

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

This document is a programmatic Environmental Impact Report (EIR) that assesses the potential environmental impacts associated with implementation of the City of Atascadero (City) General Plan update (the 2045 General Plan Update) and corresponding updates to the zoning code provisions of the Atascadero Municipal Code (the Zoning Code Update) (herein referred to as the 2045 General Plan/Zoning Code Update, or project). The 2045 General Plan and Zoning Code Update proposes a comprehensive update to the City's general plan and Municipal Code to reflect the City's refined vision for long-term, gradual change. The 2045 General Plan Update serves as the City's (top-level planning document to guide future growth and development. The Zoning Code Update amends the City's zoning regulations in the Municipal Code to ensure consistency with the 2045 General Plan Update. The 2045 General Plan/Zoning Code Update is described in detail in Chapter 2, *Project Description*. The City of Atascadero, acting as the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) Lead Agency, has prepared this programmatic EIR with assistance from its environmental planning consultant, SWCA Environmental Consultants (SWCA), in accordance with the CEQA Statute (Public Resources Code [PRC] Section 21000 et seq.) and the State CEQA Guidelines (California Code of Regulations [CCR] Section 15000 et seq.).

This chapter provides an overview of the EIR purpose, the EIR scoping and Notice of Preparation (NOP) process, EIR contents, project sponsors, and information regarding the public review of the Draft EIR.

1.1 PURPOSE OF THE EIR

According to the State CEQA Guidelines (CCR Section 15000 et seq.), a “project” refers to the whole of an action which has a potential to result in either a direct physical change in the environment or a reasonably foreseeable indirect physical change in the environment; this encompasses activities directly undertaken by any public agency including, but not limited to, amendment of local General Plans or elements thereof (Title 14 CCR). The 2045 General Plan and Zoning Code Update qualifies as a project under CEQA and requires the discretionary approval of the City of Atascadero City Council; therefore, the 2045 General Plan and Zoning Code Update is subject to the environmental review requirements of CEQA (PRC Section 21000 et. seq.) and the State CEQA Guidelines. In accordance with Section 15121 (a) of the State CEQA Guidelines, the purpose of an EIR is to:

. . . inform public agency decision- makers and the public generally of the significant environmental effects of a project, identify possible ways to minimize the significant effects, and describe reasonable alternatives to the project.

This EIR is programmatic in nature and evaluates the broad, comprehensive effects of actions taken under the 2045 General Plan Update and the Zoning Code Update. A program EIR considers the broad effects of implementing programs and does not examine the individual environmental effects of specific projects as would be done in project EIRs. According to State CEQA Guidelines Section 15168(a), a program EIR may be prepared on a series of actions that may be characterized as one large project. These actions may be related geographically, as logical parts of a chain of contemplated actions, in connection with issuance of rules, regulations, or plans that govern the conduct of a continuing program, or as individual activities carried out under the same authority and having generally similar environmental effects that can be mitigated in similar ways. Once a program EIR is prepared, later activities must be examined in the light of the EIR to determine the necessary level of additional documentation (State CEQA Guidelines Section 15168(c)). A program EIR may also be used to simplify the task of preparing later environmental documents in the program by providing a basis for significance determinations, allowing incorporation by reference for broader program-wide issues and focusing later EIRs on new impacts not previously considered (State CEQA Guidelines Section 15168(d)).

State CEQA Guidelines Section 15168(b) cites five advantages of the use of programmatic EIRs, including:

1. Providing an occasion for a more exhaustive consideration of effects and alternatives than would be practical in individual EIRs.
2. Considering cumulative impacts that might be slighted in a case-by-case analysis.
3. Avoiding redundant reconsideration of basic policy considerations.
4. Allowing the Lead Agency to consider broad policy alternatives and programmatic mitigation measures at an early time when the agency has greater flexibility.
5. Reducing paperwork by encouraging tiering.

This EIR evaluates the potentially significant environmental impacts associated with buildout anticipated to occur pursuant to the 2045 General Plan Update, if adopted, as well as the physical effects that may result from implementation of the 2045 General Plan goal and policies (see Chapter 2, *Project Description*, for the full description of the proposed project). In addition, this EIR identifies feasible mitigation measures for potentially significant environmental impacts and presents a reasonable range of project alternatives that would reduce or eliminate these impacts. This EIR is intended to provide decision-makers and the public with full disclosure of the environmental impacts associated with 2045 General Plan Update implementation to consider when determining the final action on the project.

