

Notice of Preparation

TO: State Clearinghouse
State Responsible Agencies
State Trustee Agencies
Other Public Agencies
Interested Organizations

FROM: Kim Espinosa, Planning Manager
Planning and Permitting Division
678 West 18th Street
Merced, CA 95340
(209) 385-6858

SUBJECT: Notice of Preparation – Draft Environmental Impact Report, City of Merced Vision 2030 General Plan

The City of Merced will be the Lead Agency and will prepare an environmental impact report for the project identified below. The EIR will be a Program EIR, as defined in Section 15168 of the CEQA Guidelines.

Project Title: City of Merced Vision 2030 General Plan Environmental Impact Report

Project Contact:

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Merced, CA 95340
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EIR Consultant:

Kim Hudson, Principal-in-Charge
Quad Knopf, Inc.
5110 West Cypress Avenue
Visalia, CA 93278
Phone (559) 733-0440
Fax (559) 733-7821

Pursuant to Section 15063 of the CEQA Guidelines an Initial Study has not been prepared for the plan. The EIR will consider all potential environmental effects of the plan to determine the level of significance of the environmental effect, and will analyze these potential effects to the detail necessary to make these determinations on significance. In addition, the EIR may also consider those environmental issues which are raised by responsible agencies, trustee agencies, members of the public, or related agencies during the NOP process.

We need to know the views of your agency or organization as to the scope and content of the environmental information germane to your agency's statutory responsibilities or of interest to your organization in connection with the proposed plan. Specifically, we are requesting the following:

1. If you are a public agency, state if your agency will be a responsible or trustee agency for the plan and list the permits or approvals from your agency that will be required for the project and its future actions;
2. Identify significant environmental effects and mitigation measures that you believe need to be explored in the EIR with supporting discussion of why you believe these effects may be significant;
3. Describe special studies and other information that you believe are necessary for the City to analyze the significant environmental effects, alternatives, and mitigation measures you have identified;
4. For public agencies that provide infrastructure and public services, identify any facilities that will be required to provide services;
5. Indicate whether a member(s) from your agency would like to attend a scoping workshop for public agencies to discuss the scope and content of the EIR's environmental information. A scoping workshop is scheduled for Tuesday, July 29th at 5:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. in the City Council Chambers of the Merced Civic Center at 678 West 18th Street, Merced.
6. Provide the name, title, and telephone number of the contract person from your agency or organization that we can contact regarding your comments;
7. Identify alternatives that you believe need to be explored in further detail in the EIR.

Due to the time limits mandated by State law, your response must be sent and received by the City of Merced by the following deadlines:

- For responsible agencies, other agencies and organizations, not later than 30 days following the publication of this Notice of Preparation (by Monday, August 18, 2008);

If we do not receive a response from your agency or organization, we will presume that your agency or organization has no response to make. A responsible agency, trustee agency, or other public agency may request a meeting with City representatives in accordance with Section 15082(c) of the CEQA Guidelines.

Please send your response to my attention to City of Merced Planning and Permitting Division, 678 West 18th Street, Merced, CA, 95340. If you have any questions, please contact me at (209) 385-6858 or espinosak@cityofmerced.org.

Date: July 14, 2008

Kim Espinosa, Planning Manager

NOTICE OF PREPARATION EXHIBIT

City of Merced Vision 2030 General Plan EIR

Project Summary

The City of Merced (City) is the Lead Agency for the preparation of this Draft Environmental Impact Report (EIR). The EIR addresses a proposal to update the City's General Plan. The Plan Update will cover the planning period from 2009 to the year 2030, and will be utilized to guide the growth and development of the area within the adopted planning boundary.

The Vision 2030 General Plan retains almost all the 2015 General Plan Goals, Objectives and Policies with minor revisions.

