

July 7, 2009

Humboldt County Planning Department
Community Development Services
Attn: Martha Spencer
3015 H Street
Eureka, CA 95501

Re: Land Use Element, Growth Management and Urban Lands Sections

Dear Planning Commissioners,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on Section 4.2 (Growth Management) and Section 4.3 (Urban Lands) in the Land Use Element of the Humboldt County General Plan Update. Healthy Humboldt is a coalition of public interest organizations working for a County General Plan that provides healthy transportation and housing choices while protecting resource lands and watersheds by focusing future growth in existing communities.

We have two basic goals with regard to growth management and urban planning in the Land Use Element:

- Limit the extent of the urban footprint
- Foster proximity and connectivity to improve walkability.

Keeping our development compact can work with other strategies to reduce vehicle miles traveled while increasing walkable access to jobs and services. Studies show that compact development improves public health because people are able to walk and bike more and drive less. Compact development helps to protect resource lands while providing town dwellers with better access to wild and working lands. Compact development is consistent with developing smaller housing units, creating more affordability, and higher energy efficiency.

We suggest changes to the first goal in the Growth Management section to set ourselves up for success in accomplishing the two goals we promote above.

We need to shift away from the paradigm of always expanding to convert more resource lands, and look more towards infill and redevelopment opportunities to meet our needs, whether they are to grow or to sustain our community.

Below we suggest specific policy recommendations to achieve compact development and proximity. Our suggested edits to the Key Issues and Comparison Chart are attached.

Limiting the Extent of the Urban Footprint

We recommend that the current suite of policies defining the urban growth boundary be strengthened and additional policies be added to better define urban growth boundaries and to add land to the Urban Service Areas in a more measured fashion than is currently proposed.

Compact Development

It is vital that we not waste limited public infrastructure expansion investments or future infrastructure maintenance costs on relatively few units provided by low density development. We propose a minimum density of 5 units per acre for any expansion of water and sewer infrastructure. Five units per acre is slightly below the midpoint density of RL3-8, making it a reasonable minimum density to expect. This would apply to **GP-P3** and **GP-S4**.

Managing the Urban Growth Boundary

The Eureka Community Plan is Outdated

We want to introduce an issue specific to the size or area of the Eureka Community Urban Development Area (UDA) that we will address in greater detail in future communications. The 1995 Eureka Community Plan (ECP) was based on substantially different information than we have today. Since then, the Freshwater and Elk River Watersheds have been listed as impaired, Coho Salmon which occur in both of those watersheds have been listed as threatened, the Global Warming Solutions Act (AB32) has become state law, new planning tools and approaches have been developed, and we have gained new knowledge of the impact of urban planning on public health and safety. For these reasons and others, we believe it may be necessary to revise the UDA boundaries mapped in the ECP to reflect this new information. Look for more detailed communication from us on this issue in the future.

Phasing Development Over Twenty Years and Beyond

The terminology of the GPU includes concentric rings describing planned urban footprint. The Urban Service Areas (USA) are the innermost ring, already served by water and sewer, and mostly already developed. The Urban Development Areas (UDA) include the USAs and additional land slated for development over the 20-year planning period of the GPU. Urban Expansion Areas (UEA) lie adjacent to, and outside UDAs, and represent areas for potential development beyond the 20-year planning period. UEAs define the outermost ring of planned urban development.

Since UDAs define the areas slated for development in the next 20 years, a long timeline, we need a system to add land to the Urban Service Areas in a phased fashion to provide for orderly development, to clearly communicate with landowners so they can know what to expect as they make decisions. In other words, we recommend developing a system for annexation of land from the UDAs into the USAs. Like an incorporated city's annexation process, an annexation from UDA to USA would require a set of findings to be met.

We view the Urban Expansion Areas as an insurance policy against growth far beyond what is expected in the next twenty years, akin to urban reserves. As such, it should be clear in the policies that those properties are unlikely to be developed anytime soon, and certainly not within the next planning period.

Below are our recommended policy changes consistent with this approach:

- 1) Reorder policies so urban areas are planned from the inside out. Urban Service Areas should come first, with Urban Development Areas as the intermediate point of urban expansion. Urban Expansion Areas come should be last. To correct this "**GP-P4** Urban Service Area" should come before "**GP-P2** Urban Development Area."

