

URBAN PLANNING MANAGEMENT SYSTEM IN LOS ANGELES: AN OVERVIEW

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Abstract

This paper gives an overview of the urban planning management system in Los Angeles, United States. This system consists of institutional subsystem, legal subsystem, operational subsystem, and technical subsystem. The City of Los Angeles Planning Department carries out its urban planning responsibilities in accordance with the General Plan Guidelines promulgated by the Governor's Office of Planning and Research. The planning process has a good balance between government activities and citizen participations. The City's advanced technical tools, including internet-based Zoning Information and Map Access System and online filing system, have fostered the public interaction with the planning process. The City is recommended to incorporate more market-based planning measures in the future.

Keywords: urban planning management system, general plan, zoning, subdivision

1. Introduction

As the core of Los Angeles County ("the County"), Los Angeles City ("the City") is located along the southern coast of the State of California, United States (U.S.). The City is nearly 470 square miles in land area, and has an irregular shape with the most expansive areas being in the northern portion of the City and tapering down to a strip in the southern portion.

Some of the other cities in the County, such as Santa Monica, Beverly Hills, San Fernando, and Culver City, are surrounded, for the most part, by the City, yet remain as separate and distinct municipalities. Other cities surrounding Los Angeles City include Pasadena, Burbank, Malibu, Torrance, and Long Beach. Figure 1 shows the geographic setting of Los Angeles City (white shaded area) and County.

Los Angeles City is the second largest city in the U.S., only second to New York City, whereas Los Angeles County is the nation's most populous county with a population exceeding 10 million. With a total of 88 incorporated cities (the largest one is Los Angeles City) plus the unincorporated areas, Los Angeles County is also known for its urban sprawl, traffic congestion, air pollution, and, of course, highly fragmented political and economic structure (Hubler and Meek, 2005). Table 1 shows the profiles of Los Angeles City and County.



FIGURE 1. GEOGRAPHIC SETTING OF LOS ANGELES CITY AND COUNTY
Source: <http://www.laalmanac.com/LA/lamap1.htm>

According to the figures compiled by the U.S. Conference of Mayors, if Los Angeles County, with a gross domestic product (GDP) of \$389.72 billion in 2001, were a separate nation, it would rank the 14th in the world, larger than that of either the Netherlands, Australia, Russia, Taiwan, or Argentina, and Switzerland.

TABLE 1: PROFILES OF LOS ANGELES CITY AND COUNTY

| Indicator | Los Angeles City | Los Angeles County | City/County Ratio |
|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|-------------------|
| Population in 2008 | 4,045,873 persons | 10,363,850 persons | 39.0% |
| Land area in 2008 | 469.3 square miles | 4,061 square miles | 11.6% |

Source: <http://www.laalmanac.com/population/po24a.htm>.

As a cosmopolitan city in America, Los Angeles has a very complicated urban planning management system definitely worth further researching. The need for planning becomes obvious due to the City's interconnectedness and complexity (Levy, 2003). This urban planning management system has been playing an important role in charting the City's development course and shaping its future growth. To learn more about American cities, it is necessary to start with Los Angeles first. This paper intends to give an overview of this great city's urban planning management system, on which a thorough yet concise evaluation will be conducted. Through empirical research, a summary of key findings will be provided in the concluding section.

2. Definition of Urban Planning Management System

In this research, the so-called urban planning management system is defined as a system encompassing all means, methods, and tools to realize goals set by city general plans (Hu, 2000). As shown in Figure 2, this system includes the following four subsystems:

