



Chapter 7: Recreation, Open Space, and Natural Resources Element

Introduction

The rural nature of Atascadero—with open spaces and oak studded hillsides—are fundamental components of the City’s character and quality of life. Atascadero is surrounded by natural beauty and resources, from the coastal mountains to the west and north, and the Salinas River Valley to the east and south. Varied habitats and environments occur throughout the Planning Area, including oak woodlands, chaparral, riparian creek corridors, and rangeland.

To help connect the community to nature and opportunities for recreation, the City provides an array of public parks and recreational opportunities: miles of trails, equestrian amenities, lakefront picnic areas, and specialized facilities for sports and leisure activities. Atascadero is also home to the Central Coast Zoo, the only zoo in the region accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums. In addition, San Luis Obispo County manages regional parks located in the City, and several private developments include park and recreational amenities for their residents. This element provides an overview of natural resources and recreation and open space amenities,

with specific goals, policies, and actions related to the consideration and management of these resources in response to future community needs.

Recreation, Open Space, and Natural Resources Priorities

To support recreation, open space, and natural resources goals, this General Plan considers these resources as an integral component of the City's quality of life strategy, one that invites placemaking, tourism, and a focus on economic development.

Parks and Open Spaces

As of 2024, the City owns and operates seven public parks (totaling approximately 226 acres) and several recreational facilities (Colony Park Community Center, Pavilion on the Lake) that provide space for residents to enjoy passive and active forms of recreation, including opportunities to hike, bike, and ride horses (see **Figure 7-1**). The City also owns and operates the five-acre Central Coast Zoo, allowing visitors to view hundreds of animal species from around the world. While the overall acreage of parks and open spaces is relatively high, not all Atascadero residents have the same level of access to park and recreational opportunities, as a majority of the City is rural in nature with large distances between larger lots and the urban core.

Opportunities to improve existing and create new linkages to parks and recreational amenities would improve the quality of life for residents and visitors. These may include new or expanded trails via the Jim Green Trail, Pine Mountain Loop, Stadium Park Trail, Three Bridges Oak Preserve Trail, and the Juan Bautista de Anza National Historic Trail. Also, as new residential development occurs near the City's boundaries or along El Camino Real neighborhoods, new small-scale, neighborhood-oriented parks or plaza spaces may be warranted, along with new multi-modal connections that connect the community to regional open space areas.

Trails

Atascadero contains approximately 17 miles of public trails (2024) either owned and managed by the City, San Luis Obispo County, or the Atascadero Land Preservation Society. This trail system is a community amenity and benefit. The opportunities to enhance pedestrian and bike connections to existing and new trails would better link residents and visitors to recreational destinations, including the Salinas River and Atascadero Lake Park. In addition to providing residents with better access, the City envisions these improvements as a draw for visitors looking to experience Atascadero's natural environment.

Oak Woodlands

Atascadero contains a diversity of habitats and ecosystems. At least four types of oak woodlands are represented in the City, including Blue Oak Woodlands, Coastal Oak Woodlands, Valley Oak Woodlands, and Blue Oak-Foothill Pines (see **Figure 7-2**). Oak woodlands provide important

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wildlife habitat and are an integral part of the City's aesthetic appeal and historic character. The California Department of Forestry has mapped approximately 10,822 acres of oak woodlands within the Planning Area. Approximately 7,600 acres of oak woodland habitat occur on parcels zoned for residential use, largely within the rural areas beyond the Urban Limit Line.

Slope and Topography

Nearly half of Atascadero consists of hilly or steep mountainous topography. Steep slopes, while providing dramatic views, can also pose development challenges. Typically, hillsides are much harder to serve with infrastructure due to the need to pump water uphill and build roads on challenging slopes. Hillside areas also make emergency service support and evacuations from natural disasters—wildfires, landslides, earthquakes, and floods—more difficult (see **Chapter 9**).

Creeks, Rivers, and Other Habitat

Atascadero contains approximately 27 miles of creeks and rivers, including Atascadero Creek, Boulder Creek, Graves Creek, Paloma Creek, and the Salinas River. In addition, there are over 54 miles of mapped, unidentified “blue-line” drainages that range from simple land depressions to jurisdictional waterways.