Project Location

Located in the Central San Joaquin Valley, the City of Merced is the seat of Merced County government as well as a major retail commercial/service center for the surrounding region. The City is located at the intersection of several state highways and is one of the primary access points to Yosemite National Park. Known as the “Gateway to Yosemite,” Merced is approximately 80 miles west of the valley floor of the Park, along Highway 140.

Merced is approximately 150 miles southeast of San Francisco and is one of a chain of cities located along State Highway 99. Highway 99 is one of the two major north-south arteries passing through the San Joaquin Valley and connecting Southern California to the Pacific Northwest region. Major cities to the north along Highway 99 include Modesto (40 miles), Stockton (65 miles), and Sacramento (100 miles). To the south is Madera (20 miles), Fresno (55 miles) and Bakersfield (165 miles). Smaller cities in the vicinity of Merced along the Hwy 99 corridor are Atwater to the immediate north and Chowchilla to the south.

The City is served by two rail lines, the Atchison-Topeka/Santa Fe (A.T.&S.F.) and the Southern Pacific Transportation Company (S.P.), which pass through the City. The Merced Municipal Airport provides air service for City residents. To the north, the former Castle Air Force Base has been converted to civilian use (Castle Airport, Aviation and Development Center) and is expected to expand regional air service.

Merced County contains about 1,031 square miles of land area. In 2008, the incorporated City of Merced included 23 square miles; the planning area of the City (SUDP) contained 54 square miles. Figure 1 shows Merced's Regional Location and Figure 2 shows Merced current City limits and Sphere of Influence (SOI). Figure 3 shows the proposed SUDP land use map.

Project Description

The proposed project includes an update of the City of Merced’s General Plan. California state law requires each city and county to adopt a general plan “for all the physical development of the county or city, and any land outside its boundaries which bears relation to its planning” (§65300). The General Plan will include Urban Expansion, Land Use, Transportation & Circulation, Public Facilities & Services, Urban Design, Open Space, Conservation & Recreation, Sustainable Development, Housing, Noise and Safety Elements. The Housing Element has been previously adopted and certified by the California Department of Housing and Community Development and has been reformatted only for the General Plan Update. Figure 2 shows the proposed Land Use for the General Plan Update. The expansion of the urban land use designations define the limits for extending City services and infrastructure so as to accommodate new development anticipated within the twenty year time-frame of the General Plan. Policies in the proposed General Plan limit leap-frog development and provide for an orderly transition from rural to urban land uses.

The Plan includes Planning Principles, developed during Community Workshops, shown below. Table 1 shows the acreage of General Plan land use designations for both the current and proposed General Plans (City limits and SUDP).

Table 1
Existing & Proposed General Plan
Land Use Comparison Within the City Limits and SUDP (Acres)

Land Use	City Limits	Existing SUDP	Total	Proposed SUDP	All Land in new SUDP
Rural Residential	15.25	280.73	295.98	2057.26	2353.24
Agriculture	92.33	21.51	113.84		113.84
Total Agriculture Res	107.58		409.82	2057.26	2467.08
Low Density	5516.2	2914.17	8430.37	321.99	8752.36
Low-Medium Density	82.05	367.01	449.06	54.87	503.93
Total Single-Family Res	5598.25		8879.43	376.86	9256.29
High-Medium Density	745.08	21.92	767	65.59	832.59
High Density	92.44		92.44	37.57	130.01
Residential Mobile Home Density	79.34	0.18	79.52		79.52
Total Multi-Family	916.86		938.96	103.16	1042.12
Public/Government	533.16	5.3	538.46	39.82	578.28
Commercial Office	341.74	349.36	691.1		691.1
Total Office	874.9		1229.56	39.82	1269.38
Industrial	1882.22	994.73	2876.95		2876.95
Industrial-Reserve		150.4	150.4	1072.34	1222.74
Total Industrial	1882.22		3027.35	1072.34	4099.69
Business Park	125.3	504.07	629.37	78.58	707.95
Business Park-Reserve	2.94	85.27	88.21		88.21
Total Business Park	128.24		717.58	78.58	796.16

