

# **COUNTYWIDE RURAL PLAN**

## **DISCUSSION**

The basic concept of the Countywide Rural Plan is to consolidate individual area plans (15 total) into a more unified rural area plan. Sub-regional planning policies and standards will remain to address North County, South County and coastal area distinctions. The Countywide Rural Plan will focus on policies that protect agriculture and important biological habitats, encourage growth in urban areas and at appropriate urban edges and include a more regional approach to growth, economic development, housing opportunities, resource protection, and better linkages between land use and transportation. In addition, watershed protection related to planning policies will take on a more significant role. Staff is prepared to proceed with this proposal, and is asking your Board to authorize processing of the needed amendments to the Land Use Element, the Land Use Ordinance, the Coastal Zone Land Use Ordinance and the Local Coastal Program.

### **Why do we need a new planning approach?**

A Countywide Rural Plan for the unincorporated areas will simplify the County General Plan by reducing the number of overlapping and redundant policies and standards that are common in many of the area plans, reduce time and costs for updating plans, and enhance the readability of the General Plan. Although many individual area plans have been updated over the years, a comprehensive review and update of the Land use Element and its organization has not occurred since it was originally adopted in 1981. In practice, updating areas plans has taken much longer and more costly than was envisioned when the area plan concept was adopted. Staff also believes a new approach is needed to comprehensively address countywide growth and resource-related issues. The proposed update will focus on the rural areas of the county and recommend policies that address region-based issues such as the relationship of land use and circulation; protection of production agricultural lands, watersheds, important biological habitats; location of jobs and housing closer to each other; and other region-based issues that the current system does not or cannot address.

A Countywide Rural Plan will address the growth and resource trends, and infrastructure and housing needs described in the preceding report A. It will deal with land use and growth-related issues in a more strategic approach throughout the unincorporated area, taking into account resources and growth patterns within cities, unincorporated communities and rural areas. Of particular importance will be planning for appropriate urban expansion areas, employment and housing with resources and infrastructure in collaboration with cities, towns, special districts and other agencies. The plan will also consider new population centers such as new towns or redevelopment of existing rural settlements. At the same time, strategies will be developed and implemented to help reduce undesired rural growth, thereby avoiding the costs associated with such development. New strategies will protect in the long-term important agricultural, open space and natural resources and rural character that contribute largely to the quality of life residents enjoy and expect

By encouraging and facilitating appropriate well-designed development in urban areas, and limiting inappropriate rural development, the Countywide Rural Plan will also help minimize costs of such development with regard to resources, cost of public services, and quality of life. Following are examples of those costs:

- Depleted groundwater resources require expensive solutions.

- Lost and impacted agricultural land
- Increased costs for sheriff and fire protection,
- Increased costs for rural road maintenance
- Increased infrastructure costs
- Impacted and lost biological resources
- Increased vehicle miles traveled and resulting increased greenhouse gas emissions
- Increased energy consumption
- Diminished rural character and separation between communities
- Potentially impacted agriculturally-oriented and other tourism
- Loss of quality of life factors that most residents desire

### **Authority**

Unlike the processing of land use permits, the first step when considering requested changes to the County General Plan or land use ordinances is for your Board to determine whether to initiate new legislation to change the rules. If you authorize this request for processing, the item will be scheduled for public hearings before the Planning Commission and your Board after the environmental review process and staff report is completed.

### **Major Issues**

#### Regional growth issues and the current Land Use Element

The Land Use Element of the County General Plan was last comprehensively updated in 1981, and since then, several of the 15 area plans, as well as some community plans, have been updated. Nevertheless, little has been accomplished to address growth issues through regional coordination and cooperation between cities, towns, rural areas, government agencies, and community service providers. For example, increasing traffic congestion on Highway 101 and air quality concerns are closely related to the relationship between the locations of jobs and housing. This imbalance throughout the county has resulted in significant increases in vehicle miles traveled.

