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2.0 Introduction

Santa Fe Forward – A visionary plan to prepare Santa Fe for a vibrant future through 2050.

This chapter provides an overview of the purpose of the Santa Fe general plan update, known as *Santa Fe Forward*, a regulatory overview as it pertains to comprehensive planning in New Mexico, an introduction to the regional setting and Study Area, and a guide to the assessment report.

2.1 Purpose of General Plan Update

Why Update the Plan Now?

Santa Fe, known as “the City Different,” is the oldest European-founded city in western North America. While its formal founding by the Spanish dates to 1610, its legacy extends even further, rooted in millennia of human presence and cultural continuity. Indigenous peoples have lived in the Santa Fe area since time immemorial, shaping what the city is today and what it can be tomorrow. Other cultures have and continue to shape the city. Santa Fe is known for its historic downtown and iconic central plaza, its vibrant arts community, and spectacular natural setting. During the twentieth century, it developed much like sunbelt cities across the United States, with production-built suburban neighborhoods served by roads designed for the automobile. It is the capital of New Mexico – the oldest state capital in the United States – yet its economy is not solely centered on government, with substantial tourism, science and technology, and film and media clusters. Santa Fe is also a diverse city, with an aging population and persistent struggles with pockets of multi-generational poverty. An updated general plan can help focus the community in heading toward a common vision to capitalize on and create opportunities, and innovatively solve the challenges coming down the path in the twenty-first century.

The current City of Santa Fe General Plan was adopted in 1999. Developing an update to the general plan is a prime opportunity for an actionable framework and updated vision that aligns with modern goals. Some benefits of the general plan update include:

- Community-driven plan enhancing quality of life,
- Guiding future investment,
- Empowering collaboration, and
- Aligning implementable policies with community priorities.

The general plan update will focus on addressing Santa Fe’s current needs and challenges while preparing for future opportunities through 2050. The 25-year planning horizon will consider the potential impacts of population and demographic change, climate change, regionalism, and technology through mid-century. Covering key areas like housing, transportation, land use, sustainability, and public services, the plan will take a comprehensive approach to shaping the city that reflects community priorities and long-term goals.

General Plan Update Purpose

Establishes a collective vision and policy roadmap for the next 25 years that aligns priorities, defines goals, and lays out implementation strategies.

2.2 Regulatory Overview

The State of New Mexico guides zoning regulations and comprehensive planning for municipalities and counties within the state. New Mexico State Statutes Chapter 3¹ regulates municipalities and Article 21 of this chapter provides the authority for zoning, including the ability to regulate and restrict density of population and location and use of buildings. Section 5 of Article 21 directs the regulations of the municipality to be in accordance with a comprehensive plan, and in New Mexico statute, the terms comprehensive plan, general plan, and master plan appear to be synonymous. Additionally, Article 19 of New Mexico State Statutes regulates planning commissions of municipalities, delegating authority of those commissions “to enforce and carry out the provisions of law relating to planning, platting and zoning.” Section 9 of this article directs the planning commission to “prepare and adopt a master plan for the physical development of the municipality.” The New Mexico Department of Finance and Administration² indicates that in New Mexico State Statutes, the terms comprehensive plan and master plan appear to be synonymous. The New Mexico Department of Finance and Administration also provides guidance on the typical comprehensive planning process that includes an assessment of existing conditions of the typical elements of a comprehensive plan, including, but not limited to, land use, transportation, utilities, and natural resources.³

New Mexico Statute § 3-19-9 Master Plan (2024)

“The planning commission shall prepare and adopt a master plan for the physical development of the municipality In preparing the master plan, the planning commission shall make careful and comprehensive surveys and studies of existing conditions and probable future growth The plan shall be made with the general purpose of guiding and accomplishing a coordinated, adjusted and harmonious development of the municipality...”

At the regional level, the Santa Fe Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) guides transportation planning for the surrounding area and within the city. The Santa Fe MPO adopted the Santa Fe 2020 to 2045 Metropolitan Transportation Plan⁴ on May 28, 2020. This plan guides transportation projects within the city of Santa Fe, as well as in parts of Santa Fe County and in the Pueblo of Tesuque.

Santa Fe County adopted the 2015 Santa Fe County Sustainable Growth Management Plan⁵ in 2015. This plan guides sustainable growth in the unincorporated portions of the county. Though the goals and policies of this plan do not apply directly to the City of Santa Fe, the County and City coordinate at a regional level for planning purposes.