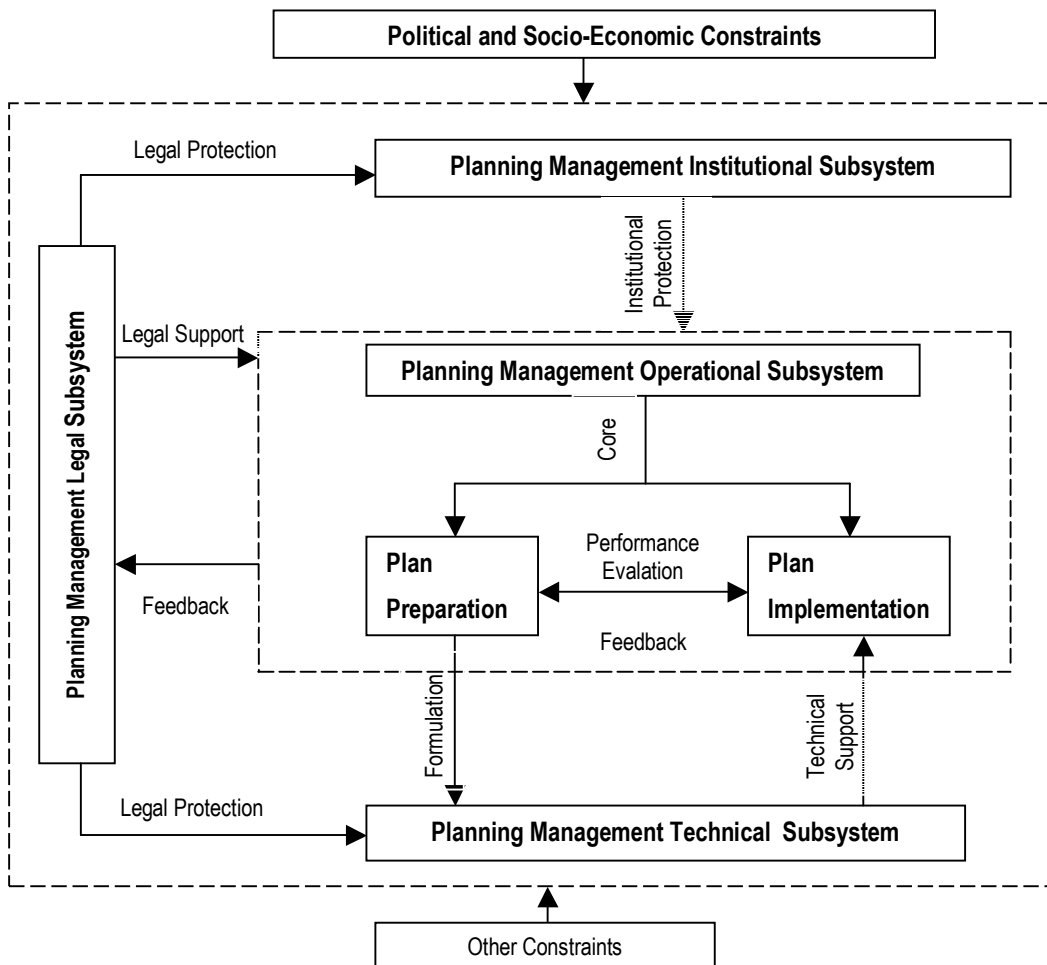


FIGURE 2. SCHEMATIC DIAGRAM OF THE URBAN PLANNING MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

- *Planning Management Institutional Subsystem*: planning departments, city governments, which carry out urban planning duties and provide institutional protection;
- *Planning Management Legal Subsystem*: planning laws, regulations, and ordinances, which provide legal support to urban planning process;
- *Planning Management Operational Subsystem*: urban planning process itself, which is the core of the entire urban planning management system; and
- *Planning Management Technical Subsystem*: planning outcome, including plans, zoning ordinances, and subdivision maps, which provide technical support to future plan preparation and amendment.

For any particular city, its urban planning management system is constrained by its unique political, socio-economic, and other factors.

3. Urban Planning Management System in Los Angeles

This section introduces the four planning-related subsystems in Los Angeles.

3.1 Planning Management Institutional Subsystem

The City of Los Angeles has a typical “strong mayor” governing structure, namely mayor-council structure, as illustrated in Figure 3. Subject to the concurrence from the city council, mayor can appoint any government chiefs, including the Director of Planning, who heads the City Planning Department.