Land Use	City Limits	Existing SUDP	Total	Proposed SUDP	All Land in new SUDP
General Commercial	323.97	257.57	581.54		581.54
Neighborhood Commercial	200.75	80.7	281.45	18.92	300.37
Thoroughfare Commercial	212.89	9.46	222.35		222.35
Heavy Commercial					0
Regional/Community Commercial	478.75	103.51	582.26		582.26
Total Commercial	1216.36		1667.6	18.92	1686.52
Open Space/Park	783.81	176.79	960.6	230.34	1190.94
Parkway					0
Total Open Space	783.81		960.6	230.34	1190.94
School	677.91	64.54	742.45	991.34	1733.79
Commercial-Reserve	7.15	83.18	90.33		90.33
Residential-Reserve	360.34		360.34		360.34
PARK	5.83	82.67	88.5		88.5
SCHOOL	5.83	48.61	54.44		54.44
Village Residential	239.36	286.18	525.54		525.54
Community Plan		240.4	240.4	7383.6	7624
RESERVE				2236.13	2236.13
Total Other	1296.42		2102	10611.07	12713.07
Overall Total	12804.64		19932.9	14588.35	34521.25

Source: Quad Knopf, City of Merced, 2008

Note: Acreage for the existing SUDP differs from that identified in the 1997 General Plan due to different methods of calculating acreage.

PLANNING PRINCIPLES:

- Expansion of the Sphere of Influence and city boundary with phasing of development to avoid premature conversion of agricultural land and to plan for cost-effective extension of municipal services.
- Foster compact and efficient development patterns.
- Connectivity between existing and planned urban areas. Examples include the northeast area toward UCM, the University Community, and South Merced.
- Merced as the single municipal service provider in the expanded sphere of influence.
- New development provides or pays its fair share of public services and facilities to avoid burdening existing city residents (in short, new growth pays for itself).

- Mixed-use, transit and pedestrian friendly urban villages in growth areas with direct access to commercial cores from surrounding neighborhoods.
- Commercial nodes in new growth areas to avoid the aesthetic and circulation issues associated with more common “strip commercial.”
- Circulation: Recognition of the cost and importance of the arterial street system and protect capacity with access standards. Designs that encourage all modes of transportation.
- Build community quality. High community standards for Merced’s services, infrastructure, and private development as a strategy for attracting business and industry and to benefit the City’s residents.
- Planning well in advance for industrial/business park uses and for the infrastructure needed to support such development.
- A diversity of housing types and opportunities.

MERCED SPECIFIC URBAN DEVELOPMENT PLAN BOUNDARY (SUDP)/SPHERE OF INFLUENCE (SOI)

The current SUDP contains 19,933 acres and the proposed SUDP/SOI contains 34,521 acres.

- 1) Approximately 3,995 acres will be added in Northwest Merced. The new SUDP boundary would generally move to Franklin Road on the west, north of Old Lake Road, and south to Santa Fe Drive. This area is proposed for industrial and business park uses along Highway 59 and a large mixed-use community north of Bellevue Road.

This area will be able to accommodate a significant amount of the residential growth in the City for the next 20 years.

The business park and industrial areas along the Highway 59 expressway are included in order to provide a better “jobs-housing” balance in North Merced, as well as alleviate circulation and air quality concerns. Most existing employment opportunities in Merced are located downtown and south of Highway 99.

- 2) The second area of expansion consists of approximately 3,824 acres. It would move the SUDP south of Highway 140 west of Thornton Road, $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile. South of the airport, a large community plan has been proposed. Although impacted by airport land use restrictions, the proposal has some significant residential and recreational potential.
- 3) The third area to be included encompasses 6,748 acres and moves the SUDP/SOI boundary to take in the property between the current city limit/SUDP, and the U.C. Merced campus and Campus Community. These will be brought within the SOI as well.