2) We propose clarifying the role of larger Urban Development Areas in relation to the smaller Urban Service Areas where sewer and water infrastructure exists. (**GP-P2, GP-P2.5, GP-P3, GP-S4.5**) Posting a map layer of the USA's on the County's GIS Portal will help inform our decisions about how much we expand infrastructure versus looking harder for infill opportunities.

3) The extent and use of Urban Expansion Areas should be clear and consistent with the goal of accommodating compact development in an orderly fashion. We suggest clarifying the role of Urban Expansion Areas as a possible urban area beyond the foreseeable future that we can plan for (**GP-P8, GP-S6, GP-S7**). We also suggest combining language of Alternatives A and B in **GP-P9**.

Limit Residential Estate Sprawl

Residential Estates served by water, but not sewer service, tend to be built at densities that do not allow for commercial use of the land as a resource, contribute substantially to vehicle miles travelled and traffic, increase the number and density of potentially failing septic systems in watersheds, and do nothing to serve the low-income housing need in our communities. Limiting this development protects resource lands, open space and watersheds so that urban populations can enjoy proximity to wild and working landscapes of our rural county. We could find no policies, standards or implementation measures in the Land Use Element with regard to Residential Estates. We suggest a new policy **GP-Px** to limit residential estate sprawl, and **GP-Py** to protect prime agricultural soils on lands currently served by water.

Fostering Proximity

While compact development can help reduce vehicle miles traveled while increasing walkable access to jobs and services, three additional components of sound urban planning can work in concert to enhance the result much further:

- connectivity
- mixed-use
- transit-oriented development

These strategies in conjunction with compact development can provide access to jobs, shopping, services and parks, and can make walking, biking and transit more competitive and appealing.

Mixed-Use

To achieve a better jobs housing balance in our communities, we need to have more housing in commercial areas and more commercial in residential areas. Fixing this will require policies to address both.

Residential in Commercial Districts

The Housing Element has begun the process of creating more housing opportunities in commercial districts with policy H-P4. This policy allows residential development in commercial areas, but does not encourage it. We suggest modeling from Arcata's successful policy to encourage mixed-use in commercial developments (**UL-Px**).

We support the mixed-use land use designation for the neighborhood and town centers because it makes them more walkable. However, we also believe housing should be encouraged in commercial areas. In addition, policies to make neighborhood and town centers more safe and

walkable should also be applied to commercial areas. In these walkable districts, we suggest allowing more leeway in the parking requirement language in **UL-P7** (Neighborhood and Town Centers) because parking policy is such a critical component of walkable design.

We support the mixed-use land use designation and approach to making this land use type in neighborhood and town centers more walkable, but large and under-developed commercial areas represent a great opportunity for infill and redevelopment. Many of these areas have been built mostly as parking lots due to onerous off-street parking requirements and lack of implementation of modern parking management tools. Reducing parking requirements in areas we wish to see become more walkable. We suggest strengthening the parking requirement language in **UL-P7** (Neighborhood and Town Centers) and applying it to additional designated commercial areas, so that areas such as Central Avenue in McKinleyville, for example, can be redeveloped over time to higher intensity, and greater walkability.

Commercial Needed in Residential Neighborhoods

The County is saddled with wide swaths of residential development that has no commercial district within walking distance. This type of development generates substantial vehicle miles traveled, because residents must drive in order to accomplish even minor errands.

To solve this problem, the County should begin the process of identifying ideal locations for and planning neighborhood commercial districts to provide access to some commercial service and jobs for all residents. We propose a policy (**UL-Py**) to accomplish this.

Connectivity

Connectivity is a component of urban design which allows people to go where they need to go directly. Connectivity is critical for emergency response and reduces traffic congestion by giving people more choices to get where they need to go.

We understand most of the policies related to connectivity will be in the Urban Lands Section and the Circulation Element, and that many details will be implemented through ordinances. Some of the components we would like to see in these implementing ordinances are:

- 1) Cul-de-sacs prohibited unless the developer shows that no other road arrangement is feasible.
- 2) Requirement of through access for bicyclists and pedestrians beyond the end of any cul-de-sac or dead end road where applicable.
- 3) A maximum block size of 200 feet for pedestrian connectivity, and 400 feet for motor-vehicle connectivity unless terrain features such as creeks, wetlands or steep slopes prevent it. That would mean that pedestrians would not have to walk more than 200 feet out of their way to get where they need to go. Motorists would be able to drive directly from one area to another.

