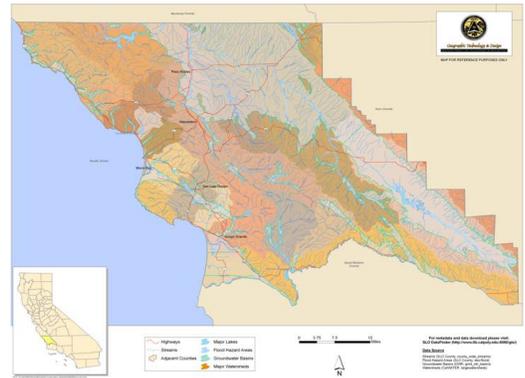




Land Use and Circulation Elements Update, Rural Area

County of San Luis Obispo
Department of Planning and Building



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS:

What is the Land Use and Circulation Elements Update?

The Land Use Element of the General Plan contains policies having to do with the way land use is regulated in the unincorporated areas of San Luis Obispo County. The update is a consolidation and revision of the current Land Use and Circulation Elements for the rural areas of the county. The update will focus on planning at a regional level in order to protect agriculture and other important resources; encourage expected new growth through the year 2035 to occur within and in expanded unincorporated towns and communities; and promote economic development, a wider range of housing opportunities, and better linkage between land use and transportation.

What areas are affected?

The update affects only the unincorporated rural areas of the county. During this update process, there will not be any changes to the community plans for the towns and communities (the county's 10 unincorporated "urban areas" and 14 unincorporated "villages"). Plan updates for those areas will take place on a prioritized basis following completion of this update for the rural areas.

Why is this update needed?

The Land Use and Circulation Elements are primary documents of the County General Plan. However, they have not been thoroughly reviewed and updated in over 25 years. San Luis Obispo County continues to attract more residents. A new regional and comprehensive approach is needed to address growth and resources in light of new, 21st century challenges. Such challenges include the need to address water and

infrastructure concerns and ways to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. This effort will also streamline the County's general plan by consolidating 15 area plans that were traditionally updated individually into one overall rural plan with fewer--perhaps five--sub-areas. This will in turn substantially reduce the public expense to update the General Plan in the future, saving taxpayer dollars.

Why is a continuation of the current rate of rural area growth a concern?

Between 2000 and 2007, about 40 percent of new homes in the county were built in the rural areas. In the future, growth pressure could result in the proportion of rural development exceeding 40% as communities approach their development capacities per the County General Plan. The Land Use and Circulation Elements update will analyze the possible adverse effects of this trend and consider options that may reduce the rate of rural area growth.

One major concern, based on past growth trends, is that a majority of future growth could occur in areas with existing and potential groundwater problems. In addition, inappropriate rural growth can increase costs for road maintenance and fire protection. It can also cause conflicts between residential development and agricultural operations, create competition over declining groundwater, diminish rural character, and create a sprawl pattern of development.

Past trends show that traffic is increasing faster than population growth. Unfortunately, funding is not expected to keep up with the need for road and transit improvements. A continuation of the current rate of rural development will make it even more challenging to reduce vehicle miles traveled, which is needed to help meet State mandates to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

What are the main objectives of the update?

The main objectives of the update are as follows:

- Consolidate 15 planning areas into fewer areas (using watersheds and groundwater basins as boundaries) for cost and time savings when updating the County's land use plans and ordinance in the future
- Consolidate redundant ordinance standards of the area plans
- Make the land use plans and ordinance more concise and user-friendly
- Implement the County's strategic growth policies and State legislation (SB 375) by shifting inappropriate rural growth potential away from rural areas and protecting agricultural and natural resources
- Plan for growth based on sustainable resources
- Identify least constrained areas for potential expansion of unincorporated towns and communities

- Take a more regional approach to providing for infrastructure, job and housing opportunities, as well as a vital economy
- Engage in a high level of collaboration with communities, community services districts and cities

What are some of the main topics?

The update will focus on the following major themes:

- Planning so that future growth is in keeping with resources such as water supply so that both are sustainable
- Planning for needed infrastructure such as roads
- Locating employment and housing opportunities in closer proximity to each other
- Emphasizing economic vitality
- Protecting rural character
- Protecting agriculture and other natural resources
- Collaborating with communities, cities, special districts, and agencies

How will the objectives of the update be achieved?

The update will include policies, standards and programs to carry out the stated objectives. The specifics will be determined following technical studies, extensive public participation, and environmental review. For example, the update could:

- Identify the amount of land and resources (such as water supply) needed for future growth through the year 2035
- Identify areas that are least constrained with regard to physical and environmental resources, infrastructure and services for possible future expansion of unincorporated towns and communities
- Identify areas that could act as separations between communities where the open and rural character is maintained in order to maintain the identity of towns and communities
- Propose policies that limit inappropriate rural development

What are the expected benefits and results?