¹ <https://nmonesource.com/nmos/nmsa/en/item/4362/index.do#a1>

² <https://api.realfile.rtsclients.com/PublicFiles/60151d4795ce4d11abc799080b50384f/46c59417-fee4-4ecf-bae7-9c3ff10c5e60/Comprehensive%20Planning%20Template.pdf>

³ <https://www.nmdfa.state.nm.us/local-government/community-planning/questions-on-planning/steps-in-comprehensive-planning/#::~text=existing%20trends%20topics-,Q.,zoning%20code%20or%20subdivision%20ordinance>

⁴ https://santafemppo.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Santa-Fe-MTP_FINAL_low-res_8-15-23.pdf

⁵ https://www.santafecountynm.gov/uploads/documents/Sustainable_Growth_Management_Plan_Resolution_2015-155.pdf

The City of Santa Fe's Charter⁶ also provides direction on comprehensive planning. Section 2.03, Environmental Protection, directs the governing body to "protect, preserve and enhance the city's natural endowments, plan for and regulate land use and development, manage the city's growth, encourage source reduction, re-use and recycling of materials, and promote and maintain an aesthetic and humane urban environment." Section 2.04, Cultural and Neighborhood Preservation, further guide planning and development to respect the multi-cultural heritage and neighborhoods of the city. Section 2.06, General Plan, directs the governing body to establish and adopt the policies, goals, and objectives of the general plan, which was last updated in 1999. Santa Fe's municipal code (Chapter 14-3.2⁷) defines the general plan as "a guide for the city's land use decisions." The 1999 City of Santa Fe General Plan⁸ elements include heritage resources, land use, growth management, city character, transportation, infrastructure and public services, natural resources management, community services, and the institutional framework. The City drafted a Land Use and Urban Design Plan⁹ around 2015 to consider more recent development trends and plan for future growth. As of 2025, the City is working with the County to develop a water resource plan with a planning horizon of 75 years.

2.3 Regional Context and Setting

Located in north central New Mexico, Santa Fe is situated at the foot of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, the southernmost portion of the Rocky Mountains. Santa Fe is sited on a gently sloping escarpment about 20 miles east of the northern stretch of the Rio Grande River, and is defined by natural characteristics like rolling hills, tabletop mesas, and woodland comprised of juniper and piñon pine, New Mexico's state tree.

With elevations ranging from 6,000 to 8,720 feet above sea level, Santa Fe stands as the highest-elevation state capital in the United States, with an average elevation of approximately 7,200 feet. Santa Fe is the fourth largest city and the third largest metropolitan area in New Mexico. Santa Fe is included in the Albuquerque-Santa Fe-Los Alamos combined statistical area, an urbanized region of central New Mexico stretching over 100 miles, with an estimated population of 1,174,222 in 2024.¹⁰

Santa Fe is well connected to the rest of New Mexico and other states by a variety of transportation options. Long distance rail connections near Santa Fe include BNSF Railway and Amtrak, with local and regional commuter services provided by New Mexico Rail Runner Express. Interstate 25 (frequently known as I-25) runs from Las Cruces, New Mexico, to Buffalo, Wyoming; connecting Santa Fe with major population centers, including Albuquerque, New Mexico, and Denver, Colorado. The Santa Fe New Mexico Regional Airport functions as the city's commercial airport, with direct flights to four other commercial airports in three adjacent states.

⁶ <https://santafenm.gov/MunicipalCharter2020DIGITALversion.pdf>

⁷ https://library.municode.com/nm/santa_fe/codes/code_of_ordinances?nodeId=CH14LADE_ART14-3REAPPR_14-3.2AMGEPL

⁸ <https://santafenm.gov/land-use/current-planning/long-range-planning/general-plan-1999>

⁹ https://santafenm.gov/document_center/document/7663

¹⁰ U.S. Census Bureau, "Annual Estimates of the Resident Population for Combined Statistical Area in the United States and Puerto Rico: April 1, 2020 to July 1, 2024," Metropolitan and Micropolitan Statistical Areas Population Total: 2020-2024 Tables, Table csa-est2024-pop, 2025, <<https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/popest/2020s-total-metro-and-micro-statistical-areas.html>>, accessed on April 23, 2025.