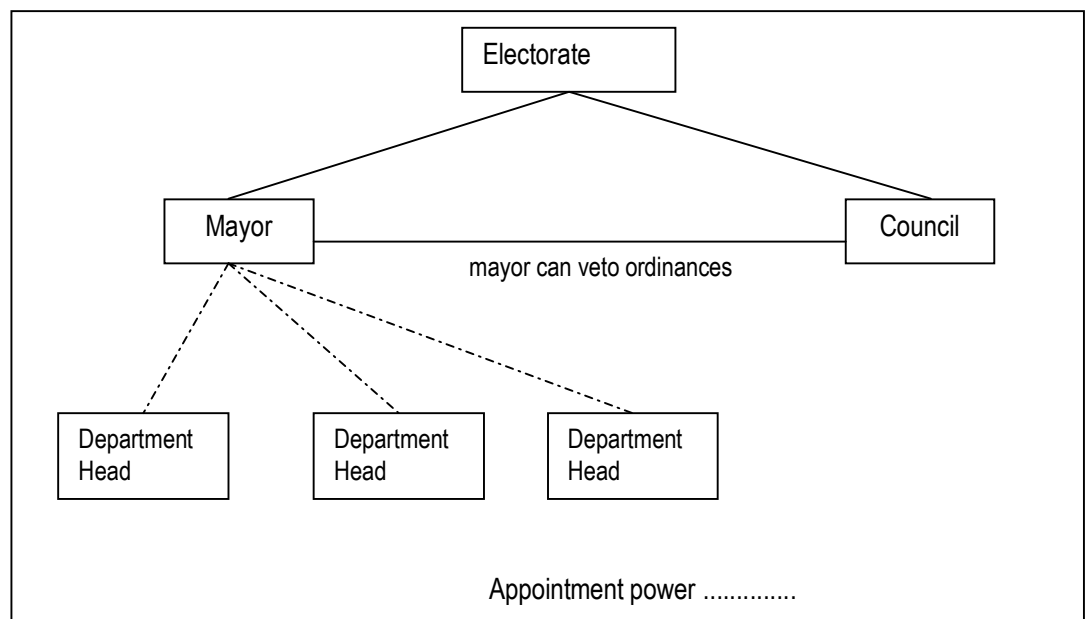


FIGURE 3. MAYOR-COUNCIL STRUCTURE

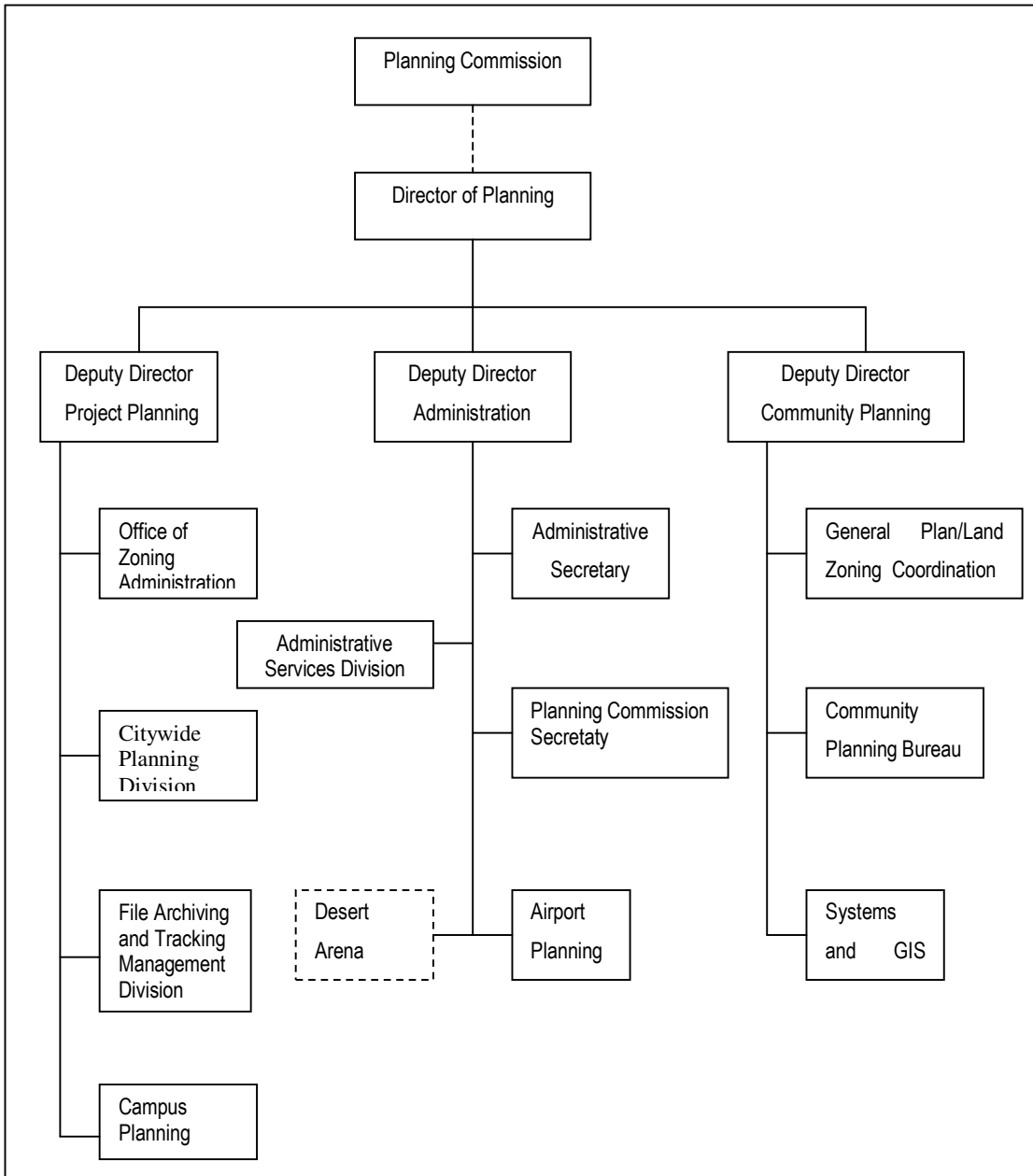


FIGURE 4. ORGANIZATION CHART OF THE LOS ANGELES CITY PLANNING DEPARTMENT

Founded in 1941, the Los Angeles City Planning Department has over 10 functional units as shown in Figure 4. The Planning Department has the following responsibilities:

- prepares and maintains a general plan, which is a comprehensive declaration of purposes, policies, and programs for the development of the City;
- regulates the use of privately-owned property through the approval of zoning regulation, specific plan ordinances, and subdivisions;

- investigates and reports on applications for amendments to zoning regulations, and passes upon zoning variance and conditional use applications;
- acquires the land for public use and submits the disposition of surplus land to the Planning Commission for report and recommendation; and
- conducts studies relating to environmental quality, and provides advice and assistance relative to environmental matters.

Los Angeles City also has a 5-member City Planning Commission (CPC) reporting to the city council. Its responsibility is to advise the mayor or city council on city general plans, building permits or other regulations. CPC typically has a final say on such issues as conditional use permits, land subdivision, and others. In case there is an appeal to the decision of CPC, the city council will make the final decision. Table 2 highlights the relationship between Planning Department and Planning Commission in Los Angeles City.

TABLE 2: RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PLANNING DEPARTMENT AND PLANNING COMMISSION

| Category | Planning Commission | Planning Department |
|------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|
| Nature of Organization | Represent the value judgment of the citizens. | Represent the administrative decisions of the government. |
| Responsibility | Macro-level direction for development. | Daily routine operation. |
| Mode of Work | Discussion and debates open to the public. | Internal daily routine operation. |

3.2 Planning Management Legal Subsystem

The United States has a federalized political system, under which local governments are regarded as the “creatures of the State,” and are delegated authorities through the State Constitution. Therefore, Los Angeles urban planning practices are governed and regulated by various California state planning laws. Table 3 shows the milestones in California’s Planning Law.

Other major planning and land use statutes that have been shaping and influencing the urban planning process in Los Angeles include:

- The California Environmental Quality Act;
- The California Land Conservation Act;
- The California Coastal Act;
- The Cortese-Knox-Hertzberg Local Government Reorganization Act;
- The California Civil Code;
- The California Business and Professions Code;
- The California Education Code;
- The California Elections Code;

- The California Government Code;
- The California Public Utilities Code;
- The California Public Resources Code;
- The California Health and Safety Code;
- The California Welfare and Institutions Code; and
- The California Streets and Highways Code.

TABLE 3: MILESTONES IN CALIFORNIA’S PLANNING LAW

| Events | Year |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|
| First Subdivision Map Act enacted. | 1907 |
| Cities authorized to create planning commissions. | 1915 |
| Initial zoning law enacted. | 1917 |
| Cities and counties authorized to prepare master plans (general plans). | 1927 |
| Adoption of master plans made mandatory for those cities and counties establishing planning commissions (based largely on the 1928 U.S. Department of Commerce Standard City Planning Enabling Act). Subdivision Map Act revised enabling local governments to require dedication of improvements. | 1929 |
| All cities and counties required to adopt master plans. Cities and counties authorized to prepare “precise plans” (similar to specific plans of today) to implement the master plan. | 1937 |
| Planning law recodified into Government Code §65000, et seq. | 1953 |
| Land use and circulation elements required in the general plan. | 1955 |
| Planning and Zoning Law reorganized. Cities and counties authorized to prepare “specific plans.” | 1965 |
| Housing element required in the general plan (effective July 1, 1969). | 1967 |
| Conservation and open-space elements required in the general plan. | 1970 |
| Safety, seismic safety, noise, and scenic highway elements required in the general plan. Zoning and subdivision approvals required to be consistent with the adopted general plan. | 1971 |
| Governor’s Office of Planning and Research (OPR) issues first <i>General Plan Guidelines</i> . | 1973 |
| Subdivision Map Act recodified from the Business and Professions Code into the State Planning and Zoning Law within the Government Code. | 1974 |
| Legislature clarifies statute on general plans’ internal consistency. | 1975 |
| Detailed content standards and adoption procedures added to the housing element requirement. Appeals court says public works must be consistent with general plans (<i>Friends of B Street</i>). | 1980 |
| Appeals court says land use and circulation elements must correlate (<i>Twaine Harte</i>). | 1982 |
| Planning statutes substantially revised, seismic safety and scenic highways elements dropped as required elements, seismic safety merged with safety element. | 1984 |
| California Supreme Court says zoning in conflict with the general plan invalid (<i>Leshner v. Walnut Creek</i>). | 1990 |
| Legislature requires <i>General Plan Guidelines</i> to include environmental justice. | 2001 |

Source: State of California. (2003). *General Plan Guidelines*. Sacramento, California: Governor’s Office of Planning and Research.