We support changes to **UL-P8** and the appropriate policies, standards and implementation measures in the Circulation Element to support this type of approach.

Transit Oriented Development

The Victoria Transportation Policy Institute describes Transit Oriented Developmentⁱ (TOD) as “residential and commercial centers designed to maximize access by transit and non-motorized transportation, and with other features to encourage transit ridership. A typical TOD has a rail or bus station at its center, surrounded by relatively high-density development, with progressively

lower-density spreading outwards one-quarter to one-half mile, which represents pedestrian scale distances. It includes these design features:

- The neighborhood is designed for cycling and walking, with adequate facilities and attractive street conditions.
- Streets have good connectivity and traffic calming features to control vehicle traffic speeds.
- Mixed-use development that includes shops, schools and other public services, and a variety of housing types and prices, within each neighborhood.
- Parking management to reduce the amount of land devoted to parking compared with conventional development, and to take advantage of the parking cost savings associated with reduced automobile use.
- Transit stops and stations that are convenient, comfortable and secure, with features such as comfortable waiting areas, real time vehicle arrival information, vendors selling refreshments and periodicals, washrooms, and information.”


This type of development is occurring throughout California, the United States and the world. Incorporating TOD into the County’s GPU would require coordinated policies in the Land Use and Transportation Elements. We would suggest amending the “Neighborhood and Town Centers” policy and implementation measure (**UL-P7** and **UL-IM2**) into a “Walkable Commercial Districts” policy and implementation measure that includes locations where transit enhancements are most feasible in conjunction with enhanced land use. TOD would be an excellent strategy to support our efforts to meet the AB32 greenhouse gas emissions targets of 80% below 1990 levels by 2050 while meeting housing and commercial development needs.

Conclusion

The Land Use Element acts as the core element of our General Plan. Of all the elements, it will have the greatest impact on transportation costs, access to services, resilience to fluctuating fuel prices, public health, meeting California’s greenhouse gas targets and maximizing quality of life. Compact development and proximity to services will be the key to maximizing the positive impacts and minimizing the negatives.

Our policy language suggestions are attached in chart format. Thank you for all the work you do and for considering these comments.

Sincerely



Chris Rall – Policy Director
Healthy Humboldt Coalition

CC


Humboldt County Board of Supervisors







Humboldt County Planning Staff

Tom Mattson – Humboldt County Public Works

Nel Fregoso – Humboldt Transit Authority

Mark Wheelley – Humboldt County Association of Governments


Plan Alternative				Section 4.2 Growth Planning	Staff Remarks/ Implementation	Position R, M, D
				4.2.3 Goals		
A	B	C		GP-G1. Land Inventory and Service Availability. An adequate supply of vacant landsites with readily available urban services to accommodate a wide variety of industrial, commercial and residential development opportunities necessary for growth to meet community needs.		M
				COMMENTS: <u>We need to be thinking about how to develop and redevelop our communities more creatively, not always relying on large vacant tracts of land for new development.</u>		
				Policies		
A	B	C		GP-P4P1.5. Urban Service Area. Urban Service Areas are located Within Urban Development Areas where sewer services are available and contain existing and planned urban development.	Leg,	M
				COMMENTS: <u>If we are planning for compact development, and developing areas with existing infrastructure first, we should start with the Urban Service Areas, so we suggest moving this policy to be before the UDA policy. We also should not assume that development is complete in these areas, as infill and redevelopment opportunities exist.</u>		
A	B			GP-P2. Urban Development Areas. Establish and maintain Urban Development Areas within Community Plan Areas to reflect areas that are within the Urban Service Area served with existing or planned to be annexed to the Urban Service Area served with public wastewater systems.	Leg, Prog, S4, IM2 	M
				GP-P2.5. Annexations to Urban Service Areas. All new subdivision outside Urban Service Areas, but within the Urban Development Areas, shall require an annexation to the Urban Service Area approved by the Planning Commission, Board of Supervisors and the appropriate services district.	<u>GP-S4.5</u>	R
				COMMENTS: <u>Because of the 20-year time horizon associated with the UDAs, a system for developing areas outside the USAs in an orderly fashion, akin to annexation for cities, should be employed.</u>		