Santa Fe's thriving arts and culture scene and seasonal outdoor recreation opportunities (such as skiing and nearby national monuments), make it a nationally significant hub for tourism.

2.4 Study Area

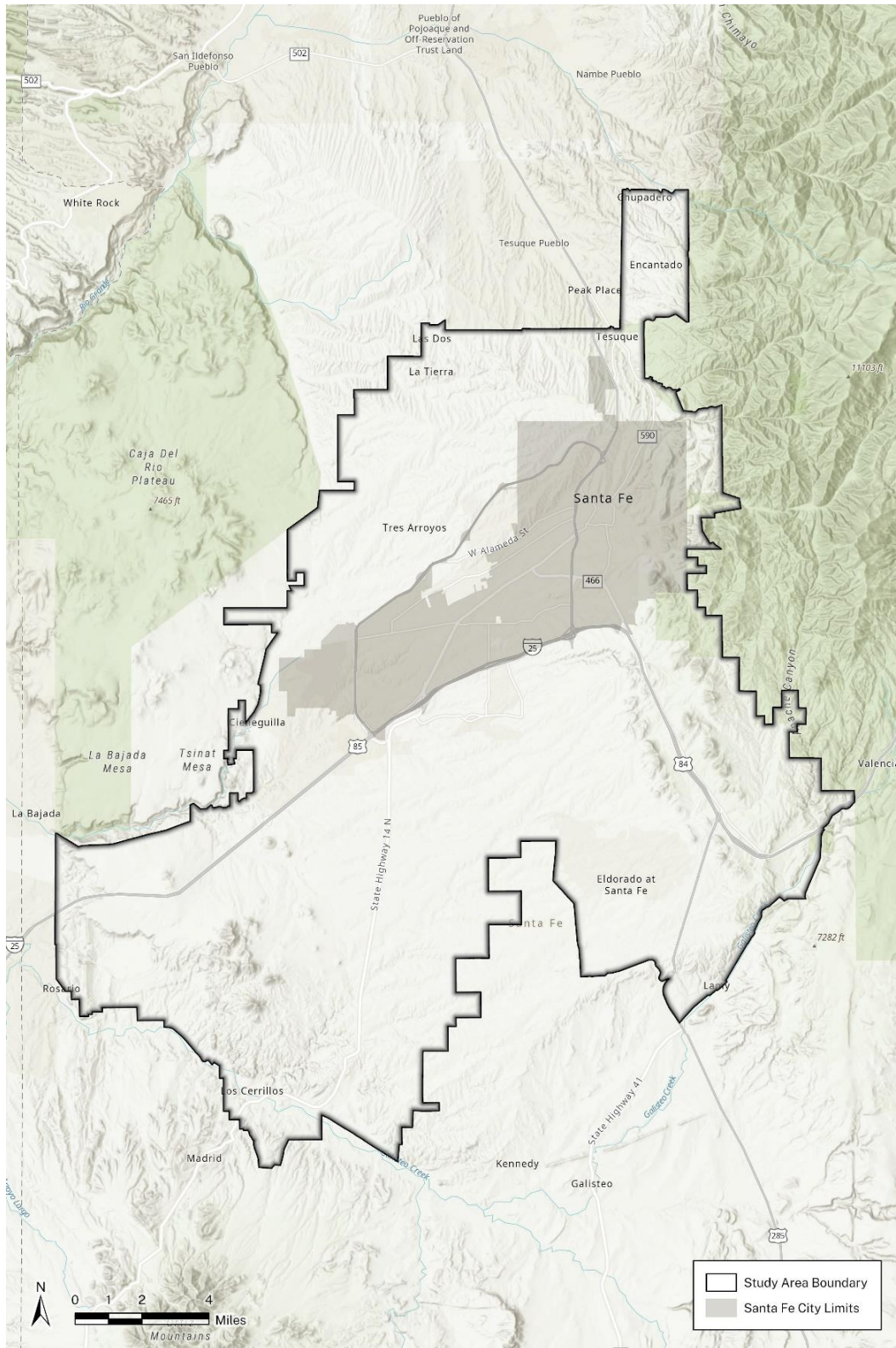
The Study Area boundary for the Santa Fe assessment report was developed by the project team to encompass not only the incorporated city limits of Santa Fe but also a broader region that includes surrounding unincorporated areas and traditional villages within Santa Fe County. This expanded boundary reflects the interconnected nature of communities within the greater Santa Fe area, where daily life, economic activity, transportation networks, and shared community resources frequently cross jurisdictional lines. The boundary was drawn with attention to existing settlement patterns, natural geography, and social and economic ties, in an effort to ensure that the assessment report considers all communities with a meaningful relationship to Santa Fe.