1.2 SCOPING AND NOTICE OF PREPARATION PROCESS

Pursuant to State CEQA Guidelines Section 15082, as amended, the City circulated an NOP to responsible, trustee, and affected agencies and other interested parties for a 30- day public review period that began on July 15, 2024, and ended on August 14, 2024. The NOP was also posted at the County of San Luis Obispo (County) Clerk-Recorder’s office for 30 days and sent to the CEQAnet Web Portal at the California Governor’s Office of Land Use and Climate Innovation to solicit statewide agency and public participation in determining the appropriate scope of the EIR. The purpose of the NOP was to formally convey that the City, as the Lead Agency under CEQA, was soliciting input regarding the scope and proposed content of the EIR.

Pursuant to State CEQA Guidelines Section 15082 (c)(1), for projects of statewide, regional, or areawide significance, the Lead Agency is required to conduct at least one scoping meeting. The scoping meeting is for jurisdictional agencies and interested persons or groups to provide comments regarding, but not limited to, the range of actions, alternatives, mitigation measures, and environmental effects to be analyzed. The City held a public scoping meeting on July 24, 2024, at the Atascadero City Administration Building, located at 6500 Palma Avenue, Atascadero, California 93422.

Table A-1 in Appendix A summarizes comments received at the scoping meeting in addition to those received during the NOP circulation period. The purpose of Table A-1 is to present a summary of the comments, and it is not intended to list every comment received by the City during the NOP review period. Regardless of whether an environmental or CEQA-related comment is listed in the table, all relevant comments received in response to the NOP and during the EIR scoping meetings are addressed in this EIR.

Section 15123 of the State CEQA Guidelines states that an EIR shall identify areas of controversy known to the Lead Agency, including issues raised by public agencies, public organizations, and individual members of the public. Based on comments received during the NOP comment period and the scoping meeting, the following issues are known to be of concern and may be controversial:

- Adequacy of biological resource impact analysis, conservation, and mitigation
- Assessment, mitigation, and protection of cultural and tribal cultural resources
- Concerns about degradation of the Salinas River Corridor, including illegal motor vehicle use and lack of enforcement
- Existing and potential flood hazards for existing and new residential areas, including areas that would be affected by a Salinas Dam failure
- Mapping, monitoring, and protection of water quality, groundwater, waterways, and riparian areas
- Impacts of encampments and trash on groundwater and waterways
- Zoning, management, and uses on properties owned by the Atascadero Mutual Water Company
- Affordable housing priorities and requests for high-density/mixed-use development
- Maintenance of existing recreation trails and establishment of new recreational resources, including De Anza Trail connectivity, pedestrian and bicycle access, multi-use trails, and public access to the Salinas River
- Safety, noise, and environmental considerations associated with public recreational facilities and allowed uses including all-terrain vehicle use, designated all-terrain vehicle areas, and equestrian and non-motorized transportation modes on trails
- Safety considerations associated with vehicle speeds, traffic, and intersection improvements (e.g., San Jacinto Ave, Curbaril interchange)
- Potential urban fire hazards, including backyard burning, fireworks, and wood-burning fireplaces in new construction

These concerns are addressed in the evaluation each environmental issue area included in Chapter 4, *Environmental Impact Analysis*, identification of feasible project alternatives in Chapter 5, *Alternatives Analysis*, and Chapter 6, *Other CEQA Considerations*.

1.3 EIR CONTENTS

The scope of the EIR includes issues identified by the City during the preparation of the NOP for the proposed project, as well as environmental issues raised by agencies and the general public in response to the NOP and at the scoping meeting. The EIR is divided into the following major sections:

Executive Summary. Provides a brief summary of the project background, description, impacts and mitigation measures, and alternatives.

Chapter 1: Introduction. Provides the purpose of an EIR, as well as scope, content, intended use of the document, and areas of known controversy.

Chapter 2: Project Description. Provides the general background of the project, objectives, a detailed description of the project characteristics, and a listing of necessary permits and government approvals.

Chapter 3: Environmental Setting. Describes the physical setting and surrounding land uses, and the cumulative project setting.