The update will consolidate the 15 area plans of the Land Use Element, reducing the time and cost of updating the County General Plan in the future. In addition, the update will simplify the Land Use Element and reduce overlapping, redundant policies and standards, making it easier for the public to use.

New policies, standards and programs will help to:

- Keep growth within the capacities of our resources
- Maintain the rural and agricultural character that we cherish in this county
- Reduce greenhouse gas emissions and improve air quality
- Conserve energy and water
- Provide more housing opportunities
- Enable jobs to be located near housing
- Promote healthier communities

In sum, the update can lead to improving our environment, economy and quality of life.

Will there be extensive land use changes?

There will not be extensive changes to land use categories (zoning) as a part of this update. Some targeted changes to zoning and development standards may be proposed, but the focus will be on policy changes.

Why are the 15 existing planning areas being consolidated?

The 15 existing planning areas will be consolidated into fewer planning areas, together with their land use and circulation plans and standards. This will help save time and costs (taxpayer dollars) when the Land Use and Circulation Elements are updated in the future, as fewer plans will need to be updated. In addition, the new planning area boundaries will follow watershed boundaries and groundwater basins, which is an advantage when planning for water resources.

Consolidating the area plans will enable a more regional approach to planning, instead of the piecemeal and sequential updating of 15 individual area plans. A regional approach is needed to deal effectively with issues that cross existing planning area boundaries, for example, the regional distribution of growth, housing, and jobs. Other issues that are better addressed with a regional approach are strategies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and vehicle miles traveled.

How will local concerns be addressed as a part of larger, consolidated planning areas?

Although the new consolidated planning areas will generally be larger in area, the Land Use Element will still effectively address areas such as those that have a special identity, special resources or special interest to communities. For example, areas such as the El Pomar area, the Nipomo Mesa Water Management Area and rural areas that separate communities can be identified and specifically addressed in the new consolidated area plans. In addition, the new area plans will retain special standards (planning area standards) that are tailored to deal with planning and development concerns on specific sites, subdivisions, and larger areas.

What is the schedule for the update; how long will it take?

The update formally starts in January 2010, although some technical and background work was initiated before then. The update is expected to be completed by August 2012. The schedule is as follows:

- January 28, 2010: Public scoping meeting on environmental issues at the County Planning Commission
- February 2010: Begin extensive public outreach
- April 2010: Complete technical, background work
- July 2010: Complete intensive public outreach
- December 2010: Release Public Review Draft Plan
- July 2011: Release Public Hearing Draft Plan and Draft Environmental Impact Report
- November 2011: Start Planning Commission hearings
- February 2012: Release Final Environmental Impact Report
- June 2012: Start Board of Supervisors hearings
- August 2012: Adopt plan

When will the public be involved?

Public participation is encouraged throughout the update process. An extensive public outreach and participation process will begin in February 2010. It will include publicizing information on the update through news releases, a web site and other means. Surveys will be conducted and comments will be encouraged and made easy to submit. Interested community and other groups will be sought out, and advisory councils, community services districts, cities, and agencies will be contacted. Several public workshops will also be held. Additional opportunities for the public to participate in the process will be available when the public review draft of the updated plan is released, when the public hearing draft plan and the Environmental Impact Report are released, and when the Planning Commission and Board of Supervisors hold public hearings.

What are “Property Owner Requests”?

Beginning January 19, 2010, requests to change land use categories (zoning) or standards affecting properties in the rural, unincorporated areas of the county (outside of urban and village reserve lines) will generally need to be considered as part of this update process, as required by the County General Plan. These general plan amendments, called "Property Owner Requests," are submitted together with the appropriate application form and fee to the Department of Planning and Building. Property Owner Requests will generally be processed as part of the Land Use and Circulation Elements update, and can not be acted on until the update is completed. The requests will be evaluated against the existing and proposed policies of the County General Plan, and there is no assurance that any request will ultimately be approved. Property Owner Requests can be submitted up until 45 days before the release of the draft plan. Based on the current schedule, the deadline to submit such requests is estimated to be in November 2010.

How can I find out more?

Bulletins and updates will be available online, or by contacting the Department of Planning and Building. Please ask to be included in a mail list for announcements.
Visit us online: www.sloplanning.org (see Land Use and Circulation Elements Update)
Staff contacts: Mike Wulkan, Project Manager, (805) 781-5608 mwulkan@co.slo.ca.us;
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