Included within the Study Area are several immediately adjacent populated areas in unincorporated Santa Fe County that, while not formally within city limits, function as integral parts of greater Santa Fe. In addition, the Study Area incorporates a number of traditional villages located outside of the city's boundaries. These villages have longstanding cultural, historical, and familial connections to the city, and many of their residents rely on Santa Fe for employment, education, healthcare, and commerce. Recognizing these dynamics allows for a more accurate and inclusive assessment of community needs, existing conditions, and trends.

The Study Area boundary does not include any areas outside of Santa Fe County and is also not coterminous with the boundary of Santa Fe County, which is the officially designated metropolitan statistical area. This was done primarily to exclude the town of Edgewood and nearby communities like Stanley and Madrid. Although these communities are within Santa Fe County, they have an equally strong, if not stronger relationship, to the East Mountains region of the Albuquerque metro area. Also excluded from the Study Area are the sovereign tribal nations and associated tribal reservation lands of Cochiti Pueblo, Kewa Pueblo, Nambe Pueblo, Pojoaque Pueblo, San Ildefonso Pueblo, and Tesuque Pueblo. Although these areas are not in the Study Area, the City of Santa Fe acknowledges that it stands on the current and traditional lands of these Pueblo peoples and other Indigenous tribes who have stewarded this region for generations and maintain a deep, enduring relationship with this place. Other traditional villages in the Pojoaque Valley are also not a part of the Study Area, due to their close cultural and economic connections with Española and Los Alamos.

It is important to note that the City of Santa Fe has no current plans to expand its municipal boundaries or pursue annexation of any surrounding areas. The establishment of the Study Area boundary is not a precursor to incorporation or jurisdictional change, but rather a tool to better understand the broader context in which Santa Fe exists. By including neighboring communities, the project team seeks to support informed decision-making, promote regional collaboration, and foster a shared vision for the future of the greater Santa Fe area. Figure 2-1 illustrates the Study Area boundary referenced in the assessment report.

Figure 2-1. Study Area Boundary



2.5 Character Areas and Corridors

The Character Areas and Corridors Map used for the Santa Fe assessment report was developed as a foundational planning tool to help visualize and contextualize the unique identities, functions, and development patterns of neighborhoods, districts and other areas.

The process began by reviewing information from existing planning documents, including land use plans, recognized neighborhood boundaries, recorded neighborhood associations, historical and local cultural context, and prevailing patterns of land use and built form. Each character area reflects a distinct sense of place, shaped by factors, such as land use, building form and typology, transportation infrastructure, and role in the regional economy. This approach helped distinguish primarily residential neighborhoods from commercial centers, institutional districts, and mixed-use hubs, while acknowledging the subtle differences in form and function within each category.

