Envision San Jose 2040 General Plan Evaluation

Phu Dang

Department of Urban Studies & Planning, USP 124

University of California San Diego

Dr. Rabinowitz Bussell

December 3, 2022

Acknowledgements

(1) **Dr. Mirle Rabinowitz Bussell**, *Associate Teaching Professor and Director of Undergraduate Studies, Urban Studies and Planning,* for instructions and guidance.

(2) **Mr. Pierluigi Oliverio**, *One of 37 Task Force members and a Councilmember in District 6,* for a personal, 1-on-1, interview for additional insights on the Envision process.

Introduction

In a collective effort to address key urban, environmental issues, and determine a vision for future growth in light of a rapidly growing population, the city of San Jose launched its campaign for *Envision San Jose 2040* in 2007 as an update to the *San Jose 2020 General Plan*. The new general plan was adopted by the City Council in 2011 and serves as the development blueprint for San Jose through policies and approaches that seek to mitigate growth problems and concerns, meet the needs of the population, and be reflective of the community's interests. San Jose's effort to facilitate community discussion and be inclusive of new ideas are clearly shown throughout the four-phase evolution of the plan, where extensive community meetings and workshops are hosted by the Task Force, a 37-member Council-appointed representation of the city's population. Beginning in Phase 1, which includes vision inception and guidelines that outline five scenarios of various land uses that accommodate differing numbers of job and housing growth, followed by a thorough analysis and selection of the scenarios in Phases 2 and 3 for the development of a complete draft plan document. In the final phase, the draft plan is subject to intensive environmental review and frequent outreach activities that continually seek to incorporate public inputs for the final plan. The *Envision San Jose 2040* general plan effectively outlines the city's vision for growth using clearly defined urban development strategies that seek to improve equitability, leverage existing strengths, and emphasize sustainability while incorporating community sentiment in the planning process.

History of the City

Formal urban planning in San Jose dates back to its first general plan in 1960 as a response to the city's massive gain in population over the years post-WWII. Since, the city's vision and development patterns have remained consistent over roughly 50 years in the drive for

downtown revitalization, community engagement, and fiscal sustainability. The city also adopted numerous other innovative initiatives throughout its planning history, most notably the introduction of growth management in the 1976 plan and smart growth as a planning strategy in 2001. According to 2021 census data, San Jose is home to 983,489 people with a median household income of $117,324. The city is proud to embrace a diverse demographic of 31% Hispanic, 25.1% white, 37.2% Asian, 2.9% African-American, 0.6% Native American, and 0.5% Pacific Islander. The median sale price for all home types is $1,239,000 with 43% and 57% of households are renter-occupied and owner-occupied, respectively.

Summary of the Plan

The *Envision San Jose 2040* general plan centers its land use policies and practices surrounding desires for employment growth, stable revenue generation, sustainable and attractive place-making, and providing high-quality government services. The plan seeks to achieve its ambitious goals through the formation of Urban Villages that emphasize mixed-use and support multi-modal transportation. Urban Villages are planned in close proximity to major regional transit centers and incorporate residential, office and employment activities to facilitate high-density development, with streets and corridors designed to provide walkable, bicycle-friendly urban centers (Land Use, p. 19). In effect, the city envisioned mixed-use development to increase its fiscal stability through more efficient use of space and increasing tax revenue from retail, as well as housing growth to address the housing shortage and accommodate a growing population. Furthermore, in acknowledgment of the substantial high-technology manufacturing, research, and innovation that are the prominence of Silicon Valley, the plan emphasizes industrial use through preserving existing industrial areas and conversion from other unproductive uses. Similarly, in item FS-3.11, the plan includes annexation policies that strongly

support its goals for preservation and environmental protection by limiting the area available for annexation to be within the Urban Growth Boundary, and additional intended uses must require minimal or no use of municipal services, such as a landfill, or composting facility that should be located in remote areas (Land Use, p. 18). Besides, several planning methods and regulations in regard to aesthetics and livability were considered as contributions to the city's attractiveness to future investments and prospective inhabitants; as such, one of the major development strategies is form-based planning for cohesive neighborhoods with a community lifestyle through density requirements and reduced surface parking lots in high-density areas (Land Use, p. 17).