The waterways provide important wildlife corridors connecting the Salinas River to the Santa Lucia Mountains and are designated critical habitat areas for South-Central California Coast Steelhead Trout. Additionally, approximately 3,000 acres of critical habitat for California red-legged frogs include the upper watershed areas of Morro and Atascadero Creeks (see **Figure 7-3**). Historically, creeks in Atascadero have sustained degraded habitat quality due to encroachment from development, sedimentation and erosion, off-road vehicle use, and urban pollution. Protecting and enhancing the effected watersheds will support the local ecosystem, help improve water flow to reduce localized flooding risks, and enhance the recreational quality of the City's waterways (see **Figure 7-4**).

The local creeks and rivers also provide recreational opportunities for many residents. The Salinas River has been recognized by residents as an asset to be protected and bolstered as a regional attraction for tourism, recreation, and education. Potential amenities and activities include trails, fishing, interpretative signage, and wildlife observation areas.

Recreation, Open Space, and Natural Resources Goals, Policies, and Actions

The following sections include goals, supporting policies, and implementation actions, related to the following topics:

- Parks and Recreation
- Trails
- Open Space Conservation
- Biological Resources
- Cultural and Historic Resources
- Air Quality and Greenhouse Gas Reduction

Parks and Recreation

Parks and other public spaces that support recreational pursuits enhance community health and quality of life. Not only do these spaces promote physical and mental health, but they also serve as spaces for social, civic, and cultural engagement. With seven parks totaling more than 200 acres and several facilities providing opportunities for a range of activities like hiking, biking, and horse riding, Atascadero offers recreational opportunities for all community members.

In addition, the County of San Luis Obispo owns, maintains, and operates over 200 acres of parks and open space land within the City limits, including Chalk Mountain Golf Course and Heilmann Regional Park.

Goal REC-1: Diverse parks, recreational activities, and leisure experiences for people of all ages

Policy REC-1.1: Park and Recreation Facilities Planning and Operations. Provide adequate park and recreation facilities to accommodate current community needs and planned future growth.

Action A: Update the comprehensive Parks and Recreation Master Plan to provide for long-term needs.

Action B: Prepare and maintain individual master plans for major City park facilities that include a programming component and management requirements.

Action C: Provide diverse recreation opportunities citywide for residents and visitors, including multi-purpose sports complexes, sports courts, play areas for children, equestrian trails, bikeways, jogging paths, hiking trails, and community centers.

Action D: Acquire and improve a neighborhood park site in northern Atascadero.

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Action E: If future development is approved for the Eagle Ranch property, require the development of publicly accessible parks, recreational facilities, equestrian facilities, and trails, including a link towards the Los Padres National Forest land to the west.

Action F: Encourage the acquisition of parkland and open space beyond the Quimby Act ratio of five acres per 1,000 residents.

Policy REC-1.2: Interagency Coordination. Work with State, regional, and local agencies to plan for, acquire, and expand park and recreation facilities and amenities in Atascadero.

Action A: Pursue expansion of sports fields in the area to the east of Paloma Park, and/or execute a long-term agreement with the State to acquire or lease the site. Analyze potential expansion into a regional sports facility.

Action B: Work with the Atascadero Unified School District to formulate a program for joint use of facilities to attain a system of school-park complexes, and execute necessary agreements to allocate maintenance and operation costs for joint use.

Action C: Work with the County and other agencies to acquire and develop parks and facilities.

Policy REC-1.3: Park and Recreation Financing. Develop a method of financing park and recreational facilities and services using a variety of revenue sources.

Action A: Acquire parkland through developer dedications, development impact fees, or other financing mechanisms.

Action B: Work with community partners on maintenance of facilities, parklands, and trails.

Action C: Use development impact and/or in-lieu fees to fund park and recreation facilities of all sizes.

Action D: Finance park operations in part through user fees.

Policy REC-1.4: Specialized Recreation. Provide specialized recreation opportunities based on projected needs and standards identified in Park Master Plan(s).

Action A: Plan for funding on-going operations and maintenance to finance development of facilities that support specialized recreation.

Action B: Promote the Zoo, Atascadero Lake Park, and other City parks as unique and valuable attractions.