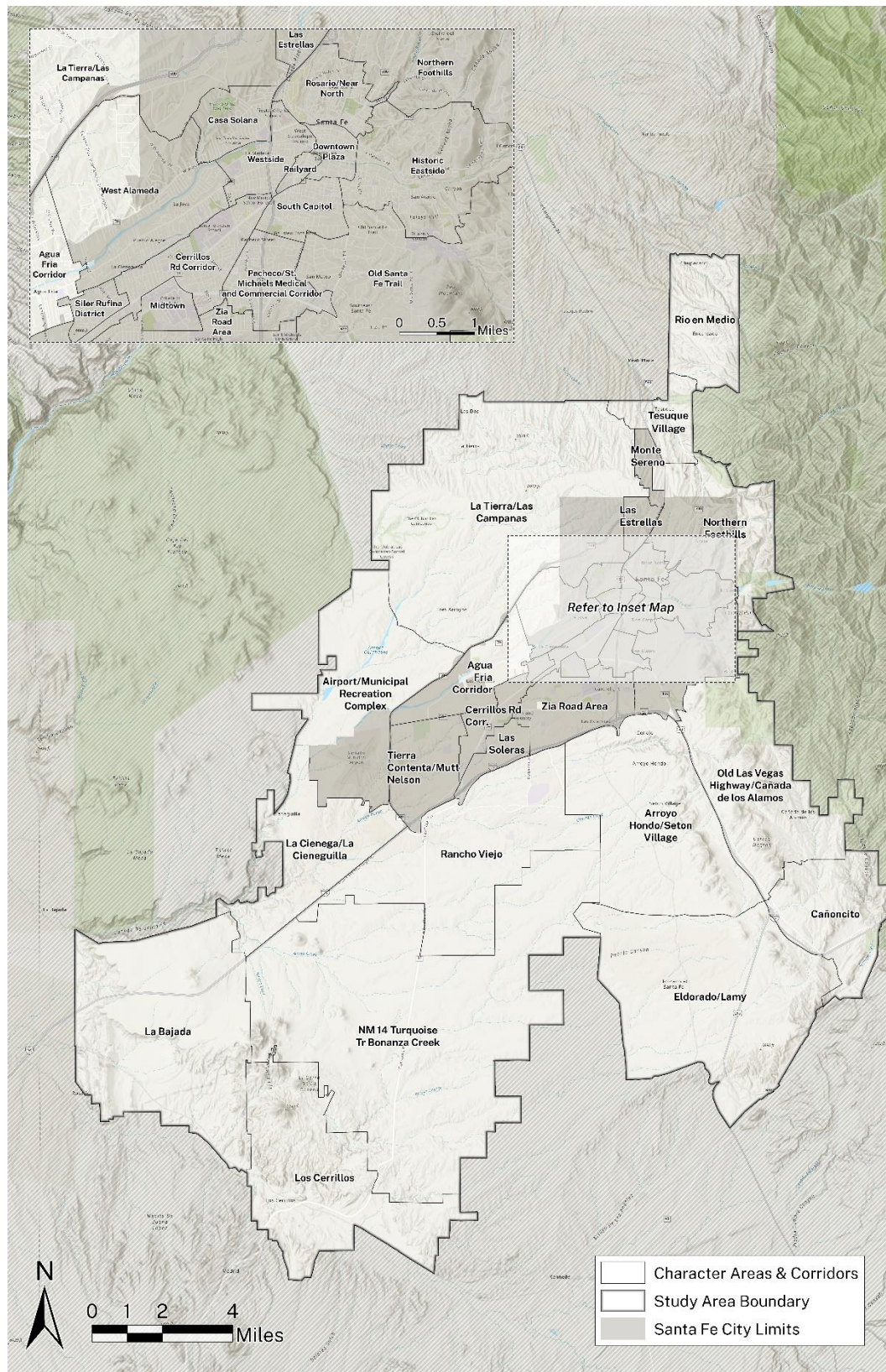
Several character areas are oriented around key corridors that serve as the structural backbone of Santa Fe's transportation network. These corridor-oriented areas often contain a mix of uses and are defined by higher levels of activity, connectivity, and access. Mapping these corridors as character areas allows for a deeper understanding of how they shape surrounding development and how future improvements can enhance their role in Santa Fe's overall identity and connectivity.

There are a total of 33 character areas and corridors identified by the project team for the purpose of the assessment report. These include 17 fully within the city of Santa Fe, 12 outside of city limits but within the Study Area, and four that include areas both within and outside of city limits. These character areas and corridors are listed below in Table 2-1, and reflected on Figure 2-2.

Table 2-1. Character Areas and Corridor Names

Character Area and Corridor Names		
Agua Fria Corridor	La Tierra/Las Campanas	Railyard
Airport/Municipal Recreation Complex	Las Estrellas	Rancho Viejo
Arroyo Hondo/Seton Village	Las Soleras	Rio en Medio
Cañoncito	Los Cerrillos Road Corridor	Rosario/Near North
Casa Solana	Midtown	Siler Rufina District
Cerrillos Road Corridor	Monte Sereno	South Capitol
Downtown/Plaza	NM 14/Turquoise Trail/Bonanza Creek	Tesuque Village
Eldorado/Lamy	Northern Foothills	Tierra Contenta/Mutt Nelson
Historic Eastside	Old Las Vegas Highway/Cañada de los Alamos	West Alameda
La Bajada	Old Santa Fe Trail	Westside
La Cienega/La Cieneguilla	Pacheco/St. Michael's Medical and Commercial Corridor	Zia Road Area

Figure 2-2. Character Areas and Corridors Map



2.6 Recent Significant Local Policy and Civic Matters

In recent years, the New Mexico state government has undertaken several bold policy initiatives that intend to help improve education, childcare, and health services statewide, while also navigating longstanding structural and legal barriers. In Santa Fe, these developments are shaping how residents experience public services and economic opportunity.

