real.

Neighborhood organizations provide residents with opportunities to learn about citywide issues on a localized scale. They also provide a useful means of relaying local priorities and concerns back to the City Council and others involved in City government.



PROGRAM G-7:

Prepare a handbook of information about neighborhood and civic organizations addressing subjects like earthquake preparedness, neighborhood beautification, event planning, how to communicate with City Hall, and guidelines for establishing and managing neighborhood and civic organizations.

PROGRAM G-8:

Establish consistent definitions of neighborhood boundaries to facilitate notification and communication.

The City currently has different neighborhood designations for fire, utilities, and other departments. Consistent lines will facilitate provision of City services. More than one organization may exist within a neighborhood.

POLICY G-5:

Establish and build relationships between staff and neighborhood groups to enhance communication between the two.

PROGRAM G-9:

Where feasible, assist residents with neighborhood improvement, beautification, and planting projects.

PROGRAM G-10:

Work with neighborhood and civic organizations on emergency preparedness and security programs.

POLICY G-6:

Support participation by community organizations in the governing process.

REGIONAL LEADERSHIP

GOAL G-3: A Leadership Role on Regional Issues

Many issues affecting Palo Alto are best addressed at the regional level. Palo Alto believes that it has a responsibility to be an active participant as these issues are addressed and resolved. The City will be a leader in regional problem-solving.

POLICY G-7:

Support active participation of City Council members, other City leaders, and City staff in the resolution of regional issues that are relevant to Palo Alto.

Palo Alto should regularly review the benefits of providing and/or sharing resources with neighboring communities upon request and where the City of Palo Alto feels that it is feasible.

POLICY G-8:

Encourage Palo Alto residents and businesses to actively participate in regional programs and organizations.

POLICY G-9:

Recognize that crime is a regional problem and crime prevention requires multi-jurisdictional cooperation.

See also Policy N-55 and associated programs, and Policy N-53

See also Goal T-9 and associated policies and programs, Policies H-20, H-21, N-2, N-26, C-1, C-2 and C-3, and Programs H-30 and H-31

VOLUNTEERISM

GOAL G-4: Active Involvement of Local Citizens as Volunteers in the Delivery of Community Services.

One of Palo Alto's greatest assets is its highly motivated and talented citizenry. Residents offer their time and skills to the City in a variety of capacities ranging from service on boards and commissions to construction of public improvements to delivery of services like recreation and elder care. The City is committed to continued and expanded use of volunteers.

POLICY G-10:

Encourage citizen volunteers, including youth and seniors, to provide community services. Where feasible, allocate City staff time and resources to projects initiated by volunteers that could not otherwise be accomplished.



Photo courtesy of Canopy

The City of Palo Alto encourages volunteerism. Here, members of Canopy: Trees for Palo Alto, are teaching children how oak trees are grown during a tree-planting event at Stanford Shopping Center.

PROGRAM G-11:

Continue and expand programs to enhance opportunities for volunteer assistance.

PROGRAM G-12:

Continue and expand opportunities for public and nonprofit organizations serving the City to provide information about themselves to the public.

PROGRAM G-13:

Continue the program to publicly recognize the efforts of individuals, groups, and businesses who provide volunteer services within the City.



MANAGING CHANGE

GOAL G-5: New Ways to Encourage Collaboration Among the Public, Property Owners, and the City in Areas where Change is Desired.

Palo Alto intends to uphold its reputation as one of the country's most livable cities. This will require that the City revisit the way that planning and development decisions are made from time to time. Although the City's planning process is already open and inclusive, new ways to fine tune and modernize certain aspects of development review may be desirable. In particular, the process could benefit by providing more opportunities to bring diverse community interests together prior to the design of individual projects. The City has identified the "coordinated area plan" as a tool for achieving this type of participation in the future.

POLICY G-11:

Encourage the development of new planning processes that emphasize collaborative exchanges of ideas. Retain City Council authority over decision-making in these processes.

PROGRAM G-14:

Establish a procedure that allows the City Council to initiate coordinated area plans for certain large areas that it has targeted for change.

Over 100 people, including property owners, tenants, and neighborhood residents, participated in planning sessions for Midtown. Midtown was one of several areas that was the subject of focused urban design, traffic, and economic planning during the Comprehensive Plan Update.