As the region continues to attract new residents, a regional approach is needed to address growth issues, as well as other regional needs. The Countywide Rural Plan is intended to address region-related needs such as:

- the distribution of the region's "fair share" of affordable housing units as required by State regulations
- shared constraints, especially water supply and major infrastructure deficiencies
- agriculture, open space and habitat protection, and rural development
- growth areas around cities and towns
- urban/rural interface

The consequences of growth, as well as the potential solutions, cross jurisdictional boundaries; therefore, comprehensive solutions might be found from a more regional perspective.

The county's many area plans (in the Land Use and Circulation Elements of the County General Plan), together with planning area standards in Land Use Ordinance, are updated individually and in isolation, often without enough consideration and analysis of how they fit into or impact

regional growth, land use patterns, environment, and economies. In addition, over time, the area plans, other parts of the General Plan and the Land Use Ordinance have become loaded with policies, standards and programs. Many overlap, and some are duplicative. As a result, this current system with many separate areas plans is difficult for the public to use and is costly to maintain.

### **General Plan considerations**

The proposed Countywide Rural Plan, as envisioned, will help implement the Land Use Element General Goals in Framework for Planning. Following are some key topics for the plan:

- Balance the capacity for growth allowed by the Land Use Element with the sustained availability of resources.
- Maintain a distinction between urban and rural development by providing for rural uses outside of urban and village areas which are predominately agriculture, low-intensity recreation, residential and open space uses, which will preserve and enhance the pattern of identifiable communities.
- Identify important agricultural, natural and other rural areas between cities and communities and work with landowners to maintain their rural character.
- Design and maintain a sustainable land use pattern and population ~~capacity~~ that is consistent with the capacities of existing public services and facilities, and their programmed expansion where funding has been identified.
- Designate a pattern of strategically located commercial areas that are convenient to local residents and realistically related to market demand and the needs of the community.
- Provide new zoned areas within urban areas and at appropriate edge locations for industrial and commercial service enterprises that foster head of household jobs and that are located proximate to nearby housing opportunities.
- Integrate land use and transportation planning in coordination with cities to ensure that traffic and transportation demands can be safely and adequately accommodated.
- Work closely with cities to provide continuity between city and county land use planning and to achieve common land use goals through reciprocal agreements.

### **Concept of the Countywide Rural Plan**

A Countywide Rural Plan is the Land Use Element for the unincorporated rural areas and would focus on promoting policies that protect agriculture and important biological habitats, encourage growth in urban areas and take a more regional approach to growth, land use and circulation. It will implement a long-term countywide vision for development, rather than focusing on individual planning areas in isolation. It will also take into consideration the regional implications of individual land use decisions. A Countywide Rural Plan will be coordinated with and implement the policies of the Conservation Element (now being updated), the Housing element (soon to be updated) and the smart growth principles now being incorporated into the County General Plan.

In addition, it will also build on the ongoing Community 2050 “Blueprint” Planning efforts being led by the San Luis Obispo Council of Governments to seek regional cooperation in planning future growth.

The Countywide Rural Plan will be an important part of the County General Plan, together with other countywide and coastal zone-wide policies in the Land Use Element. It will identify the county’s policies on the preferred pattern of development, where growth should be directed, what infrastructure improvements will be needed, and how it will be accommodated. It will be the basis for implementing standards and programs for directing growth in the unincorporated parts of the county.

Since the Countywide Rural Plan will focus on rural areas only, the community plans for urban and village areas will remain in place as currently adopted. They will not be revised at the same time as the Countywide Rural Plan other than necessary reformatting to fit into the new general plan organization of documents (see a following section titled: “How would the Countywide Rural Plan be organized? How would the General Plan be reorganized?”)

### **Key topics, major themes in the Countywide Rural Plan**

The plan could include the following key topics:

#### Regional growth

In order to take a regional and comprehensive approach to future countywide growth, the Countywide Rural Plan will determine how projected population growth will be distributed and accommodated throughout the county over the next 20 years, and perhaps beyond that period. This will require consideration of regional issues such as natural and environmental resource limitations for long-term sustainable growth, circulation system and other infrastructure capabilities, regional housing and economic needs, and quality of life. Collaboration with cities, special districts and other agencies will be an essential part of this analysis and policy development.