One of the most persistent legal hurdles to economic development in Santa Fe – and throughout the state – is the “anti-donation clause” in New Mexico’s constitution. Originally adopted to safeguard public funds and prevent government corruption, the clause prohibits public entities like county agencies and school districts from providing financial support to private individuals, corporations, or associations. While rooted in a desire to maintain ethical governance, the clause has proven to be a significant impediment to public-private partnerships that could otherwise help fund housing, infrastructure, and economic development projects. Local governments across the state regularly cite the anti-donation clause as a major constraint on their ability to catalyze needed economic growth and support local investment initiatives.

Despite such legal barriers, New Mexico has made significant strides in education policy. The state is now a national leader in tuition-free higher education, thanks to the New Mexico Opportunity Scholarship. Building on the earlier Lottery Scholarship, which fell short as tuition rates increased, the Opportunity Scholarship now covers tuition and fees for approximately 55,000 students enrolled in the state’s 29 public colleges and universities. This move has substantially increased access to post-secondary education, especially for lower-income and non-traditional students, helping to reduce educational inequality and build a more skilled workforce.

Equally groundbreaking is New Mexico’s establishment of a constitutional right to childcare and universal prekindergarten. Passed through a constitutional amendment and approved by voters, this initiative was designed to combat the high costs and limited availability of childcare, which had long been a burden on working families. As a result, over 30,000 children now benefit from free, high-quality childcare and early education. This measure not only provides essential support to families but also lays the groundwork for long-term improvements in educational outcomes and economic mobility.

Despite this recent progress, Santa Fe – and New Mexico more broadly – faces ongoing challenges with educational attainment and student performance. Based on the New Mexico KIDS COUNT Data Book, only 21 percent of New Mexico fourth-grade students were reading at grade level, and in the 2023-2024 school year, only 40 percent of students in the Santa Fe Public School Districts were proficient in English Language Arts, and 22 percent in mathematics¹¹. These issues related to educational performance, both real and perceived, represent a serious barrier to economic development, growth, and employee

¹¹ <https://www.nmvoices.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/24NMKidsCount-DataBook-2024.pdf>

recruitment; families with children need to feel confident in school quality before choosing Santa Fe as a place to settle down.

However, one of the most urgent and unresolved issues in New Mexico remains its shortage of healthcare professionals. The state has seen a net loss of physicians in recent years, at a time when the national healthcare workforce is growing. Several factors may contribute to this decline, including New Mexico's gross receipts tax rate, limited reimbursement rates, and the perceived legal risk of practicing medicine due to frequent malpractice lawsuits. This shortage is particularly problematic as the state's aging population places increased demands on the healthcare system, especially in Santa Fe.

Locally, Santa Fe also faces unique hurdles tied to housing, affordability, and economic development. Affordable housing remains a top concern, with limited inventory and high costs driving a wedge between income levels and housing access. Affordability challenges are even more stark when New Mexico's multigenerational poverty levels are considered. Santa Fe has pockets of entrenched poverty, which underpins other social struggles like those with education. Recent data showing that Santa Fe is becoming wealthier may represent the displacement of vulnerable populations through gentrification, rather than true progress in increasing prosperity for all.

Meanwhile, sustainability efforts, such as water conservation, are central to Santa Fe's civic agenda, given the city's semi-arid climate and reliance on regional water sources. As the climate continues to get hotter, drier, and more unpredictable, Santa Fe residents will have to carefully consider how City policy can shape resilience and adaptation. In light of increasing pressure to develop more sustainably, the City is taking significant steps to update its Green Building Code so that Santa Fe developers and builders can be better prepared to meaningfully respond to climate change.

In summary, both New Mexico and Santa Fe present a pair of contrasts: forward-thinking in its social policies but constrained by outdated legal structures, ongoing professional shortages, persistent poverty, and poor educational outcomes. The progress made in childcare and education highlights the potential of bold public investment, while healthcare access and economic development remain pressing concerns. Addressing these issues will require innovative thinking and continued public engagement to ensure that all residents can benefit from the state's promising policy initiatives. Additionally, identifying and addressing the root cause of issues such as declining school enrollment, multigenerational poverty, and low proficiency in reading are required to secure a prosperous future for Santa Fe.