Action C: Support equestrian staging areas and trail systems, including the De Anza trail along the Salinas River.

Trails

Atascadero has more than 17 miles of public trails owned and managed by the City, San Luis Obispo County, and the Atascadero Land Preservation Society. Some follow natural features, like the Atascadero Lake Park pathway, and some trails have been developed to create new recreational opportunities. A recurring theme of the 2045 General Plan is enhancing existing amenities and developing new amenities where feasible. This strategy can improve connectivity overall to create a system accessible to community members and visitors.

Goal REC-2: A network of public trails that provide opportunities to engage with nature, move through the City, and connect to key destinations

Policy REC-2.1: Trail Connections and Signage. Provide access to a range of City destinations through a well-thought-out, safe, and integrated multi-modal system.

Action A: Integrate multi-modal (pedestrian, bicycle, equestrian) and public transportation facilities with the network of public trails/paths, parks, and recreation facilities, consistent with the Mobility Element (see **Chapter 6**).

Action B: Develop a comprehensive signage program for pedestrian walkways, bikeways, equestrian trails, and recreation trails.

Policy REC-2.2: Public Access to Creeks. Preserve creek reservation parcels for open space and support opportunities for public access where appropriate.

Action A: Develop parks, trails, and recreational amenities where appropriate on or adjacent to public creek reservation parcels.

Action B: Require the dedication of trail easements and access points to and along creeks and the Salinas River as part of subdivision maps or development permits consistent with the Mobility Element (see **Chapter 6**) and Subdivision Map Act, as appropriate to the conditions.

Open Space Conservation

Open space can be defined as any area unencumbered by private development potential. Open space areas can be set aside for preserving habitat, guarding against natural hazards such as flooding or wildfire risk, and providing benefits such as groundwater recharge. Some open space areas can serve multiple benefits. Atascadero's dramatic mountain vistas, expansive undisturbed landscape, and tree-lined streets create a link between the more developed parts of the City and the natural environment, and embody the elements of Atascadero's rural character. Designating and maintaining open spaces achieves several community goals: preserving the character of rural residential neighborhoods, protecting natural resources, creating recreation opportunities, and

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facilitating public access to nature. The following goals, policies, and actions work to preserve and enhance Atascadero's natural and scenic resources.

Goal REC-3: Dedicated system of open space that upholds the community's rural character, local biodiversity, natural landscape, and enjoyment of recreation

Policy REC-3.1: Open Space System. Prioritize enhancement and acquisition of parks and open space to meet evolving community needs.

Action A: Seek the acquisition of open space areas that can be managed by community partners.

Action B: Require that hazard lands be managed to minimize risk to life and property, including delineating areas as preserved open space.

Action C: Require that areas with special environmental resources be considered and integrated into development planning.

Policy REC-3.2: New Development. Require that new development and subdivisions blend in with surrounding topography by minimizing disturbance to the existing natural environment.

Action A: Maintain zoning districts to reduce density as natural topography/slope increases.

Action B: Require development built on hillsides to conform with the City's adopted hillside grading ordinance.

Action C: Maintain requirements that prohibit new lots with slope averaging 30 percent or greater except where such lots can contain building envelopes with less than 20 percent average slope.

Action D: Require dedication of open space easements, parklands, and open space as mitigation for subdivisions and development projects that impact significant slopes, floodplains, watercourses and wetlands, wooded areas, sensitive areas, historic sites, cultural sites, and similar areas.

Action E: Require new single-family subdivisions of 20 units or greater to provide on-site shared greenspace/park amenities.

Policy REC-3.3: Grading. Prevent unnecessary intensive grading of development sites.

Action A: Periodically review, and update as necessary, the hillside grading ordinance to minimize hillside grading, cuts, fills, and ridgeline disturbance.

Action B: Require a schematic grading plan in compliance with the Municipal Code prior to any site disturbance, lot line adjustment, parcel map, or tract map proposed on sites

with slopes greater than 15 percent.

Action C: Maintain thresholds that limit and restrict development based on average slopes consistent with the Municipal Code.

Biological Resources

Biological resources provide critical ecosystems that support plant species and provide animal habitat. Natural habitats can provide air and water purification, flood control, pollination for crops, and temperature regulation. The following goals, policies, and actions ensure that Atascadero's sensitive biological and watershed resources are considered into the future.