Chapter 4: Environmental Impacts Analysis. Discusses the environmental setting as it relates to the various issue areas, regulatory settings, thresholds of significance, impact assessment and methodology, project-specific impacts and mitigation measures, cumulative impacts, and secondary impacts. The EIR analyzes the potentially significant impacts to the following resource areas, as identified during preliminary evaluation and preparation of the NOP:

- Aesthetics
- Agriculture and Forestry Resources
- Air Quality, Greenhouse Gas Emissions, and Energy
- Biological Resources
- Cultural Resources and Tribal Cultural Resources
- Geology and Soils
- Hazards and Hazardous Materials
- Hydrology and Water Quality
- Land Use and Planning
- Mineral Resources
- Noise
- Population and Housing
- Public Services and Recreation
- Transportation
- Utilities and Service Systems
- Wildfire

Chapter 5: Alternatives Analysis. Summarizes the environmental advantages and disadvantages associated with the project and alternatives. As required, the “No Project” alternative is included among the alternatives considered. An “Environmentally Superior Alternative” is identified.

Chapter 6: Other CEQA Considerations. Identifies growth-inducing impacts and a discussion of long-term/short-term productivity and irreversible environmental changes.

Chapter 7: Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Program. This section contains a matrix of all mitigation measures contained in the EIR, the requirements of the mitigation measures, the applicant’s responsibility and timing for implementation of these measures, the party responsible for verification, the method of verification, and verification timing.

Chapter 8: References and EIR Preparers. This section provides a list of all references used within the EIR and the individuals involved in the preparation of this EIR.

1.4 PROJECT SPONSORS

Lead Agency/Project Applicant: City of Atascadero
6500 Palma Avenue
Atascadero, CA 93422
Phil Dunsmore, Community Development Director

Environmental Consultant: SWCA Environmental Consultants
4111 Broad Street, Suite 210
San Luis Obispo, CA 93401
Cassidy Bewley, Project Manager

1.5 AGENCY USE OF THE DOCUMENT

Lead Agency reviewers and decision-makers (i.e., the City Planning Commission and City Council) will use the EIR as an informational document to assist in the decision-making process, ultimately resulting in the approval, denial of the project. Section 15381 of the State CEQA Guidelines defines responsible agencies as other public agencies that has discretionary approval power over a project and must rely on the environmental document prepared by the Lead Agency when deciding whether to approve its portion of the project. As the project consists of a General Plan and Zoning Code Update, and does not include any specific development entitlements, there are no formal responsible agencies for this project.

Although not responsible agencies under CEQA, several other agencies have review authority over aspects of the proposed project or approval authority over future projects that could potentially be implemented in accordance with the various goals, policies, and actions included in the 2045 General Plan and Zoning Code Update. These agencies are listed below:

- The State Geologist is responsible for the review of the City's programs for minimizing exposure to geologic hazards and for regulating surface mining activities.
- The California Department of Transportation has responsibility for approving future improvements to the state highway system, including U.S. Route 101 and State Route 41.
- The California Department of Fish and Wildlife has responsibility for issuing take permits and streambed alteration agreements for any projects with the potential to affect plant or animal species listed by the State of California as rare, threatened, or endangered or that would disturb waters of the State.

1.6 PUBLIC REVIEW OF THE DRAFT EIR

This Draft EIR was distributed to responsible and trustee agencies, other affected agencies, surrounding cities, interested parties, and all parties requesting a copy of the Draft EIR in accordance with PRC Section 21092(b)(3). The Notice of Completion and Notice of Availability of the Draft EIR are distributed and posted as required by CEQA. During this 45-day period, the EIR and all technical appendices are available for review at the following locations:

Atascadero Public Library
6555 Capistrano Avenue
Atascadero, CA 93422

Atascadero City Hall
6500 Palma Avenue
Atascadero, CA 93422

On behalf of the Lead Agency, comments on the Draft EIR shall be addressed to:

City of Atascadero
Attn: Kelly Gleason, Planning Manager
6500 Palma Avenue
Atascadero, CA 93422

Comments on the Draft EIR may also be sent via email to Kelly Gleason, Planning Manager, at kgleason@atascadero.org.

The public review period is 45 days. Written responses to all significant environmental issues raised will be prepared and included as part of the Final EIR and the administrative record for consideration by decision-makers for the project.

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