3.3 Planning Management Operational Subsystem

The Planning Management Operational Subsystem in Los Angeles includes the following key components:

3.3.1 Plan Compilation

As a local city, Los Angeles urban planning process is governed by the California's general plan process stipulated by the Governor's Office of Planning and Research (OPR). All Californian cities and counties, including Los Angeles City, are required to comply with the California General Plan Guidelines promulgated by OPR in preparing its general plans. See Figure 5 for the suggested planning flowchart.

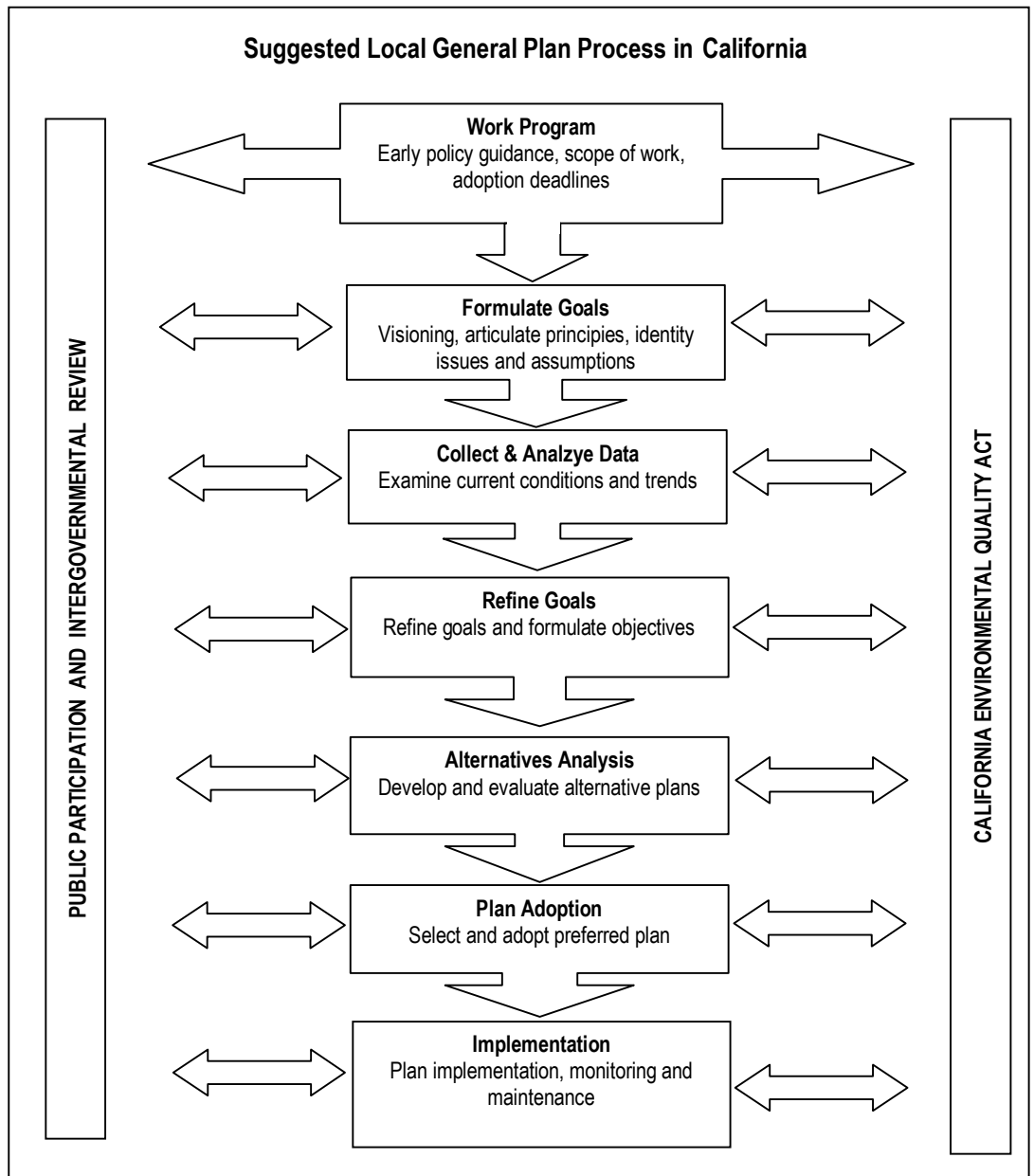


FIGURE 5: GENERAL PLAN PROCESS IN CALIFORNIA
 Source: State of California. (2003). *General Plan Guidelines*. Sacramento, California: Governor's Office of Planning and Research.