As the 5th-ranked best place to live in America (Business Insider, 2022), San Jose faces a paramount challenge to meet a continually rising housing demand that perhaps led to the city's reputation as the "sprawling city." In response, the general plan outlines a holistic approach to planning housing development through 2040 that focuses on affordable, sustainable, and high-quality housing in a variety of product types. Since the city is largely developed within its limits and new developments are restricted to within the Urban Growth Boundary, the plan focuses on high-density urban forms with reduced automobile dependency through conversion of older commercial areas to mixed-use, including areas that support mixed-use or previously zoned for housing development (Housing, p. 17). Through housing, in item H-4, the plan aspires to advance the city's fiscal, climate, and environmental goals by minimizing consumption of natural resources at both the development and individual level, in which green building principles and policies are implemented to maximize sustainability and operational efficiency. For individuals, safe, walkable, bikeable, transit-oriented communities would inspire lower auto dependency, hence lower vehicle miles traveled, and reduced energy usage (Land Use, p. 33). Being home to conceivably the world's largest concentration of talent and innovative businesses, along with

favorable weather and close proximity to prestigious higher-education institutions and large tech campuses, these factors have skyrocketed housing costs, placing San Jose as the 8th most expensive city in the nation (Rocket Mortgage, 2022). In light of the severe housing shortage and low affordability, evident in item H-2, the city is committed to have at least 15% of the new housing stock affordable to low, very low, and extremely low income households through providing financial assistance programs and permitting secondary units on single-family homes (H-2.1, 2.5, Housing, p. 30).

Another critical urban planning concern of the *Envision* process, addressed in chapter 6, is transportation and regional circulation, which directly affect people's travel mode choices, safety, and have far-lasting environmental impacts that must be carefully assessed. In conjunction with the development of Urban VIllages and high-density neighborhoods, the plan's transportation policies aim to lower automobile dependency, while increasing pedestrian, bicycle, and transit travel (Transportation, p. 36). Particularly, in tandem with, yet separate from, high-density and mixed-use development patterns, the plan contributes to the aforementioned goals by adopting an innovative vision to expand the trail system and recognizing trails as transportation. In goal TN-2, the *Envision* planning effort includes policies that enhance the safety and convenience of trails through installing recreational amenities along trails and increased accessibility with adjacent neighborhoods (Transportation, p. 61). In addition, evident in goal TR-6, the city's transportation policies are designed to support people, as well as commerce and industry, where freight routes are carefully analyzed and mapped to minimize contact between people and truck traffic that would increase safety and efficiency in goods movement (Transportation, p. 46).

Notably, the general plan dedicates a sizable portion of its policies towards noise and vibration reduction to improve standards of living and minimize the impact of noise on people. Specifically, the plan highlights strict examination of land use compatibility and creative urban designs as tools to control community noise levels. For instance, in item EC-1.1, the plan establishes acceptable interior and exterior noise levels for different types of uses, with exceptions for the areas in Downtown and surrounding the San Jose International Airport (Noise, p. 39). Also, acoustical analyses and noise suppression studies, such as attenuation methods in street and corridor designs, will be conducted to ensure land uses are compatible with their respective environments and are compliant with the city-adopted California Building Code (Noise, p. 41).

Evaluation

The *Envision San Jose 2040* general plan is exceptionally informational, readable, and is readily available to the public as it is conveniently located on the same website where San Jose residents would pay water bills. In support, the plan explicitly states that community engagement is a principle requirement to optimize the production of mixed-use housing projects in Urban Villages (Housing, p. 16). It is important to delineate the motivational factors behind the plan for an accurate comprehension of its nature, that is the city's vision was formed to embody its values and meet the community's interests and needs. As an illustration, Pierluigi Oliverio, a Task Force member of the *Envision* process in a personal interview for this evaluation, summarized the plan as a response to "sprawl and a lack of jobs, for residents had to commute long distances." Consequently, as reflected in the city's land use vision and policies, concerns for livability and meeting residents' needs were foundational to the creation of the general plan. In the historical component of the plan's introduction, the authors meaningfully accentuated on the costs of the

