

City Council Study Session #1 Summary

March 2021



Overview

On November 16, 2020, Raimi + Associates (R+A) held a special session with City Council on the Ventura General Plan Update (GPU) process. The intent of this session was to present key information about the project (including the scope of work, community engagement approach, and work conducted to-date), provide an overview of the Housing Element and new housing laws, and gather feedback on existing conditions (including a summary of the issues and opportunities and a map of sub-areas of the City). Councilmembers were asked to respond to the following questions and pose questions of their own.

- What is missing from the list of assets and challenges?
- Does the “sub area” map accurately represent the distinct areas in the city?
- How do you define a successful update process and a successful General Plan?

Matt Raimi (Raimi + Associates, the lead consultant on the project) led the session with support from Veronica Tam (Veronica Tam and Associates, the Housing Element consultant) and Peter Gilli, Community Development Director.

This memo summarizes the key themes and topics of discussion from the meeting.

Community Engagement

The presentation included a summary of the community engagement approach. The following are the City Council’s comments on community engagement.

- Participation in the General Plan Advisory Committee (GPAC) is a big commitment spanning multiple years, which leaves open the prospect of attrition. If the GPAC were to shrink over time, the City risks losing the broad representation and diversity of viewpoints it initially set out to achieve. To avoid this outcome, Matt Raimi suggested establishing a GPAC of an adequate size (up to 20 members, but no fewer than 12) to ensure that it is broadly representative of Ventura’s demographic, geographic, and intellectual diversity. Holding some meetings virtually could also help ensure sustained participation among GPAC members.
- The initial stakeholder list looks fairly comprehensive, but Raimi + Associates should also reach out to mobile home community groups, as they represent a significant number of seniors.
- Several Councilmembers stressed the importance of representing the younger generation. Because the General Plan is a forward-looking document planning several years into the future, it needs to prioritize and represent the needs of the next generation.
- While Community Councils are an important resource to leverage, we should ensure that they do not have outsized influence over the process. Their voice may not be fully representative of the range of different opinions and perspectives in the city.