By statutes, California's General Plan functions as the "constitution for all future development" (52 Cal 3d 531, 553, 1990). California law requires each planning jurisdiction to adopt a General Plan "for the physical development of the county or city, and any land outside its boundaries which...bears relation to its planning" (Government Code Section 65300). In addressing physical development, the jurisdiction must consider locations, appropriate mix, timing, and extent of land uses and supporting infrastructure (State of California, 2003, p.12).

To assist local governments in meeting the responsibility, Government Code 65040.2 directs OPR to adopt discretionary guidelines.

Though they are termed guidelines, the OPR recommendations frequently incorporate provisions of California statutory and case laws that are mandatory and strictly construed. The recommendations also incorporate "commonly accepted principles of contemporary planning practice." There are seven required elements of the General Plan: land use, circulation, housing, conservation, open-space, noise, and safety. A jurisdiction can also add optional elements as it sees fit, including air quality, capital improvements/public facilities, community design, economic/fiscal development, energy, flood management, geothermal, parks and recreation, as well as water. Once adopted, these optional elements have an equal legal status as that of the other elements.

3.3.2 Implementation of General Plan

In Los Angeles, the most important vehicles for implementing city general plan include:

Zoning: The typical zoning ordinance regulates land uses by dividing the community into districts or "zones", and specifying the uses that are to be permitted, conditionally permitted, and prohibited within each zone. Zoning texts and maps describe the distribution and intensity of land uses in different categories, including residential, commercial, industrial, and open space.

Specific Plans: A specific plan is an important tool for systematically implementing the general plan within all or a portion of the planning area. Any interested group or person may request the adoption, amendment, or repeal of a specific plan. A plan may be prepared by either the public or private sector. But responsibility for its adoption, amendment, and repeal lies with the city council or county board of supervisors.

Subdivision Regulations: The Subdivision Map Act establishes statewide uniformity in local subdivision procedures while giving cities and counties the authority to regulate the design and improvement of subdivisions, require dedications of public improvements or related impact fees, and

require compliance with the objectives and policies of the general plan. This includes the authority to approve and design street alignments, street grades and widths, drainage and sanitary facilities, lot size and configuration, traffic access, and other measures.

Capital Facilities: The general plan should identify existing capital facilities and the need for additional improvements.

Redevelopment: State community redevelopment law (Health and Safety Code §33000, et seq.) authorizes cities and counties to implement redevelopment projects in economically blighted areas.

3.3.3 Public Interaction with the Planning Process

In Los Angeles, through various Certified Neighborhood Councils (CNC) and Area Planning Commissions (APC), the general public actively participates in land use entitlement permit process, community planning process, California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) process, and others. Entitlement processes are shown in Table 4. Figure 6 is the City's Community Plan Flow Chart.

TABLE 4: ENTITLEMENT PROCESSES IN LOS ANGELES

| Process Number | Category Type | Step 1 | Step 2 | Step 3 | Step 4 | Step 5 | Step 6 | Step 7 |
|----------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------|
| Process 1 | Land Use Legislative Actions (Zone changes, specific plans) | Initiation/ Amendment | Hearing Officer Recommendation Hearing | APC or CPC Recommendation Hearing | Council Decision Hearing | Mayor Review | | |
| Process 2 | General Plan (Elements and community plan changes and amendments) | Initiation/ Amendment | Hearing Officer Recommendation Hearing | CPC Recommendation Hearing | Mayor Recommendation | Council Decision Hearing | | |
| Process 3 | City Planning Commission (Conditional Uses, plan approvals) | Application Submitted | Hearing Officer Hearing | CPC Decision Hearing | If Appeal is Filed | Council Appeal Decision Hearing | Mayor Review | |
| Process 4 | Zoning Administrator (Conditional Uses, plan approvals) | Application Submitted | Zoning Administrator Decision Hearing | If Appeal is Filed | APC Appeal Decision Hearing | | | |
| Process 5 | Variances | Application Submitted | Zoning Administrator Decision Hearing | If Appeal is Filed | APC Approval Hearing | If Appeal is Filed | Council Appeal Decision Hearing | Mayor Review |
| Process 6 | Area Planning Commission (Conditional Uses, plan approvals, specific plan exceptions) | Application Submitted | APC Decision Hearing | If Appeal is Filed | Council Appeal Decision Hearing | | | |
| Process 7 | Director of Planning Approvals (Site plan review & design review) | Application Submitted | Director of Planning or the Director's Designee | If Appeal is Filed | APC Appeal Decision hearing | | | |
| Process 8 | Subdivision of Land (Above threshold) | Application Submitted | Advisory Agency Decision Hearing | If Appeal is Filed | CPC Appeal Hearing | If Appeal is Filed | Council Appeal Decision Hearing | |