city's rapid and largely uncontrolled growth resulting from the lack of implementation guidelines and practical considerations in the 1960 General Plan, which initiated the drive for a more involved use of a better general plan and raised interests in growth management (Land Use, p. 33). Although seemingly trivial, this retrospective reference is a strength of the plan by showing much time and effort have been invested in studying the city's past, in which empirical knowledge can significantly improve the efficacy of new policies. Economically, in the context of Silicon Valley, location and regional employment variation play a strategic role in determining fiscal contributions to cities. For example, when asked about the effects of Apple Park on San Jose's fiscal stability, Mr. Oliverio explained that the attractive campus has actually taken more from the city than contributed; this is because the resulting jump in high-paying jobs recruited talents predominantly from San Jose, however, the city of Cupertino holds all fiscal benefits through a geographical advantage. Thus, it is pivotal that the *Envision* process incorporated fiscal implications in determining land uses, as evident in item IE-1.2 with a plan for the retention and expansion of employment activities (Land Use, p. 4), to effectively leverage Silicon Valley's talent concentration. The city's unceasing drive for fiscal sustainability and employment growth resemble a long-term perspective towards a highly diverse economic base that promises a stable and thriving future for San Jose. In addition, from downtown revitalization, to high-density development, and restrictive annexation policies, the plan covers all the territory within its boundaries in a coherent manner. For example, item FS-3 outlines policies for a land use framework that spans from urban centers to remote areas beyond the Urban Service Area (Land Use, p. 17-18); having an extensive scope of coverage strengthens the plan for its in-depth and inclusive nature. Furthermore, the plan includes adequate maps that clearly specify different growth approaches throughout the city, such as the Planned Growth Areas Diagram that outlines

Urban Villages, employment, and specific plan areas (Land Use, p. 30); this helps prevent differences in policy interpretation and conflicts over boundaries.

In regards to housing, the creation of mixed-use Urban Villages and preservation of existing single-family neighborhoods are the primary housing mechanisms to improve affordability and accommodate San Jose's growing housing demand. Since the city is largely developed to its growth boundary and annexation is not an option, new developments must rely on conversion from older commercial areas to mixed-used (Land Use, p. 17); this demonstrates that the plan is current because older, traditional shopping malls are declining in quality and demand due to competition from online shopping, making this strategy highly feasible under the contemporary and future trends in real estate. More importantly, the *Envision* effort successfully addresses all locally relevant issues by helping the senior population age in place, as well as tackling the housing shortage and affordability concerns. For example, in item H-1, the plan includes policies to preserve and rehabilitate the existing housing stock, while leveraging financial resources for purchasing assistance programs that would foster the "starter" housing market of varying product types (Housing, p. 28). In effect, the aforementioned policies would not only significantly improve people's living qualities through more housing stability, a stronger "starter" housing market would also empower the younger working population of San Jose by providing adequate housing that can serve as "equity building" places. Moreover, the plan is consistent with state policy in assuring its guidelines and that of the state are in alignment regarding the diversification of housing types and increased density. For instance, the plan aims to facilitate second units on single-family homes in conformance with the Secondary Unit Ordinance (Housing, p. 30). Likewise, the emphasis on multiple housing product types is a

strength of the plan by serving as a direct response to the problem of the "missing middle" home types that is prevalent in any discussion of the housing shortage.