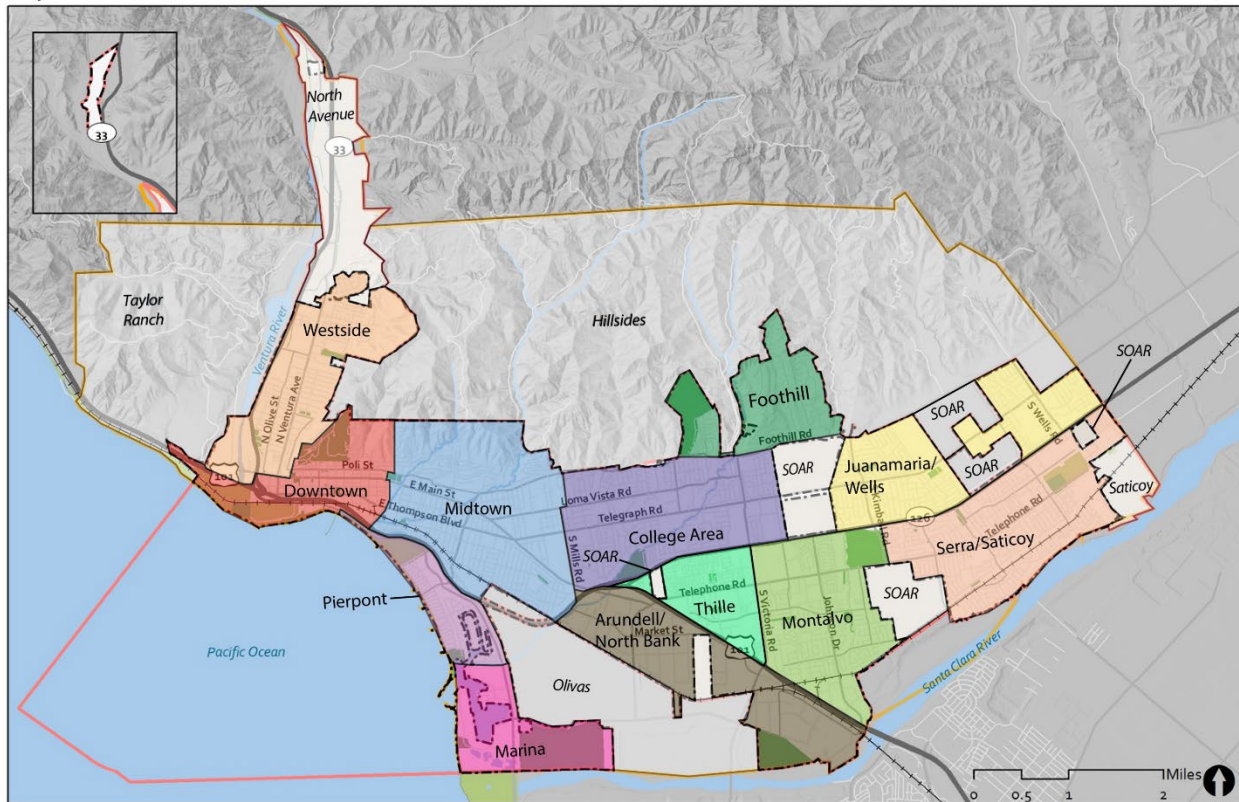
Housing, Growth, and Development

Veronica Tam provided an overview of the Regional Housing Needs Allocation (RHNA) and Raimi + Associates discussed comments from the Community Councils on housing, growth, and development. The following are the comments and questions from the City Council.

- There is a concern that the Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG) allocated Ventura significantly more RHNA units than it did for comparable cities. While Thousand Oaks and Simi Valley were given a ~4% housing growth target for the sixth cycle, Ventura was given a ~12% growth target.
 - Peter Gilli noted that this discrepancy is due in part to SCAG’s aim to concentrate growth along existing and/or planned transit corridors, and much of the county’s high-quality transit infrastructure passes through Ventura. However, some Councilmembers responded that the completion of planned transit projects is expected *after* the sixth cycle planning horizon.
 - Some Councilmembers suggested that Ventura should be part of the Santa Barbara Region and not the SCAG region since Ventura has more in common with other Central Coast communities in terms of regional planning.
- Veronica Tam clarified that Housing Element law requires the City to create capacity for at least one emergency shelter and transitional/supportive housing.
- Projects permitted *after* July 1, 2021 will count toward the sixth cycle RHNA allocation.
- As Ventura plans for more housing, it will be critical to retain and expand Ventura’s commercial and industrial businesses as they are an important source of jobs and revenue for the City.
- The City should prepare for an increased demand for public services (specifically safety) that will come with anticipated population growth. This further highlights the need to consider fiscal health and a jobs/housing balance in the preparation of land use alternatives.
- Adaptive reuse will be a key strategy for preserving Ventura’s historic building fabric and sense of character.
- Councilmember Weir commented that the General Plan should not recommend growing into adjacent undeveloped areas, which is a controversial topic.
- Urban forestry and tree management should be prioritized as a strategy to mitigate and adapt to climate change. This should be folded into at least one of the General Plan Elements.

Sub-Areas

Raimi + Associates presented a map of the City with multiple sub-areas identified. The purpose of these sub-areas is to provide more detailed analysis and engagement work throughout the process and to recognize that the City is not monolithic but rather made up of distinct neighborhoods. The map of the sub-areas presented at the Study Session is below:



In response to the map, the City Council made the following recommendations:

- The majority of City Council members thought the map represented the unique sub-areas of the City and needed no changes.
- Councilmember Brown noted that the Montalvo district, as shown on the draft subarea map, encompasses more land than the original annexed area.
- Councilmember Brown expressed some concern over the names of the sub-areas. In response, Matt Raimi offered to meet with Councilmember Brown and create new names for some of the areas on the East Side of the city.

Community Assets and Issues/Challenges

The City Council was asked to comment on the list of assets and issues and challenges developed from the stakeholder interviews and meetings with six of the seven Community Councils. Overall, there was support for the summary, but City Council members added to the ideas presented.

Assets

- Ventura is a family friendly city with a history of providing high-quality public education.
- City residents have access to fantastic open space, parks, and other natural recreation amenities. There is a great interface between community and the surrounding natural landscape.
- The City boasts a strong jobs/housing balance, with dynamic employment opportunities and a diverse mix of housing types.
- Ventura benefits from fantastic weather, but as climate change intensifies (Ventura County is one of the fastest warming counties), this asset may come increasingly under threat.

Issues and Challenges

- The “digital divide” is a major issue, which has been exacerbated during the pandemic. Under present circumstances, students need access to broadband in order to participate in class and complete their work – in some instances, students have driven to school and sat in parking lots just to participate virtually in class.
- The City lacks cohesive design standards, which can have negative implications for neighborhood character as Ventura continues to grow and evolve.
- As growth and development increase in nearby cities, traffic in Ventura worsens. The City needs to overcome strains on its transportation infrastructure.

General Plan Success

Councilmembers were asked to define what a successful General Plan update would look like. The following are the responses:

- Reflects community priorities in accordance with the Ventura Vision;
- Leverages new voices, including young families and working professionals;
- Focuses on the needs and desires of the next generation, such as high-quality amenities and housing diversity, and
- Incorporates digital outreach tools to broaden access for all who wish to engage.