#### Potential growth areas around cities and towns

How and where urban expansion occurs will be a key factor in helping to curtail sprawl, avoid leapfrog development and plan for orderly growth while protecting rural character and resources. Regional issues will need to be considered, and collaboration with cities, special districts and other agencies will be essential. In developing the Countywide Rural Plan, different approaches to avoiding undesired growth will be considered. These could include such ideas as urban growth boundaries, transfer of development from rural to urban areas in connection with annexations and general plan amendments, and plans that complement city and county plans for greenbelts and other buffer areas around communities.

#### Urban/rural interface

This subject deals with how urban development occurs at the edges of urban areas and how to maintain a distinction between urban and rural areas. The distinction between urban and rural is an essential part of what defines the character of this county, maintaining the identity of our communities and creating a sense of place. This topic could include identifying critical

“gateways” and rural separators between communities, together with policies to maintain urban edges.

### Rural development policies

Rural development policies are essential in order to limit inappropriate rural development and to protect rural character and important agricultural, open space and natural resources. These policies will focus on areas beyond the urban/rural interface. The policies will emphasize limiting sprawl, directing growth to urban areas where adequate resources and infrastructure exist and protecting rural character by addressing land divisions, development and general plan amendments.

The policies and recommendations in the Countywide Rural Plan should be guided by and organized around the following major themes or topics:

- Sustainable resources: constraints and opportunities
- Infrastructure, including transportation
- Jobs/housing balance
- Economic considerations
- Rural character
- Habitat conservation/biological resources
- Regional cooperation

### **Organization of the Countywide Rural Plan; reorganization of the General Plan**

The new Countywide Rural Plan could be organized into three sub-regions for the inland portion of the county and two sub-regions for the coastal portion, but integrated into a single coherent plan (see Figure 2). For example, the 11 inland planning areas could be consolidated into north, central and south county regions within the inland area. In the coastal area, the four planning areas could be consolidated into north and south coastal regions. The regions could be further defined according to watershed boundaries, which are important considerations in land use planning. Establishing large sub-regions will also make it easier to coordinate land use with major biological systems; i.e. ecosystems.

The proposed new sub-regions will include large areas of the county, especially the proposed sub-region covering the northern and eastern parts of the county, which would consolidate several existing planning areas. Although this sub-region includes diverse areas of the county, those rural areas do have many issues in common. In any case, the Countywide Rural Plan could be tailored to account for different conditions and needs in specific areas where needed through policies and programs. Likewise, the rural LUO planning area standards could be tailored for specific areas.