Inclusion of this area within the SUDP will form a more logical urban boundary, which will ultimately facilitate the provision of City services to the university.

These areas referenced above represent logical expansion areas for the City, primarily because they are adjacent to major road improvements (Merced-Atwater Expressway, Mission / Highway 99 Interchange, etc.). They also encompass areas needed for long-term commercial and industrial development. The residential areas included in this expansion were for the most part large tracts with significant planning efforts currently underway. Given the environmental and physical limitations elsewhere around the City, these are the most logical areas for the next phase of expansion. These areas will give the City enough land to accommodate expected growth over the next 20 to 40 years.

AREA OF INTEREST

Some of the original study areas were found to have constraints which limited their development potential within the current plan timeline. In the interest of flexibility, and to provide interested property owners with some options, certain study areas have been designated as being within the Area of Interest (AOI). This area is a concern to the City, as it is likely going to be the location of City expansion in the next general plan update, 20-40 years hence. Should it be found that some property within the AOI can be developed sooner, criteria have been developed which would allow land to be incorporated within the SUDP/SOI when appropriate, and ultimately annexed.

In addition, including these areas in the AOI would allow the City to comment on any development proposals which might occur in these areas and impact current and future City development patterns, public service provision, and circulation routes. These areas are not considered for urban development within the 20-year planning horizon.

Purpose

The purpose of the General Plan Update is to address various issues that have arisen since the adoption of the *Merced Vision 2015 General Plan* in 1997. Most of the changes have arisen due to the new location of the University of California Merced campus and its adjacent University Community. Rapid growth and increasing land costs in Merced have also led to the need to consider additional areas for expansion, thus, one major component of the General Plan Update was to expand the City's existing growth boundary known as the Specific Urban Development Plan boundary (SUDP boundary). Modifications were made to the City's Sphere of Influence to add the University Community area and to remove areas that have been identified as significant wetlands preservation areas.

General Plan Elements/Chapters

The Merced Vision 2030 General Plan contains 14 chapters, including the major chapters outlined below. The General Plan also contains an Executive Summary, an Introduction (Chapter 1), a Glossary of Terms (Chapter 12), a Bibliography (Chapter 13), and a Subject and Policy Index (Chapter 14). It is anticipated that the Executive Summary, the Introduction, and Chapters 12, 13 and 14 required very minor updates to reflect the revised General Plan chapters. The other ten chapters have more extensive revision that will be reflected in the revised General Plan. Each of the seven State-Mandated Elements needed to be updated to reflect the latest edition of

the State of California's General Plan Guidelines and changes to State General Plan law since 1997.

Issues to be Addressed in the EIR

The EIR will address issues related to aesthetics, agricultural resources, air quality, biology, cultural resources, geology and soils, hazards and hazardous materials, hydrology and water quality, land use and planning, noise, population and housing, public services, recreation, transportation and circulation, public utilities and services systems, and greenhouse gas and global climate change.

Alternatives Analysis

The alternatives analysis will contain a qualitative analysis of the land use alternatives considered during the Merced Vision 2030 General Plan Update process. This analysis will be comparative in nature, and will address the likely impacts associated with the various alternative land use patterns considered in the planning process. If one or more of the alternatives from the planning process are not sufficient to meet the legal requirements of alternatives (fail to meet project objectives or do not lessen an environmental impact), then different alternatives will be proposed for inclusion. The No Project alternative will analyze the development of the site based on existing land use and zoning designations. The City encourages suggestions and recommendations during the NOP comment period regarding the nature and content of the alternatives to be considered.

Cumulative Impacts

This section will address the impacts of the development of the plan along with other known, approved or reasonably foreseeable development activity in the City and region. The analysis will be based on a list of known and foreseeable projects in the region as well as development forecasts. The analysis will address each identified issue area and will identify appropriate mitigation measures for any identified cumulative impacts.