Photo courtesy of Palo Alto Weekly

This process should provide early opportunities for all participants—developers, property owners, residents, government representatives, and others. It should also provide a means of informing these participants about urban design and architectural principles, economic realities, neighborhood and citywide priorities, and government regulations. The City Council will provide direction and guidance during the process.

PROGRAM G-15:

Explore opportunities to establish a process for developing precise development or economic revitalization plans for smaller areas, frequently with multiple ownership, where redevelopment, reuse, or redesign is needed.

See Programs H-9, L-22, L-25, L-30, L-32 and C-25 for more information on coordinated area plans

See Program L-37 and Policy L-40 and associated programs

Some of Palo Alto's commercial centers are considered less successful than others. In such areas, the City should pursue planning processes that bring the City and nearby property owners and tenants together prior to redevelopment.

PROGRAM G-16:

Encourage use of the Preliminary Development Review (pre-screening) Ordinance for specific development proposals that may require changes to current City policies. As appropriate, test and refine application of this Ordinance.

PROCESS MANAGEMENT

GOAL G-6: More Clearly Defined Procedures, Standards, and Expectations for Development Review.

Both the general public and the development community benefit from a development review process that better articulates what kind of development the City has determined to be “desirable.” While the outcome of development review can never be guaranteed, it may be possible to improve predictability and reliability. One approach to achieving this goal is to revisit how the City communicates its regulations to the public. Materials that are “user-friendly” and make generous use of illustrations are encouraged.

POLICY G-12:

Assist decision-makers, applicants, and residents with improved tools for understanding planning regulations.

PROGRAM G-17:

Use illustrations and a “form code” to simplify the Zoning Ordinance, to make it more understandable to readers, and to promote well-designed neighborhoods.

The Zoning Ordinance does not always provide a clear picture of physical changes that are allowed or prohibited. When the Ordinance is applied to a particular development site, the results are sometimes disappointing to some participants in the process. To address this predicament, the City may explore alternatives to traditional zoning that make greater use of illustrations to show the intent of the regulations.

A form code is a set of regulations that address the location and physical attributes of building(s) or site(s) by precisely establishing the location and form of structures including setbacks, building heights and other physical features, rather than control development by applying maximum development limits. Form codes typically do not restrict the type of use on a property. However, a form code could be more specific than traditional zoning with respect to site development regulations. For example, instead of creating maximum height and minimum setback restrictions, it could precisely establish required setback distances, number of stories, roof type, and other features relating to the form of the structure on a specific site or multiple sites.

PROGRAM G-18:

Create brief, understandable written materials that guide citizens and businesses through the City review and approval process.

PROGRAM G-19:

Continue and expand customer-oriented process improvement efforts.

See also Goal C-2 and associated policies and programs

See also Policy B-16 and associated programs



The purpose of this effort would be to better incorporate the public's needs in the development review process. In other words, the sequence and review of the process would be made more clear and the criteria by which projects are evaluated would be made more explicit and consistent.

PROGRAM G-20:

Develop, use, and update when necessary, design guidelines for various geographic areas of the City or types of projects to supplement the Architectural Review Board Ordinance.

PROGRAM G-21:

Continually educate and remind policy and decision-makers, staff, and the public about the distinction between quasi-judicial and legislative decision-making.

The distinction between quasi-judicial and legislative land use decision-making is important because constitutional due process principles require different procedures for each type of proceeding. Quasi-judicial proceedings usually involve a hearing required by law and a decision based on findings and evidence presented during the hearing or in writing. Because quasi-judicial matters are based “on the record,” decision-makers are limited in their ability to receive information outside the hearing—it is viewed as unfair for such information to be “heard” without all of the affected persons present. This program calls for preparation of educational materials so that the public and decision-makers can better understand these requirements.

Quasi-judicial Proceedings

The City's current procedures identify the following proceedings as quasi-judicial:

- **Conditional Use Permits**
- **Variances**
- **Home Improvement Exceptions**
- **Design Enhancement Exceptions**
- **Subdivisions, other than final map approval**
- **Architectural Review Board hearings**
- **Assessment protest hearings**
- **Other matters as determined by the City Attorney**

