

June 23, 2023

Daniel Findley
Planner III, Lead - Safety Element
1 Frank H. Ogawa Plaza
Oakland, CA 94612

RE: City of Oakland General Plan Update — Safety Element Public Review Draft

Dear Daniel Findley and Oakland Safety Element team:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the Draft Safety Element of the City of Oakland 2045 General Plan Update. SPUR is a Bay Area public policy non-profit organization with a presence in Oakland, San Francisco, and San José. We work across policy areas and political lines to solve the big problems the region faces and to build a more equitable, sustainable, and prosperous Bay Area. As an organization, our vision is to create a Bay Area where all people thrive; this includes ensuring that all Oaklanders have access to safe homes and neighborhoods, and are protected from environmental hazards like flooding, earthquakes, heat waves, fires, and more.

SPUR commends the Safety Element team on the comprehensive and multihazard framework of the draft safety element. However, we believe there is room for improvement. Our recommendations are as follows:

- 1) **Make post-disaster recovery planning a goal of the Element.** At present, the draft element lacks language around post-disaster recovery, despite the fact that Oakland's 2021 LHMP says that the City should "develop a post-disaster action plan that includes grant funding and debris removal components." We recommend that the City update its disaster recovery plan ([2010 Plan](#)), and include how equity priority communities will be supported through the recovery process. We also recommend that emergency sheltering and short-term interim housing be considered in the updated recovery plan.
- 2) **Commit to specific language and actions around reducing structural hazards from new and existing buildings.** We appreciate the Element's commitment to Oakland's existing mandatory soft story retrofit program. However, our region is operating on borrowed time and we must move swiftly to retrofit other existing at-risk building types. We recommend that Oakland begin work on determining the number of concrete buildings that are vulnerable to collapse in a major earthquake. We also recommend that new buildings be built to higher than life safety standards, especially housing developments, in order to ensure that these buildings remain functional after a major earthquake. Both of these recommendations are housing preservation and displacement issues.

- a) Model Policy language (from Alameda Safety Element 2040): “Building and infrastructure Standards. Maintain up-to-date building codes and encourage or require new and existing buildings and infrastructure to be designed or retrofitted for timely restoration of service (functional recovery) following an earthquake, with particular attention on the effects of liquefaction on buildings and infrastructure.”
 - b) Model Action language (existing buildings): Develop an inventory of **non-ductile and tilt-up** concrete buildings to determine risk in event of a major earthquake with goal of establishing a similar mandatory retrofit program for these at-risk buildings.
 - c) Model Action language (new buildings): Develop seismic performance targets for new buildings, especially housing developments, that allow the city to recover more quickly.
- 3) **Update Flooding/Sea Level Rise Policies based on new groundwater rise research:** [Recent studies](#) have shown that parts of Oakland, specifically flat neighborhoods with high proportions of residents of color, such as [West Oakland](#), are at risk of groundwater rise, which can lead to hazards such as flooding, liquefaction, movement of contaminants in soil, and damages to roads, building foundations, and utility lines. The current draft of the Safety Element does not adequately capture these risks. The draft must be updated to more explicitly state the risks imposed by groundwater rise and set out a clear plan for how the City plans to mitigate them.
- a) Model Policy language: Contaminated Sites. New and/or substantial construction on contaminated sites shall account for impacts of rising shallow groundwater on contaminant mobilization in project design and all steps of the site remediation process. This shall be documented in a vulnerability assessment and adaptation plan, which will also include a groundwater data monitoring plan. Groundwater data from the site should be used for the most accurate water level on-site; however, if groundwater wells are not present at the project site, databases such as GeoTracker71 can be used to access water table elevations nearby, using U.S. Geological Survey, California Department of Water Resources, or other. ([ONESHORELINE Planning Guidance](#))
 - b) Model Action language: **Shallow Groundwater Rise Vulnerability Assessment.** Coordinate with adjacent jurisdictions as appropriate to establish a detailed understanding of the effects of rising shallow groundwater on people, the built environment, and water supply. This includes buoyancy, seepage, infiltration, liquefaction, corrosion, and contaminant mobilization hazards. This assessment should have an interactive map component that will be updated based on site-specific geotechnical and topographic data submitted by new developments. ([ONESHORELINE Planning Guidance](#))
- 4) **Decarbonization Policies as tool for reducing post-earthquake fires and improving public health:** While the City of Oakland has [banned natural gas in new residential and commercial buildings](#), and the Safety Element draft mentions building electrification, these actions are not enough to tackle risks of post-earthquake fires caused by the rupture of gas pipelines during intense groundshaking. In accordance with the City’s [Equitable Climate Action Plan](#), the Safety Element must include updated, specific building decarbonization policies such as the installation of heat pumps in existing buildings, or the installation of gas shutoff valves during seismic retrofits and other major renovation projects. We also recommend that the Safety Element include a policy on installing gas shut-off valves in existing buildings at time of sale, transfer of title, and

when upgrades are planned for to gas pipes. The City of Alameda adopted this policy as an amendment to their [municipal building code](#).

- 5) Additional comments on the draft Safety Element.
 - a) SPUR would like to see the Safety Element take a more expansive view of safety. We appreciate the section on public safety highlighting the City's efforts to reimagine public safety and to address crime through environmental design. However, we believe that the element could more strongly relate its emergency preparedness policies to day-to-day wellness and health benefits for the community. With this, the safety element will represent not just a document governing emergencies, but also the present-day needs of all Oaklanders. In many ways, the inaugural EJ element considers these day-to-day health and safety issues that Oaklanders face. Due to this overlap, we suggest a stronger tie between the efforts of the Safety Element and the EJ Element (as well as the Housing Element, Climate Vulnerability Assessment, and LHMP).
 - b) For *Section 2.2 on Urban fires*. We recommend referencing the impacts of the Ghost Ship Warehouse Fire on the Oakland community and how the city has already taken action and will continue to learn about urban fire and building safety from this tragic event.

Thank you for your consideration of our comments and for your work on the Safety Element. Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to Sarah Atkinson, satkinson@spur.org.

Sincerely,



Ronak Davé Okoye
SPUR Acting Oakland Director & Chief of Strategic Initiatives



Sarah Atkinson
SPUR Earthquake Resilience Policy Manager