Plan Alternative			Section 4.2 Growth Planning	Staff Remarks/ Implementation	Position R,M,D
	B	C	GP-P3. Urban Levels of Development. Lands located within the Urban Development Area are intended to be <u>developed</u> at a density of one-five or more dwelling units per acre.	Leg, QJ, S4, S8, IM2	M
			COMMENTS: <u>We should get our money's worth in development when we expand infrastructure. Five units per acre is consistent with the midpoint density of RL3-8.</u>		
	B		GP-P8. Urban Expansion Areas. Establish and maintain Urban Expansion Areas within Community Planning Areas that consists of land not provided with public sewer services, but and not expected to be developed to urban densities and provided with public water and sewer services beyond-within the 20-year planning horizon of the General Plan.	Leg, Prog   	M
			COMMENTS: See Alt. wording below <u>Urban Expansion Areas should not provide the property owners with the expectation that it will be developed. We may choose not to ever incorporate a UEA into a UDA if the community deems it unnecessary.</u>		
	B		GP-P9. Urban Expansion Area Review. <u>Residential density within Urban Development Areas shall be increased, in concert with water and wastewater service expansion, prior to expanding urban development into Urban Expansion Areas.</u> Review Urban Expansion Areas during Community Plan or comprehensive General Updates to determine if the boundaries reflect current conditions and community needs. The boundaries of an Urban Expansion Area shall remain fixed until modified through a General Plan amendment.	Leg, Prog   	M
			COMMENTS: <u>We agree with the approach laid out in Alternative A, but a process for review as outlined in B makes sense.</u>		
			GP-Px. Limitations on Residential Estates: <u>Due to its disproportionate impacts on land and transportation infrastructure, the County shall not designate new land for residential estates, and minimum lot sizes on existing Residential Estate-designated land shall be set at the size of the largest lot in the area to protect watersheds, and the rural character.</u>		R
			GP-Py. Protecting Threatened Prime Agricultural Land: <u>Lands on Prime Agricultural Soil served by municipal water but no sewer, shall not be subdivided, and shall retain AE designation if already designated as such.</u>		R
			COMMENTS: <u>Residential Estates use up land, impact watersheds, and do little to support GPU goals. Policies above would help to limit the impact of Residential Estate Development.</u>		

Plan Alternative				Section 4.2 Growth Planning	Staff Remarks/ Implementation	Position R, M, D
				4.2.4 Standards		
A	B			<p>GP-S4. Urban Development Area. An urban development area contains land that can be developed to a density of one-five or more dwelling units per acre. This area can be serviced with public water and wastewater in the near term, and constitutes an identifiable urban community, substantially more developed than surrounding lands. Urban densities and land use designations apply to the urban development area. <u>Development on larger lots shall be sited so as to allow for future buildout at urban densities.</u> These areas provide the best opportunity for affordable development and economic delivery of necessary public services and are to be sized to provide an adequate supply of land to accommodate growth as specified in this Plan.</p>		M
				<p>COMMENTS: <u>See comments on GP-P3. If property owners wish to develop at rural densities before annexation into the Urban Service Area, proper siting will be important to allow for future urban development.</u></p>		
				<p><u>GP-S4.5. Expansion of Urban Services Areas.</u> Annexing Urban Development lands to an Urban Service Area consists of modifying the Urban Service Area boundary to include the new addition and requires Planning Commission, and Board of Supervisors to make findings including: the addition must be adjacent to the existing urban service area, it must assist in the completion of an orderly and contiguous extension of urban development, the development must be fiscally neutral, and development opportunities within the urban service area must be limited. Such lands also require approval from the appropriate services district providing water and wastewater service.</p>		R
				<p>COMMENTS: <u>See comments for GP-P2.5.</u></p>		
A	B			<p>GP-S6. Urban Expansion Area. Urban Expansion Area means land outside and adjacent to the Urban Development Area boundary that may be appropriate for urban densities of development when further development <u>opportunities</u> in the urban development area is <u>are</u> constrained by the availability of land.</p>		
				<p>COMMENTS: <u>Redevelopment is often an option. We need to stop thinking development occurs only on vacant land.</u></p>		

