

Fortuna Business Community Input and Recommendations To General Plan Update and Strategic Plan May 19th, 2026

A Bridge to the Future

Introduction

The City of Fortuna is updating its General Plan and developing a new Strategic Plan for the city. Sixty-four business owners, executives, chamber members and downtown merchants in Fortuna completed an economic survey to provide input for those plans. That input and following assessment of Fortuna's current economic condition, it is clear that for the first time in 140 years, Fortuna and the Eel River Valley does not have an economic anchor providing financial stability for many families, businesses and the city. The decline of timber industry employment twenty years ago and the collapse of cannabis five years ago is now resulting in a declining population, increasing poverty rates, reduced economic activity and city services facing a financial crisis. A new economic vision building upon the assets in our community needs to be developed and action must be taken to stabilize and then strengthen our economy. Over seventy business and community leaders signed a letter to the city recommending a community led workgroup tackle these issues. The city is supportive. Other communities similar in size to Fortuna and previously timber based have successfully addressed these kinds of challenges. All segments of our community will need to be involved in these discussions.

Business Survey Results - Executive Summary

The collective input from all sectors, restaurants, retail, developers and contractors, ranching and dairy, industrial and manufacturing, grocery and beverage, agriculture and natural resources, healthcare, hospitality and tourism, downtown merchants, and general respondents, reveals a consistent and clear narrative: Fortuna is widely viewed as a wonderful place to live, rich in natural beauty, community spirit, and strategic location, but economically underperforming relative to its assets. Business owners and stakeholders describe the city as stable yet stagnant, with significant untapped potential. Across nearly every sector, respondents expressed pride in Fortuna's small-town character, riverfront setting, redwood identity, and family-friendly culture. However, they also emphasized structural economic weaknesses that must be addressed, if Fortuna is to thrive long-term.

The most consistent concern across sectors is the lack of economic diversification and the loss of anchor industries such as timber and cannabis. Many participants described the current economy as retail and service heavy, without a strong base of high-paying employers to drive disposable income and sustained growth. Without new industry or exportable economic drivers, local spending power remains limited, retail leakage continues to neighboring cities and online platforms and municipal revenues struggle to grow. There is strong consensus that Fortuna needs to attract manufacturing, value-added natural resource industries, or other scalable economic engines to replace the industries that once supported middle-class wages.

Housing availability and affordability emerged as a second dominant theme. Nearly every sector identified housing as a direct barrier to workforce attraction and business expansion. Employers struggle to recruit and retain employees due to limited housing supply, aging rental stock, and rising costs. Healthcare providers report building their own housing units to accommodate staff, developers cite high fees and permitting delays that hinder new construction, and business owners consistently link workforce shortages to housing constraints. Participants emphasized that housing is not merely a social issue but a central economic development challenge that affects nearly every industry.

Downtown vitality and retail leakage were also repeatedly cited. Many stakeholders described Main Street as lacking vibrancy, cohesion, and destination appeal. Retail dollars are flowing to Eureka, Costco, and online retailers, while downtown struggles with limited variety, insufficient foot traffic, and an unclear identity. Respondents called for beautification, stronger visual appeal, more concentrated retail uses, and anchor attractions that would give residents and visitors a reason to stop and stay. Several bold ideas were proposed, including pedestrian-oriented redesigns, historic district branding, expanded events, and leveraging the Great Redwood Trail and Riverwalk to activate the core.

Another cross-sector theme was the need for more efficient permitting processes, clearer regulatory pathways, and stronger city capacity. Developers, industrial operators, healthcare leaders, and downtown merchants all referenced delays, rising fees, and limited staffing capacity as obstacles to growth. There is widespread support for creating or strengthening a dedicated economic development function, improving interdepartmental coordination, and fostering a more proactive “how can we help you succeed” approach within city operations.

Finally, nearly every sector emphasized that Fortuna’s greatest competitive advantage lies in its natural and cultural assets—its redwoods, Eel River, climate, outdoor recreation, rural character, and friendly community identity. However, participants

repeatedly stated that the city does not effectively promote or unify these strengths into a cohesive brand. There is strong interest in positioning Fortuna as a gateway to the redwoods, a river-centered destination or a sports and recreation hub. The Mill Site and riverfront redevelopment were consistently identified as catalytic opportunities that could reshape the city's economic trajectory, if executed strategically.

In summary, Fortuna's stakeholders see a city with strong foundational assets but lacking a diversified economic base, adequate housing supply, downtown vitality, streamlined development processes and a unified identity. There is broad agreement that meaningful progress will require coordinated leadership, strategic industry recruitment, housing expansion, downtown revitalization and a bold but practical branding and development strategy centered on Fortuna's unique natural advantages. The community is ready for forward momentum; what is needed now is alignment, execution capacity, and a clear economic vision that translates pride in place into measurable progress.

Action Plan

Community Led Workgroup - *Providing overall strategic leadership and guidance*

Workgroup members-

- John Egan - Developer/Rancher
- Corey Fitze - Eco Medical Waste
- Jeana McClendon - George's Glass
- Tina Christiansen - Coldwell Banker
- Amy Nilsen - Fortuna City Manager
- Ben McWhorter - Sequoia Gas
- Cody Hurst - The Hurst Group
- Martha Spencer - Planner/Resource Dev.
- Kevin Bradley - Kreations Auto Body
- **Two additional members to be confirmed.**

Tasks/Responsibilities:

- Draft a new economic vision and unique brand for Fortuna, leveraging its assets while preserving its historical character and culture.
- Identify leads and provide strategic oversight of community workgroups.
- Engage the broader community.

Community Workgroups

- *Downtown Revitalization* - Develop a plan to revitalize Downtown/Main Street aligned with Fortuna's natural/historical/cultural assets and future directions.
Lead -
- *Tourism* - Promote tourism, including a regional partner strategy similar in concept to "The Wine Country" in Napa, Sonoma and Mendocino counties. Package tourism experiences. Build upon Fortuna's current schedule of annual events. Develop strategies to attract conferences and youth sports tournaments.
Lead -
- *Business Development* - Actively pursue business development and attraction for the Mill Site and Riverwalk areas. Lead -
- *Remote Workers* - Attract remote workers through targeted outreach, offering support services and incentives. Lead -
- *Business Support* - Provide support services to existing and new businesses (business development, retention, expansion and new business start-ups).
Lead -
- *Workforce Development* - Strengthen work experience/internship opportunities with local education and promote youth entrepreneurship through competitions, mentoring and support. Lead -
- *Housing Availability/Affordability* - Develop strategies to meet current and future housing demand. Lead -
- *City Services* - Increase capacity using an ombudsman service style approach with permitting, regulations and business development/attraction incentives.
Lead -

Tasks/Responsibilities:

- Each lead solicits workgroup members.
- Workgroups develop and implement action plans.
- Engage the broader community.