In addressing issues related to transportation and circulation, the general plan clearly delineates an implementation plan that shows how different components of the city would be integrated for the betterment of communities; such as the action plan for the expansion and improvement of the trail system, where trails and amenities are placed strategically to encourage usage from residents in adjacent neighborhoods and contribute to the city's vision of an active lifestyle (Transportation, p. 61). Additionally, the plan contains the statutory criteria required by the state law that greatly contribute to the efficacy and legitimacy of its policies and implementation. For instance, the plan's approach for transportation improvement that seeks to promote San Jose as a walkable and bikeable city is in accordance with the California Government Code Section 65302 and the California Complete Streets Act of 2008 that support a balanced, multi-modal transportation system (Transportation, p. 36). Besides, staying in accordance with the regioEvergreennal planning vision and growth trajectories strengthens the plan by presenting the city as one with a thoughtful, innovative, and effective planning scene. Supplemental to land use conversion and preservation efforts, San Jose also utilized relocation as a planning strategy to increase accessibility to urban services and improve circulation through lowered commute times and diversion of traffic at rush hours. From personal experience, the city adopted correctly its plan for relocation as large high-technology manufacturing and research facilities have been built in the Evergreen and Silver Creek suburbs that consist of primarily R1 zoned residential lots; whereas many parts of Santa Clara and Berryessa have been converted to single-family residential and townhomes, where the aforementioned industrial uses were located in clusters. As a result, the relocation of housing in closer proximity to employment reduced

commuting distances and increased employment in the southeast part of the city (Land Use, p. 35).

Holistically, the plan is internally consistent thanks to many frequent connections back to the central vision of the city, that is to have a thriving economy, high social equity, cohesive communities, and environmental leadership. Throughout the plan, every newly introduced strategy or planning approach is followed by a detailed analysis of how successful implementation would improve the city and align with the plan's vision; this helps delineate the distinctive roles of various ideas and strategies, hence preventing the risk of contradictions. For example, in addressing noise and vibration as hazardous disturbances, the plan succinctly described how the city's noise suppression approaches were determined based on land use and circulation policies, in which the rising interest in high-density development increased concerns for noise considerations due to disturbances from adjacent uses (Noise, p. 37); such references allow the audience to connect multiple elements of the plan together in a cogent perspective. Furthermore, the plan ensures that all elements are internally consistent by emphasizing how they are all interconnected and contribute to the Envision General Plan goals and policies. For instance, quality education, of which environmental sustainability is included, leads to equitable distribution of services that could attract businesses, and consequently, drive up demand for various transportation modes and improve neighborhoods (Land Use, p. 12). As an award-winning general plan, *Envision San Jose 2040* is a complete plan that addresses virtually all aspects of every urban issue it tackles. As an illustration, the plan touches every element of urban noise concerns, from acceptable noise levels, to land use compatibility, suppression techniques, and use exceptions, including a descriptive chart that shows specific decibel ranges for different land use categories (Noise, p. 40). Given the high levels of detail and depths of

coverage in the plan, it can ideally serve as a yardstick to evaluate any urban development blueprint and assess the scope and magnitude to which a city's urban concerns and planning elements are successfully addressed. For instance, the plan compared and contrasted against its own previous versions to highlight improvements and lessons learned (Land Use, p. 33); as such, the plan competently served as a yardstick to measure the comprehensiveness and effectiveness of urban planning strategies.

Conclusion

In an effort to elevate San Jose as one of leadership stature, both regionally and globally, the plan determined numerous fiscal, land use, environmental, and neighborhood-oriented goals, with ambitious milestones, that will maximize the city's prospects and significantly improve people's living standards. The *Envision San Jose 2040* general plan epitomizes an exemplary blueprint for the creation of thriving communities that embody the values of sustainability, equitability, safety, and inclusivity.

References

Pierluigi Oliverio. (2022). *One of 37 Task Force members in the Envision process and a Councilmember in District 6.* Personal Interview for This Paper

Tanza Loudenback, Mark Abadi, Erin McDowell, Sarah Jackson, Jordan Hart, and Erin Snodgrass. (2022). *The 50 best places to live in America based on cost of living, quality of life, and more.* Business Insider. https://www.businessinsider.com/us-news-best-places-to-live-in-america-2016-3

Katie Ziraldo. (2022). *10 Most Expensive Cities In The US.* Rocket Mortgage. https://www.rocketmortgage.com/learn/most-expensive-cities-in-the-us