Goal REC-4: Consideration of biological and watershed resources within the urban areas to provide multiple benefits, with resource areas including oak woodlands, riparian corridors, native trees and plants, and creeks and rivers

Policy REC-4.1: Natural Resources Protection. Protect natural and sensitive resource areas to the maximum extent practicable.

Action A: Enforce all provisions of the Atascadero Native Tree Ordinance.

Action B: Maintain a GIS-based inventory of sensitive habitats and resources, including native trees, watercourse- and wetland-adjacent areas, archaeological resources, and historic sites.

Action C: Work with non-profits and community organizations to preserve biologically sensitive areas to increase community resiliency and public access to recreational areas.

Action D: Require identification of scenic and sensitive lands (creeks, riparian corridors, wetlands, critical habitats, etc.) on development applications. Develop and work with applicants to implement avoidance and mitigation measures to minimize impacts.

Action E: Carefully evaluate public and private projects to require the consideration of trees, watersheds, natural slopes, and other natural features.

Policy REC-4.2: Tree Protection and Replenishment. Protect and replenish street and native trees.

Action A: Implement and enforce the Native Tree Ordinance to protect and replenish native tree species.

Action C: Implement a comprehensive street tree planting and maintenance program, specifically within the Downtown core and along major corridors.

Action D: Require planting of shade trees in new projects, in part to provide shade for adjacent buildings to conserve energy use.

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Action E: Update the Zoning Ordinance to require native trees and plant species be incorporated into landscaping plans, as appropriate.

Action F: Require lot line adjustments and tentative subdivision maps on sites with 25 percent or greater native tree canopy cover to establish locations of building sites, driveways, and leach fields that will minimize impacts to oak woodlands.

Policy REC-4.3: Watershed Protection. Ensure that development along Atascadero Creek, Graves Creeks, the Salinas River, blue line creeks, and natural springs, lakes, and other riparian areas does not interrupt natural flows or adversely impact riparian ecosystems and water quality.

Action A: Require new development be designed in accordance with all applicable best management practices to prevent obstruction or diversion of flood and drainage flow to minimize adverse impacts to riparian vegetation and habitat along or within a watercourse.

Action B: Maintain waterways in a natural state; prohibit concrete channelization of creeks.

Action C: Limit development and uses that allow animal keeping, storage of vehicles or materials, and active recreation uses that result in disturbance of sensitive resource areas.

Action D: Allow flood protection measures (such as selective brush cleaning), low-impact trail development, streambed maintenance, and bank protection along waterways where appropriate with necessary permits.

Action E: Preserve creek reservations and the Salinas River for open space and recreational use. Minimize the impact of recreational uses on the habitat value and open space qualities of the creeks.

Action F: Protect areas subject to flooding from development, consistent with the City's flood hazard ordinance requirements.

Action G: In conjunction with the Atascadero Mutual Water Company, maintain regulations that identify existing and potential well sites and aquifer recharge areas, including sufficient buffers to protect them from contamination.

Action H: Support the establishment and protection of floodable terraces, wetlands, and revegetation along creeks and streams.

Policy REC-4.4: Stormwater Control Program. Maintain a stormwater control program consistent with the requirements of the National Pollution Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) Permit Program (Phase II).

Action A: Continue to implement the Urban Storm Water Quality Management and Discharge Control ordinance.

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Action B: Minimize impervious surfaces and decrease off-site storm flows for new and modified development.

Action C: Consider incorporating regionally focused improvements into the stormwater master plan, including shared detention facilities and natural retention and detention systems.

Action D: Continue to notify project applicants of requirements to inspect sediment and erosion control mitigation measures each year.

Policy REC-4.5: Agricultural Practices. Allow agricultural practices, including keeping livestock and farm animals, on parcels designated as Rural Residential and Agriculture, with consideration for the natural environment and residential character.

Action A: Regulate allowed agricultural practices and the keeping of domestic animals on rural and agricultural lands consistent with the farm animal regulations of the Zoning Ordinance.

Policy REC-4.6: Soil Health. Encourage soil conservation by minimizing grading and preventing erosion.

