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General Plan Content Related to Transportation and Land Use Varies Significantly Across Cities in Orange County

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Issue

California cities and counties are required to prepare general plans, which serve as long-range planning documents for future growth. General plans do not necessarily focus on a specific investment project or regulatory action that shapes development patterns directly but rather play an important role in informing stakeholders (e.g., landowners, developers, planners, elected officials) and supporting their decision making. The state provides guidelines and requirements for general plans. However, the content and structure of general plans vary markedly across cities. Some cities simply list goals and policies, while other cities provide detailed information using various forms of written and visual presentation. An increasing number of studies have examined to what extent plans are implemented and under what circumstances they are implemented successfully. However, little is known about the informational content of general plans and how the structural characteristics of general plans can either facilitate or hinder the use of the plan itself.

Key Research Findings

To better understand the informational content and use of general plans, researchers from UC Irvine performed a content analysis of the circulation and land use elements in recently adopted general plans from eight cities in Orange County, California – Costa Mesa, Fullerton, La Habra, La Palma, Los Alamitos, Mission Viejo, San Clemente, and Westminster. The elements were analyzed for composition (how information is combined), integration (how elements relate to other general plan elements or other city plans, and/or connect to other external agencies), and adaptability (how each element addresses future scenarios and technologies). It should be noted this research is exploratory and the findings do not necessarily represent the average general plan in Orange County or California. Key findings from the research are summarized below.

Each general plan covers main subject categories (e.g., visions, goals, facts, policies, and implementation strategies) but varies markedly in what content is emphasized. Some plans are more visionary or goal-oriented while others put greater emphasis on detailed policies and/or implementation strategies (Figure 1). Factual information about the city, which usually makes up a large proportion of the plans' content but not always,

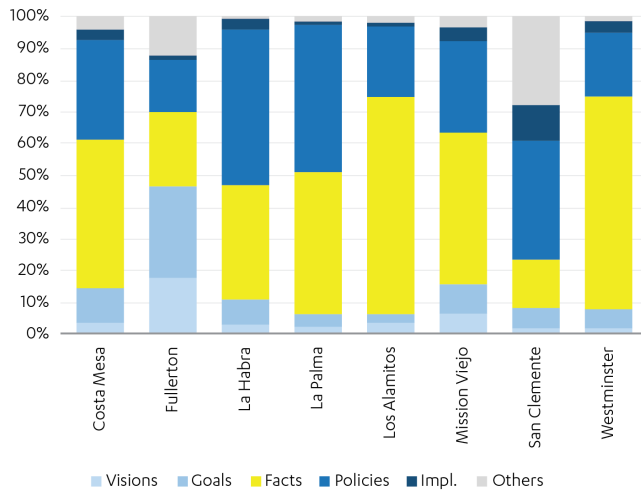


Figure 1. Plan composition analysis of newly adopted general plans from eight cities in Orange County, California.

can play a significant role in connecting plan contents, putting issues in perspective, and conveying ideas in a more effective manner. Some plan users may find fact-rich plans less efficient or too narrative, while others could find them extremely helpful in understanding current conditions in the area and the reasoning behind proposed actions. Interestingly, the two most rapidly growing cities in the sample – Fullerton and San Clemente – contained a relatively smaller proportion of facts, allowing goals, policies, and implementation approaches to stand out more clearly.

Plans differ in how each addresses other related plans and policies. Some of the plans addressed consistency with a wide variety of other plans and policies while others concentrated on showing consistency with a smaller number of key plans/policies. Interestingly, the majority of

circulation elements were found to address consistencies more frequently than land use elements perhaps due to the fact that transportation planning requires systematic coordination with other municipalities and higher levels of government. Circulation elements also discussed external consistency (their connections with other entities/plans) relatively more often than internal consistency (their interactions with other general plan elements or other plans/policies/initiatives in the city).

Little attention is paid to alternative future scenarios or the possibility of revolutionary change. Even though emerging new technologies will likely reshape our cities in significant ways, most of the plans were somewhat silent about such contentious issues and their distributional consequences. While some themes and keywords referencing new and emerging technologies were identified across multiple plans, these subjects were not examined frequently and thoroughly, perhaps due to difficulties in projecting future technological advancements and uncertain market responses.¹

Further Information

This policy brief is drawn from the research report “Transportation Plans: Their Informational Content and Use Patterns in Southern California” authored by Jae Hong Kim and Xiangyu Li from the Department of Urban Planning and Public Policy at the University of California, Irvine. The full report can be found here: www.ucits.org/research-project/2018-41.

For more information, please contact Professor Jae Hong Kim at jaehk6@uci.edu.

¹ Guerra, E. (2016). Planning for cars that drive themselves: Metropolitan planning organizations, regional transportation plans, and autonomous vehicles. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 36(2), 210-224.

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