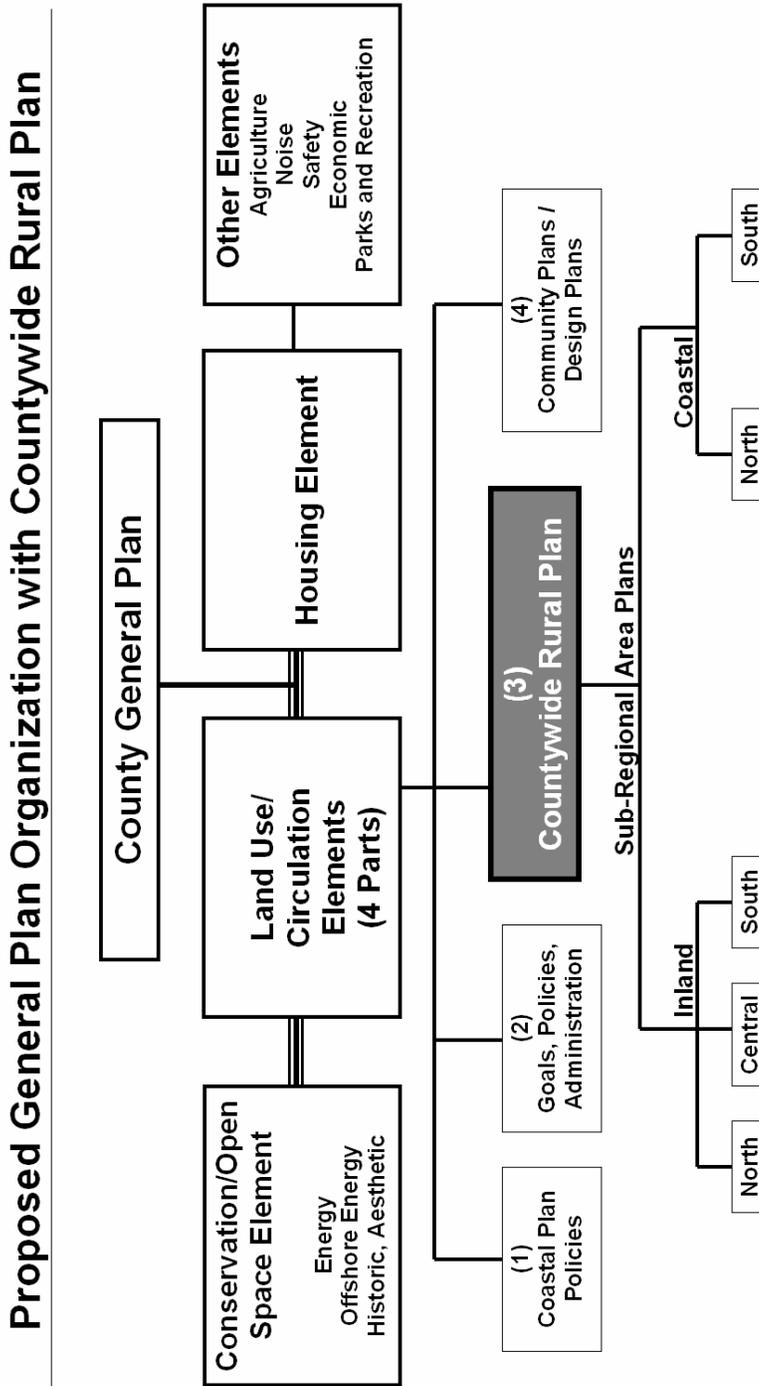
As part of the consolidation of planning areas, the existing area plans will be reorganized and streamlined. For example, we could eliminate or relocate non-essential descriptive text in the existing area plans and eliminate duplication among goals, policies and programs. In addition; the plan will include new policies that address key regional topics such as resources, transportation, jobs/housing balance, and sustainable economy. The result will be a more user-friendly and concise document. The plan should be organized around goals, policies and

programs that are formatted in a way that fits into a consistent format and numbering system for all general plan policies.

### Countywide Rural Plan: Possible Sub-Regional Planning Areas



**Figure 2**  
**Proposed General Plan Organization with Countywide Rural Plan**



The community plans for urban and village areas will not be revised as part of the Countywide Rural Plan effort, other than necessary reformatting. Following adoption of the Countywide Rural Plan, community plans will be updated to implement the relevant countywide plan policies.

### **Implementation of the Countywide Rural Plan**

The Countywide Rural Plan would be implemented primarily through programs in the new, consolidated area or sub-regional plans, together with standards in the Land Use Ordinance. The Growth Management Ordinance, if ultimately revised along the lines that staff is now suggesting, could also play a key role in implementing Countywide Rural Plan policies.

In the inland areas of the county, development standards (planning area standards) are now included in the Land Use Ordinance and organized by planning area. Therefore, as part of the consolidation of planning areas into sub-regions, there will be a corresponding consolidation and reorganization of the inland rural planning area standards. This will also offer an opportunity to streamline and eliminate duplication among the various overlapping and similar planning area standards in the existing area plans. New standards could be considered in order to implement new regional policies of the Countywide Rural Plan.

In the coastal zone, the planning area standards are still contained in the four coastal area plans. In order to be consistent with the organization of the Countywide Rural Plan, those standards could be placed in the Coastal Zone Land Use Ordinance and organized by the new coastal sub-regions. Staff will evaluate the possibility of combining the Coastal Plan Policies--currently a separate document—into the Countywide Rural Plan and Coastal Zone Land Use Ordinance.