3.4 Planning Management Technical Subsystem

Planning management technical subsystem includes actual city plans. From more conceptual/macro level to more detailed/micro level, the Los Angeles city general plan contains three integrated planning levels:

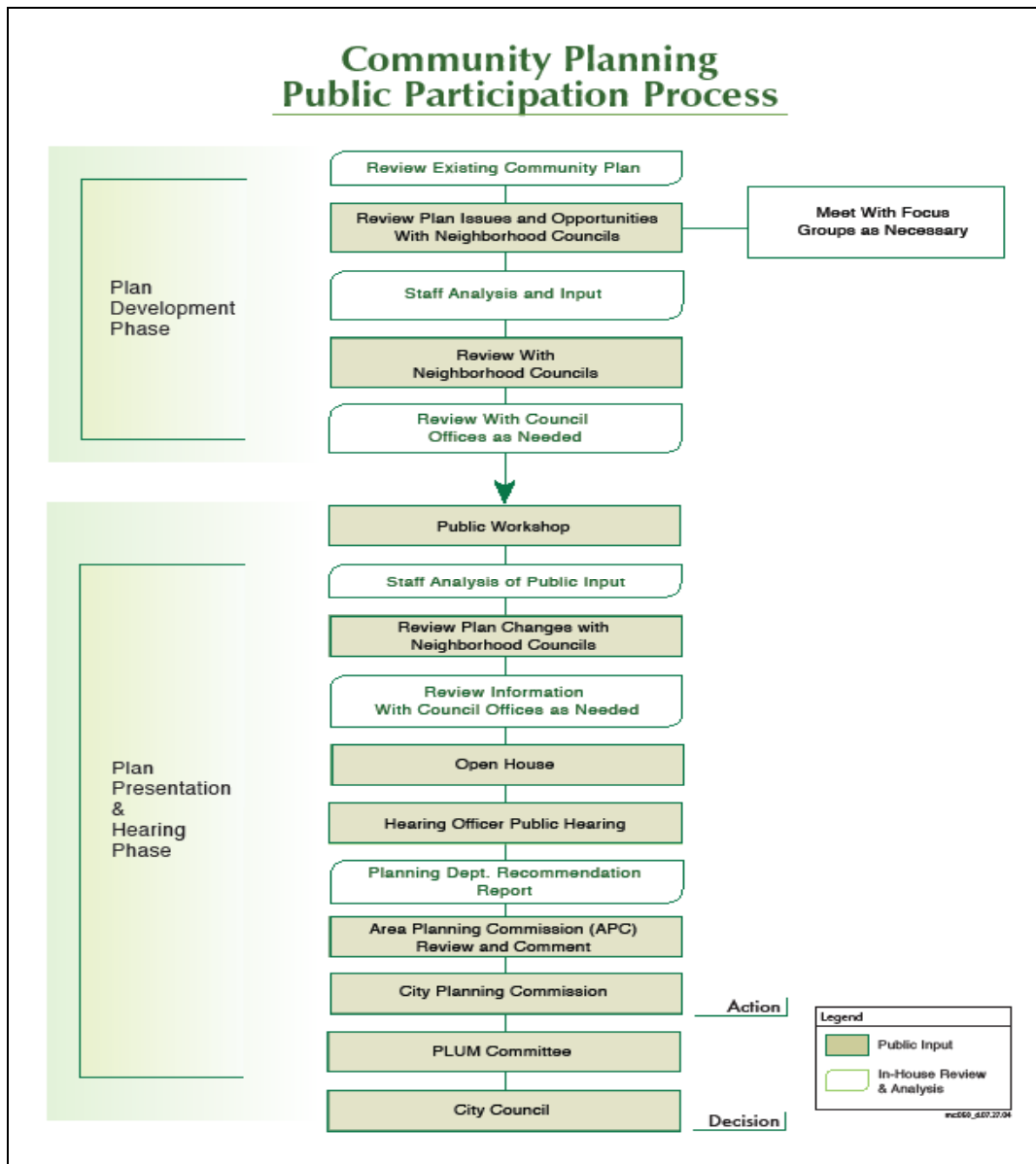


FIGURE 6: COMMUNITY PLAN FLOW CHART

SOURCE: [HTTP://CITYPLANNING.LACITY.ORG/PROCESSES/COMMUNITYPLAN.PDF](http://CITYPLANNING.LACITY.ORG/PROCESSES/COMMUNITYPLAN.PDF)

Level 1 (General Plan Framework Element): gives an overall review of the 11 planning elements (listed in Table 5), and sets forth the basic principles and policies for preparing and managing city general plan. The framework element is a special purpose element of the city general plan that establishes the

vision for the future of the City of Los Angeles and the direction by which the citywide elements and the community plans shall be comprehensively updated in harmony with that vision. The framework element establishes development policy at a citywide level and within a citywide context, so that both the benefits and challenges of growth are shared.