Action A: Require soil retention and erosion control as conditions of approval for development projects consistent with Regional Water Quality Control Board standards.

Action B: Periodically review the Municipal Code for consistency with National Pollution Discharge Elimination System requirements.

Policy REC-4.7: Water Conservation. Support ongoing water conservation efforts.

Action A: Coordinate water conservation programs with the Atascadero Mutual Water Company.

Action B: Consider implementation of reclaimed water use, as feasible.

Action C: Encourage incorporation of water conservation measures in new development.

Action D: Continue to implement the State of California's Model Water Efficient Landscape Ordinance (MWELO) for new and rehabilitated landscape projects.

Policy REC-4.8: Atascadero Lake Water Quality Improvements. Develop and implement a program to improve water quality in Atascadero Lake.

Action A: Perform periodic water quality assessments of Atascadero Lake.

Action B: Identify potential pollution sources and incorporate feasible mitigation strategies into the Parks and Recreation Master Plan.

Action C: Work with local community groups and organizations to monitor lake water quality and propose strategies for enhancements.

Action D: Seek additional water supply sources, including recycled water sources, to maintain Atascadero Lake water levels and quality.

Cultural and Historic Resources

While Atascadero was created as a fully master-planned community in the early 1900s, human activity in the area dates back millennia. Many Indigenous communities lived and/or traveled through the area, and preserving their history in parallel with Atascadero's developed history is important. In addition, Atascadero has a rich and eclectic mix of historical homes and structures having significance based on their style, unique events or people associated with them, or other qualifying factors.

Goal REC-6: Protection and celebration of Atascadero's rich prehistory and history

Policy REC-6.1: Cultural Resource Protection. Protect prehistoric cultural resources from disturbance associated with development.

Action A: Maintain a current GIS-based map of generalized areas of known archaeological resources.

Action B: Continue to implement the City's archaeological development standards.

Action C: Require short- and long-term mitigation measures for significant archaeological resource sites, include avoidance of impacts, burial under sterile fill, and/or monitoring of earthmoving activities.

Action D: Involve local Tribal governments with any work located within known archaeological sites where resources are present or likely.

Policy REC-6.2: Historic Structures and Resources. Encourage conservation and preservation of places and buildings of historical and architectural significance.

Action A: Periodically review, and update as necessary, the historic resources standards in the zoning ordinance to maintain historic community assets and provide recognition and consideration of historic resources, districts, and character defining features.

Action B: Create and maintain a list of historic resources in Atascadero, known as the Historic Resources List, to maintain resources significant to Atascadero's heritage, such as Colony homes with character-defining features.

Action C: Utilize the State Historic Building Code to encourage rehabilitation, preservation,

restoration, or relocation of historic buildings.

Action D: Utilize the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards and Guidelines for Rehabilitating Historic Properties to assess proposed improvements to historic properties.

Action E: Develop incentives for retaining and rehabilitating Atascadero’s historical resources, including exceptions to development regulations, conservation districts, staff technical assistance, programs to facilitate relocation instead of demolition, and Mills’ Act contracts.

Air Quality and Greenhouse Gas Reduction

While greenhouse gas reduction remains a regional and global issue, each jurisdiction in California is obligated to define and implement strategies to reduce localized greenhouse gas emissions, with the aim to achieve the statewide reductions established by the Global Warming Solutions Act of 2006 and related legislation. Atascadero first addressed greenhouse gas emission in its 2014 Climate Action Plan (CAP). The CAP set a framework for reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and the City has made considerable progress over the years in climate actions and sustainability. This General Plan has policies and actions that will move Atascadero forward in reducing greenhouse gas emissions and meet updated reduction targets.

Goal REC-7: Improve air quality and reduced health risks

Policy REC-7.1: Clean Air. Support regional efforts to maintain clean air.

Action A: Require dust control and emissions limitations during project construction.

Action B: Adopt circulation policies that encourage vehicle trip reductions consistent with the Mobility Element (see **Chapter 6**), and support regional programs to maintain clean air.

Action C: Concentrate new intensive development at identified nodes and commercial corridors to help reduce vehicle trips.

Action D: Continue to support the development of Park-and-Ride facilities in appropriate locations.