

Project Highlight

Burlingame General Plan Update



The bayside city of Burlingame is just four and a half square miles and sits between two major economic hubs—San Francisco and Silicon Valley. Despite its location in California’s second largest metropolitan area, the city maintains much of its original small town charm. It incorporated in 1908, shortly after the 1906 San Francisco earthquake sent residents flocking south to less densely populated environs. By the mid-1960s, the City had evolved into tree-shaded, pedestrian-scale neighborhoods of single-family homes and multi-family rentals.

The original Southern Pacific train depot now serves CalTrain, the commuter train line connecting San Francisco with San Mateo and Santa Clara Counties—and acts as a reminder of Burlingame’s early role as a gateway on the journey to San Francisco. The station anchors a robust shopping and dining district along Burlingame Avenue. Just north of the city line, the final stop on the Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) at Millbrae is within walking distance.

Burlingame’s location, transit access, good schools, and small town character make it a popular home base for families and young professionals alike. The city is now home to nearly 30,000 and median home prices range between \$1.4 and \$3 million depending on the neighborhood, notably higher than the San Mateo County median price of \$1.1 million.

The Project

Burlingame’s existing *General Plan* was created nearly five decades ago, in 1969. Rather than proceed with piecemeal changes to the city’s specific plans, the City Council decided it was time to reconsider the entire community’s vision for the future. To this end, they launched an update to its General Plan to be completed in late 2017.

City planners were cognizant of the fact that similar planning efforts in other coastal cities have failed when residents felt excluded from—or simply indifferent towards—the planning process or its goals. Burlingame residents are cautious when it comes to changes to their beloved community, so the City has spent a year and a half conducting extensive

community outreach and generating a discussion about strategies for building a more sustainable community while maintaining the many positive qualities residents value.

Residents enjoy Burlingame’s pedestrian-friendly streets and small town charm. Source: City of Burlingame.





Locally-Driven Solutions

- Protecting treasured neighborhoods while allowing for new developments and modes of living in underutilized areas.
- Updating the General Plan and Zoning Ordinance concurrently, in order to provide design guidelines and regulations that will shape new developments that fit in with the character of existing areas.
- Limiting new development in areas subject to Sea Level Rise and developing resilience strategies for development that already exists in those areas.
- Focusing new development in areas close to transit and other services and allowing the possibility of higher densities for projects with more sustainable features.

Nearly a half century old, the existing General Plan was not designed to keep up with current housing demands driven by the Bay Area’s booming economy. The City’s outreach team discovered that while residents feel strongly about preserving the character of the city, many recognize the need for more housing, particularly affordable housing and increased diversity of housing. The December 2016 City Council session on growth established projections for population, housing, and employment growth through 2040. With Burlingame’s population expected to grow by 10% per decade, the City anticipates planning for an additional 3,000 housing units.

Through community input, the City identified “areas of stability” and “areas of change”—i.e., parts and features of the town they wanted kept largely as is and parts they would like to see changed. As a result, the City is exploring a land use concept that will preserve most existing residential neighborhoods, while allowing the development of new housing near the Downtown Caltrain and Millbrae BART/Caltrain stations. The community identified Rollins Road—an area convenient to the Millbrae Station that lacks the neighborhood-feel that distinguishes much of Burlingame—as an area ripe for transformation.

In the commercial stretch of California Drive near the center of town, the City will consider allowing housing on second floors of businesses in an effort to revitalize the area. California Drive, which runs from Millbrae in the north to the southern San Mateo city limits, is also the centerpiece of the city’s multi-modal transportation strategy, which would upgrade bike and pedestrian accommodations along the broad roadway, expanding the transit options for commuters traveling both to-and-from and within the city.

Burlingame does not have space for new parks, but improved planning along the Bay would allow the City to connect gaps in the Bay Trail, and new developments would be required to include parks and open space. Furthermore, restored natural space along the Bay provides the additional benefit of mitigating against sea level rise and flooding.

Local/Regional Connection

Burlingame’s General Plan would help implement the Bay Area’s regional planning effort, *Plan Bay Area*, which includes the region’s *Sustainable Communities Strategy* and *2040 Regional Transportation Plan*. *Plan Bay Area* aims to meet 80 percent of the region’s future housing needs in Priority Development Areas, which include a swath of Burlingame along the CalTrain line and the Bayside. The land use map under consideration



Left to right: Residents participate in “pop up” community survey boards on Burlingame Avenue. The public considers proposed land use concepts at a Community Workshop. Source: MIG, Inc. and the City of Burlingame.

Effective Community Engagement

Since the General Plan had not been updated within the lifetime of many of its residents, the planning team began its process by explicitly asking community members to share their vision for the city. Some Burlingame residents were protective of the city’s history and character and wary of significant changes that might be proposed by the Plan. As a result, planners have positioned the plan as an opportunity to protect the Burlingame’s best assets, while identifying areas that could benefit from changes.

The team collected community input through stakeholder interviews with members of the City Council, Planning Commissioners, business owners, and residents, as well as through pop-up sidewalk activities, an online survey, and community workshops. In addition, a Community Advisory Committee has held monthly discussions.

This variety of tools helped the planners develop a nuanced understanding of the community’s needs: the pop-up sidewalk meetings and online survey reached segments of the Burlingame community who would not otherwise be engaged in a general plan update. For instance, to gauge community sentiment, the sidewalk pop-ups used interactive exercises with printed poster boards and “voting” stickers. The activity successfully engaged all age groups—especially families with young children—and allowed for informal and educational discussions. Meanwhile, the Community Advisory Committee has provided a forum to explore single issues in more depth,

particularly those around sustainability, transportation, and resource conservation that have been identified in other venues as community priorities.

The General Plan process presented an opportunity for education: in 2016, Burlingame High School students developed design concepts for future uses of the Bayfront area, which were presented at the second community workshop. University of California, Berkeley graduate students learning about stakeholder engagement hosted an outreach event at the Burlingame Caltrain station to engage commuters and young professionals about their thoughts and perspectives related to the future vision for the city.

Sustainable Benefits for California

Implementation of the *Burlingame General Plan Update* will help to advance many of California’s sustainability objectives, particularly in the areas of:

- Housing affordability
- Infill and compact development
- Reduced automobile usage and fuel consumption
- Reducing greenhouse gas emissions

For More Information

Name: Kevin Gardiner, Planning Manager
 Agency: City of Burlingame
 Telephone: 650-558-7253
 Email: kgardiner@ Burlingame.org
 Website: www.envision Burlingame.org