Level 2 (General Plan Elements Other Than Land Use): includes 10 citywide planning elements, each of which is a separate plan. The citywide elements address functional topics that cut across community boundaries, such as transportation or public services. The citywide elements address these topics in more details than those in the framework element.

Level 3 (Community Plans): this land use element includes 35 community plans, which are the district-level general plans, primarily focusing on each district's land uses. The community plans are oriented towards specific geographic areas of the City, defining the more general citywide policies and programs set forth in the framework element and the citywide elements with more specificity that is appropriate at the citywide level. This differentiation is necessary because of Los Angeles's various topography, development patterns, diverse cultural and ethnic communities, and other variations which require that policies, standards, and programs developed at the citywide level be tailored to meet community and neighborhood needs.

TABLE 5: PLANNING ELEMENTS IN LOS ANGELES CITY GENERAL PLAN

| Element Category | Element Names |
|-------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Citywide Elements | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Air quality element • Conservation element • Historic preservation and cultural resources elements • Housing element • Infrastructure system element • Noise element • Open space element • Public facilities and services element • Safety element • Transportation element |
| Land Use Element | Containing the City's 35 Community Planning Areas |

4. Evaluation

The existing urban planning management system in Los Angeles primarily follows the rational comprehensive planning approach. Rationality principle requires the logical consistency between means and ends (Cullingworth and Caves, 2003). OPR's General Plan Guidelines embodies this principle by requiring the consistency between zoning and general plan, and between land subdivision and zoning. In the meantime, the city general plan is a very comprehensive plan covering both required elements and optional elements.

In addition, the Los Angeles city general plan is amended periodically and implemented incrementally. This represents an incremental and muddling-through planning approach so strongly advocated by Lindblom (1959), even though in a not-so-disjointed way. The Los Angeles City Planning Department highly centralizes the urban planning process.

The active citizen participation in local planning process helps achieve social equity goals set by advocacy planners (Davidoff, 1965). The City of Los Angeles encourages the interaction between the general public (especially the powerless and disadvantaged groups) and its Planning Department through such means as public outreaches, case hearings, community and other stakeholder meetings.

Furthermore, Los Angeles City also has numerous community organizations and certified neighborhood councils to empower local residents and promote plural interests. This is generally in line with some of the radical planning ideals (Grabow and Heskin, 1973).

It is worth noting that the Los Angeles City Planning Department has developed the state-of-the-art Zoning Information and Map Access System (ZIMAS). ZIMAS provides local residents with a powerful technical tool to present an Internet-based Geographic Information System (GIS) with the purpose of empowering its users with the ability to instantly retrieve property information within the framework of a user-friendly and inherently self-intuitive interface. This makes zoning information more open and transparent to its users. In addition to zoning information, the urban planning management system in Los Angeles has a very advanced feature: E-government. All planning-related forms are provided online with detailed filing instructions. E-government is expected to play a more important role in improving the City's urban planning management system in the future.

Therefore, the existing urban planning management system in Los Angeles has its obvious strengths and merits for other cities to emulate. However, the City still falls short of incorporating more market-based planning measures strongly endorsed by Richardson and Gordon (1993), including congestion pricing, parking pricing, and emission charge. Under certain circumstances, marginal cost pricing and other economic approaches are perhaps more effective than purely regulatory approaches in addressing urban planning issues (Boarnet and Crane, 2001). Of course, efficiency and equity goals should be properly balanced before implementing any pricing strategies.

5. Summary of Findings

The City of Los Angeles has a very sound urban planning management system. The effective functioning of this system relies on the seamless integration and coordination among its institutional subsystem, legal subsystem, operational subsystem, and technical subsystem.

The Los Angeles urban planning process incorporates some of the most important planning principles advocated by rational comprehensive planners, incremental planners, advocacy planners, and radical planners. The well-balanced city general plan elements, zoning ordinances, subdivision maps, and other documents are prepared pursuant to the state's General Plan Guidelines and other planning-related laws. Overall, compared to other smaller cities, Los Angeles has a much larger city planning department, more complicated planning procedures, and more advanced technical capabilities. Local citizens also have more opportunities to participate in urban planning process.

This author recommends incorporating more market-based planning measures into the existing urban planning management system. The public sector-led urban planning process in the U.S. has to be more "marketized" in order to better meet the requirements imposed by its market-oriented economy.

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