Plan Alternative		Section 4.2 Growth Planning	Staff Remarks/ Implementation	Position R, M, D
A	B	<p>GP-S7. Required Findings for Urban Expansion. To determine when it is permissible to extend urban level development into the Urban Expansion Area, the Planning Commission shall evaluate housing demand and capacity within the Urban Development Area and public service availability and capacities for Urban Expansion Area proposals including factors such as: water and sewer availability; roads, streetlights, parks and recreation and trail capacity; police and fire protection; proximity to educational and health facilities; and solid waste management capabilities and make the following findings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A. That the amount of land available <u>development opportunities</u> within the Urban Development Area for urban uses <u>is are</u> insufficient to meet Housing Element goals; and, B. Public water and sewer systems demonstrate current or expansion capacity to serve the proposed addition. C. <u>That the proposed development will have a neutral or positive fiscal affect on County finances.</u> 		
		<p>COMMENTS: <u>See comments on GP-S6</u></p>		

Plan Alternative		Section 4.3 Urban Lands	Staff Remarks/ Implementation	Position R,M,D
A	B	<p>UL-P7. Neighborhood and Town Centers. Walkable Commercial Districts Within The County shall designated Walkable Commercial Districts in neighborhood and town centers, and Transit Oriented Development sites in urban commercial districts identified in cooperation with transit providers. In walkable commercial districts, the County shall:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A. Allow buildings with commercial uses on the ground or lower floors and residential uses on upper floors. B. Reduce or eliminate the County’s off-street parking requirements to encourage new business development and to reflect multi-modal access options. C. Allow ministerial approval of development that conforms to performance standards adopted by ordinance. C. Encourage and provide incentives for the following design characteristics: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Pedestrian-oriented scale and character. 2) Orientation of buildings toward the street or central open space areas rather than parking lots. 3) Parking areas to the side or rear rather than between buildings and the street edge. 4) Placement of buildings that create a central open space, or plaza, where passive activitysocial interaction can occur. 5) Transparent ground-level façades designed for pedestrian-oriented sidewalks. 	Leg, QJ, Min, S-2, IM-2	M
		<p>COMMENTS: <u>This suite of tools should be applied to both the proposed town centers, and TOD sites that would be identified in cooperation with transit providers. We suggest strong parking reforms to reduce the impact that parking has on walkability and traffic generation. This type of development is new to the County, so mandating ministerial permits as a matter of right is premature at this point.</u></p>		

Plan Alternative				Section 4.3 Urban Lands	Staff Remarks/ Implementation	Position R,M,D
				<u>UL-Px. Residential Uses in Commercial Districts.</u> Commercial developments should include residential units where feasible. Residential units should be located on upper floors or at the rear, to maintain uninterrupted commercial uses at the street level. Any residential development in new structures shall comply with the development standards of the RM land use category.		R
				COMMENTS: <u>Language borrowed from the Arcata General Plan would be useful in encouraging, rather than just allowing mixed use to development to occur in commercial areas.</u>		
				<u>UL-Py Neighborhood Commercial Centers.</u> The County shall identify future neighborhood commercial centers within Urban Development Areas in such a way as to ensure that no residential area within a UDA would be further than one mile from a commercial area		R
				COMMENTS:		
A	B			UL-P8. Neighborhood Connectivity. Subdivisions shall be designed to promote road and trail circulation between neighborhoods, schools, parks, and open space areas. The subdivision ordinance shall specify standards and limitations for <u>block sizes,</u> cul-de-sacs and dead end roads.	Leg, QJ, IM-7, C-P25, C-P26, <u>C-S2,</u> C-S7, C-IM12 	M
				COMMENTS: <u>We suggest that the ordinance specify maximum block size of 200 feet for non-motorized connectivity, and 400 feet for motorized connectivity.</u>		

4.3.5 Implementation Measures					
A	B		<p>UL-IM2. Neighborhood and Town CentersWalkable Business Districts. Prepare a <u>Commercial District, and</u> Neighborhood and Town Center ordinance and establish <u>Transit-Oriented Development Sites, and</u> Neighborhood and Town Center areas by zoning overlay during General Plan Updates and Community Planning processes. Develop figures in the implementing ordinance to demonstrate design principles; for example, how to orient commercial and mixed-use buildings toward the street or the central open space areas.</p>		M
			<p>COMMENTS: <u>See comments on UL-P7</u></p>		

ⁱ TDM Encyclopedia. 2008. Victoria Transportation Policy Institute. Available at: <http://www.vtpi.org/tm/tm45.htm>