### **Work plan summary**

Following is a summary of a work plan to start the plan preparation. The work plan outlines the process to prepare and bring the Countywide Rural Plan and EIR to hearings within three years. It also includes some key, specific tasks in order to give a better idea of the work that will be done.

#### Year 1: Consolidation and Research (staff only; no consultant)

1. Initiate program
2. Consolidate and revise planning areas, policies, programs, standards, text
  - a. Consolidate inland and coastal planning areas using watershed boundaries
  - b. Consolidate area plans
  - c. Revise area plan and other maps
  - d. Consolidate rural planning area (LUO) standards; organize by new sub-regional planning area
  - e. Organize urban and village area planning area (LUO) standards by new sub-regional planning area
  - f. Remove urban and village area policies, programs and text and combine with design plans into new document containing community plans (no substantive revisions)

- g. Identify duplicative rural area goals, policies and programs
- h. Identify unnecessary rural area plan text
- i. Begin research on regional sustainable resource capacities
- j. Begin research on realistic buildout capacities or urban areas

#### Years 2 and 3: Plan and Programmatic EIR preparation; hearings

1. Notice of Preparation/Request for Proposals
2. Contract with consultant
3. Public outreach, workshops (ongoing)
4. Coordination with cities, communities, special districts (ongoing)
5. Identify community and regional sustainable resource capacities (relates to RMS and biological inventory/ mapping project)
6. Determine realistic buildout capacities of urban areas based on vacant land inventory and development trends
7. Determine unincorporated area housing, employment and economic development needs (relates to Housing Element, Economic Strategy)
8. Determine infrastructure needs (relates to infrastructure planning and financing efforts)
9. Based on preceding steps, revise, establish regional policies, strategies and standards, including strategies to address rural development and maintain urban edges and community separation (also relates to Conservation and Open Space Element, smart growth principles)
10. Based on regional growth needs, identify potential expansion areas around cities, urban areas (extensive coordination with cities, communities, special districts)
11. Investigate establishing new towns and/or facilitating maturation of existing settlements into more complete villages or communities
12. Prepare draft Countywide Rural Plan with sub-regional area plans (public review)
13. Prepare LUO amendments
  - o revised and consolidated rural planning area (LUO) standards by new sub-regional planning areas
  - o urban and village planning area (LUO) standards reorganized by new sub-regional planning areas
14. Prepare LUE/LCP amendment: new community plans document
15. Prepare Draft EIR (public review)
16. Prepare Final EIR and response to comments
17. Planning Commission hearings
18. Board of Supervisors hearings

#### **OTHER AGENCY INVOLVEMENT**

The concept of a Countywide Rural Plan has been discussed with the Air Pollution Control District (APCD) the San Luis Obispo Council of Governments (SLOCOG) and city planning directors.

## **FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Staff will likely need the assistance of a consultant for a portion of plan preparation and for the Environmental Impact Report. The estimated cost for consultant assistance for the plan and preparation of an EIR will be about \$300,000, with about \$150,000 needed for EIR preparation and another \$150,000 needed for consultant assistance on the plan preparation and related tasks. However, the project could be broken into two or more discrete phases that are separately budgeted over two or more fiscal years. Approximately 50% of the costs would be recovered through the new building permit fee structure, which reflects costs involved in maintenance of the general plan.

## **RESULTS**

This proposal will result in a new part of the Land Use Element of the County General Plan: a consolidated plan for the rural areas of the county that focuses on a regional approach to land use and growth. It will implement policies in the Conservation Element, Housing Element and further strategic growth principles in the general plan. This effort will result in a reorganized general plan, including a new Countywide Rural Plan divided into a few sub-regions, and separate community plans for the urban and village areas. This consolidated sub-regional plans will result in efficiencies when it comes to updating those plans in the future. The Countywide Rural Plan will be accompanied by consolidated, reorganized and streamlined planning area standards in the Land Use Ordinance and Coastal Zone Land Use Ordinance. Those ordinances could include revised and new standards. All of the new and reorganized documents should be concise, policy-oriented, and easy for the public to understand and use. If your Board is interested in pursuing this idea of a Countywide Rural Plan, work could begin as early as August 2008 and take about 36 months to complete and adopt.