2.7 Assessment Report

It is important to have a clear understanding of what has already been accomplished in Santa Fe since 1999, the underlying fundamentals of the community, and how the general plan update can best address critical issues and opportunities. As a first step in the general plan update process, the assessment report provides an existing conditions analysis to build upon the goals, strategies, and programs that are already defined and lay the foundation for next steps in the planning process. The assessment report contains a review of existing city and regional plans, studies, and data to accurately capture existing conditions of Santa Fe. Existing policies that will influence growth and feasibility of development in the area are also identified. Key findings, including opportunities, challenges, gaps, and trends, for each topic area are provided to inform the recommendations in the general plan update.

In addition to documenting current conditions, the Assessment Report also evaluates how well the City has met the goals set in the 1999 General Plan. This appraisal considers both policy achievements and areas where progress has fallen short, providing an honest benchmark to guide future decision-making. By understanding past successes and shortcomings, the City can refine its strategies to better meet community needs in the years ahead.

Assessment Report Purpose

As a community atlas, the Assessment Report will serve as a baseline of understanding and a foundation to inform Scenario Planning and the content of the General Plan Update.

2.7.1 Report Organization

Each chapter of the assessment report contains narratives, maps, data analysis, and statistics that provide a current picture of the Santa Fe community. The chapters are structured as individual reports to provide an in-depth assessment of key topics that will inform long-range planning efforts for the general plan update. Taken as a whole, the assessment report is a comprehensive catalogue of community characteristics that make Santa Fe unique, including demographic information, built environment, history, arts and culture, economy, natural environment and resilience, and public facilities. Descriptions of the assessment report chapters are provided in Table 2-2.

Table 2-2. Assessment Report Chapters

Chapter No.	Chapter	Description
1	Executive Summary	A summary of key findings and input from public engagement.
2	Introduction	Overview of the purpose of the Santa Fe General Plan Update, New Mexico regulations for comprehensive plans, regional setting and study area, and a guide to the Assessment Report.
3	Demographic Profile	Discussion of the characteristics that shape the communities and culture of Santa Fe, the economic outlook, anticipated growth, and the factors that drive these forces.

Chapter No.	Chapter	Description
4	Land Use, Community Places, and Open Space and Parks	Description of Santa Fe's land use and zoning, significant community places, and open spaces and parks.
5	Historical and Cultural Resources	Overview of Santa Fe's history, and the identification and management of historical, cultural, and archaeological resources.
6	Arts and Culture	Overview of the existing arts and culture community that represents the distinctive character of Santa Fe.
7	Housing	Description of Santa Fe's housing trends, needs, gaps, and programs.
8	Economic Development	Description of Santa Fe's economic trends and demographic drivers, the city's employment, workforce, and major industry clusters, and the local real estate market.
9	Parcel Availability Inventory	The Parcel Availability Inventory analysis uses a variety of data indicators to identify vacant parcels and parcels that have varying potential to be redeveloped. This analysis will inform the preparation of future plan scenarios within three broad categories: preservation areas, enhancement areas, and investment areas.
10	Transportation	Assessment of the current transportation network and infrastructure within Santa Fe.
11	Community Services and Facilities	Description of the community services and facilities that are present in Santa Fe, including public safety resources, health infrastructure, education, and public and private utilities.
12	Natural Resources	Assessment of the current state of Santa Fe's natural resources, including biological resources, habitat conservation, soils, hillsides, natural landscapes, and environmental protection.
13	Resilience and Climate Change	Overview of climate trends and natural hazards that impact Santa Fe.
14	Water	Inventory of Santa Fe's existing water systems and assessment of existing and future water supply.
15	Governance	Overview of the city, regional, and state governance structures.

Chapter No.	Chapter	Description
16	Equity	Equity analysis identifying census tracts with concentrations of underserved or overburdened populations, based on household, transportation, and environmental indicators. Uses a data-driven, tiered scoring framework with demographic overlays to highlight communities facing the highest levels of disadvantage and inform focused strategies in the General Plan update.
17	Policy Implications and Recommendations	Assessment of the 1999 General Plan and recommendations for the General Plan Update based on Assessment Report findings and input from public engagement.

Sources

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