

Marin County Community Development Agency  
Community Plan Update Strategy

I. Purpose

Establish an effective and efficient process for updating community plans to refine implementation of the Countywide Plan and, where necessary, to address unresolved land use planning issues unique to a particular community.

II. Background

Marin County is characterized by a diverse group of individual communities ranging from small coastal villages to more urbanized residential neighborhoods along the Highway 101 corridor. Over the years, development within 16 of these communities has been guided in part by community plans containing policies related to land use, design, transportation and environmental quality in that particular community. The County's earliest community plans date from the early 1970s (Blackpoint and Muir Beach) but the majority were prepared and adopted in the 1980s and 90s. Even the most recent community plan is almost ten years old (Indian Valley, 2003).

In 2007, the County completed an exhaustive planning process leading to adoption of the Marin Countywide Plan, which establishes a comprehensive and detailed framework of policies on the built environment, natural systems and agriculture, and socioeconomic issues, with an overarching theme of "planning sustainable communities." The Countywide Plan recognizes that existing community plans may need to be updated, both to bring them into consistency with the policies and programs of the Countywide Plan as well as to refine implementation of specific Countywide Plan policies or programs at a more local level. For example, Countywide Plan goals strongly support increasing the supply of affordable housing in Marin County as a whole (Goal CD-2) while also encouraging community plans to identify specific sites that may be appropriate for affordable housing at the neighborhood level (Program CD-2.q). Similarly, built environment policies restrict development near visually prominent ridgelines within Ridge and Upland Greenbelt (RUG) areas (Policy DES-4.1, Programs DES-4.d and 4.e) while acknowledging that the precise RUG boundary may need to be refined as part of a community plan update (Program CD-4.a).

In addition to ensuring consistency with the Countywide Plan, work on community plans may be needed for other reasons.

- Community plans may contain outdated information (such as population and land use statistics) or include land use recommendations (such as rezonings and infrastructure improvements) that have been implemented and are no longer relevant.
- Community plans commonly contain policies that have been duplicated or superseded by similar policies or guidelines in more recently adopted documents, such as the Marin Countywide Plan or the Marin County Single Family Residential Design Guidelines.
- New planning issues may have arisen in a community plan area that did not exist at the time the plan was developed.

Based on these factors, it is appropriate to consider a comprehensive strategy that will accomplish the goal of developing and updating Marin County's community plans in an efficient and effective manner.

### III. Approach

Historically, preparing and updating community plans has been a time consuming and staff intensive undertaking. For example, the update process preceding the most recent version of the Point Reyes Station Community Plan (adopted 2001) took over five years to complete. The agency's current budget and staff constraints, as well as the breadth of available countywide planning tools, have created the opportunity to reconsider the community planning update process and develop a more strategic approach that focuses on several questions:

- 1) Are there Countywide Plan policies and programs which should be implemented more specifically for a particular community through a community plan?
- 2) Are there unique planning issues in a particular community that are not already addressed by existing policies, programs, or regulations, and if so, would a community plan be the appropriate vehicle to address those issues?
- 3) Is there a demonstrated broad community interest in and commitment to a Community Plan process?

In cases where the above questions can be answered affirmatively and a new or updated community plan is determined to be appropriate, the update process should embody the following guiding principles:

- Address implementation of relevant Countywide Plan policies at a detailed community level (i.e. RUG boundary, affordable housing sites, home size limits, zoning changes, etc.)
- Focus on issues that are truly unique to a particular planning area and avoid duplication or inconsistency with:
  - Policies, guidelines and regulations that are already in place (i.e. Marin Countywide Plan, Local Coastal Program, Single Family Residential Design Guidelines, Marin County Development Code, County Green Building and Energy Efficiency ordinances, etc.); or
  - Issues that are more appropriately addressed on a uniform basis throughout the County (i.e. stream and wetland setbacks, tree removal, storm water runoff and water quality, etc.)
- Focus on topical issues that are best suited for a community plan and avoid addressing “non-land use” issues (see Content discussion below)
- Coordinate with appropriate agencies on issues within their jurisdiction with the understanding that ongoing programs should not be duplicated (i.e. Marin County Watershed Program, Unincorporated Area Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan, Parks Master Plan, etc.) and budget constraints may limit their level of involvement
- Anticipate issues that may arise in the future (sea level rise, planned transit or transportation improvements, proposed development projects, etc.)
- Minimize inclusion of extensive background information or data which is quickly outdated or has limited relevance to the regulatory process
- Work with a selected group of community representatives in a “task force” format to help define issues and review policies but also utilize appropriate means, including new technology to encourage widespread community input and participation
- Utilize a document design format which incorporates illustrations, photographs, maps and other graphic elements to create more concise, useful, and engaging plans
- Incorporate a predetermined schedule of “task force” and community meetings and public hearings to keep the update process on track
- Conduct the work in a fiscally prudent manner and utilize County staff time and resources as efficiently as possible

The community planning process in each particular community will likely vary depending on factors such as community size, neighborhood issues, and level of public interest. However, the guiding principles outlined above are applicable countywide and would help ensure that the community plan and update process results in a useful and relevant document that furthers implementation of the Countywide Plan at a local level.

#### IV. Content

In Marin County, community plans are most often used in conjunction with the review process for development applications. Therefore, community plan policies and guidelines are most relevant to the extent that they contain guidance on land use and design issues which are regulated by the County and can be applied to a particular development project. Some examples of appropriate topics to address within a community plan might include:

- Preferred land uses and site specific land use recommendations
- Potential affordable housing sites
- Visually prominent ridgeline areas (refining RUG boundaries) or other unique local topographic or natural features
- Preferred trail, bicycle, and safe route to school alignments
- More detailed mapping of environmental resources
- Sea level rise adaptation
- Structures or neighborhoods of historic or architectural interest or other special neighborhood characteristics that warrant unique design standards

Conversely, recommendations on issues which are not land use-related or which are within the jurisdiction of other local districts, state and federal agencies, or adjoining cities or towns, should not be the focus of a community plan. Examples of issues which might be of concern to residents in a particular area but are largely outside the scope of a community plan might include:

- Public safety issues such as police and fire service levels
- Economic issues such as job opportunities or home prices
- FEMA requirements or flood insurance rates
- Septic system standards or requirements
- Transit service routes or frequency
- Nearby development, transportation, or infrastructure projects outside the County's jurisdiction

As noted previously, community plans should also avoid issues that are already addressed in other documents and regulations or are more appropriately implemented on a uniform basis throughout the County, unless there is a clear justification for varying from existing policies and guidelines. In other words, "special rules" should be developed only when justified due to unique characteristics in a particular area. For example, Marin County's Single Family Residential Design Guidelines provide extensive direction on developing site and building designs that minimize grading and site disturbance, reduce building mass and bulk, protect privacy and views, and respect the character of surrounding development. Therefore, these types of guidelines do not need to be duplicated in a community plan. Similarly, the Marin Countywide Plan and Local Coastal Plan (currently under review) contain detailed policies and standards related to issues such as natural resource protection, which are best applied consistently throughout the County. Therefore, it would be unnecessary for a community plan to include policies or detailed direction on issues such as stream and wetland setbacks, water quality, storm water runoff, tree removal, or habitat protection where these topics are already addressed somewhere else.

Finally, it should be noted that not every issue can best be addressed by a policy or guideline in a community plan. For example, neighborhood crime concerns would be better addressed by organization of a neighborhood watch program than by a plan policy supporting public safety, while local flooding issues could be more effectively addressed by ongoing programs and flood protection facilities managed by the Marin County Flood Control District than by a land use policy in a community plan. In cases where these types of issues arise, staff may be able to assist community members to identify a method of addressing the problem outside of the community plan process. In summary, a community plan will be most useful and relevant when it focuses on issues that are truly unique to that community and provides direction where necessary on implementing more general Countywide Plan policies at a local level.

## V. Community Plan Update Phasing

Due to staff and budget constraints, the process of updating all 16 of Marin's community plans will extend over a number of years. Community planning issues in West Marin are currently being addressed as part of the Local Coastal Program update, which will incorporate community-specific policies drawn from eight coastal community plans directly into the Local Coastal Plan (including Bolinas, Dillon Beach, East Shore, Inverness, Muir Beach, Point Reyes Station, Stinson Beach and Tomales). However, eight additional communities in the Inland and City-Centered Corridors (including Blackpoint, Indian Valley, Kentfield/Greenbrae, Marin City, Nicasio Valley, San Geronimo Valley, Strawberry, and the Tamalpais Area) have plans that may need updating.

It is likely that no more than two community plan updates could be undertaken simultaneously in a given year due to staffing limitations. Therefore, an overall phasing program for the community plan update process will be needed. Ultimately, the order and timing of individual community plan updates would be determined by the Board of Supervisors. However, factors that should be considered in determining the priority of community plan updates include:

- Demonstrated community interest in and commitment to an update process
- Existing community plan age and relevancy of policies
- Acknowledged need to refine Countywide Plan policies at a local level
- Extent of development potential (general or related to a specific development site)
- Degree to which community issues are being addressed by other planning efforts (i.e. LCP, watershed program, etc.)
- Community size

Of the factors noted above, community interest is a particularly important component for a successful community planning effort. To that end, staff proposes that, at a minimum, appropriate community organizations be requested to submit a letter indicating their interest in participating in a community plan or update process and identifying the primary issues they hope to see addressed. Other substantive means by which a community could demonstrate interest in such a process could also include: 1) submitting the results of community meetings, surveys, or other efforts designed to gather community input on priority issues; 2) collecting resident signatures on a petition requesting a community plan or update; or 3) contributing or obtaining matching funds toward the costs of a community plan or update. Overall, this type of approach could be helpful in ensuring there is genuine and widespread interest in undertaking a community plan or update and determining the potential scope of the process. Understanding a community's goals may also help to establish realistic expectations for what might be accomplished through a community plan.

## VI. Schedule and Budget

The schedule and budget of each community plan or update are likely to vary depending on factors such as the number and complexity of planning issues, community size, and level of public interest. More detailed time and cost estimates would be developed prior to the start of any formal planning process after meeting with the community to: 1) identify issues of concern and relevant Countywide Plan policies needing refinement at the local level; 2) determine whether a community plan would be an appropriate way to address identified issues; and 3) establish an agreed-upon scope of work for the plan. However, in general, staff's goal would be to complete each update according to a predetermined schedule of approximately 18 months following the general timeline shown below:

- 2 to 3 months – assembly of background materials and advisory group
- 8 to 12 months – preparation of draft community plan including 4 to 6 advisory group meetings and 2 to 3 community meetings
- 2 to 3 months – Planning Commission and Board hearings

The primary cost associated with a community plan would be attributed to County staff time. However, additional funds may be required for various indirect costs, such as those associated with community outreach, plan production, environmental review, charges by other County departments for their staff time, and potentially, outside consulting costs to address particular technical issues. As noted above, a detailed cost estimate for each community plan could be developed once the scope and duration for the process have been developed in more detail.

## VII. Recommendation

In order to proceed with implementation of Countywide Plan community planning policies, staff recommends that your Board approve the proposed Community Plan Update Strategy, including the strategic approach and community selection criteria outlined above, with the understanding that individual communities will have an opportunity to demonstrate their interest in participating in an update process. The phasing schedule for community plan updates could be approved by the Board based on staff recommendations, or alternatively, the Board could delegate the decision to the Agency Director.