

1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter describes the purpose and organization of the General Plan, and provides an overview of what a General Plan is, why it is prepared, and why it is important. This chapter also provides an overview of the purpose, format, and organization of the General Plan Background Report.

This chapter is organized into the following sections:

- What is a General Plan? (Section 1.1)
- Using the General Plan (Section 1.2)
- Regional Setting and Planning Boundaries (Section 1.3)
- Purpose of the Background Report (Section 1.4)
- Format of the Background Report (Section 1.5)
- Organization of the Background Report (Section 1.6)

SECTION 1.1 WHAT IS A GENERAL PLAN?

Introduction

California State Law requires each city and county in the state to adopt a general plan “for the physical development of the county or city, and of any land outside its boundaries which bears relation to its planning.” A general plan serves as the jurisdiction’s “constitution” or “blueprint” for future decisions concerning a variety of issues, including land use, health and safety, and resource conservation. All specific plans, area plans, subdivisions, public works projects, and zoning decisions must be consistent with the local jurisdiction’s general plan. The Ventura County General Plan contains the goals and policies upon which the Board of Supervisors and Planning Commission base their land use decisions. Typically, the time horizon for a general plan ranges from 15 to 25 years. The horizon year for Ventura County’s General Plan Update is 2040, resulting in a planning horizon of 20 years.

A general plan has four defining features:

- **General.** As the name implies, a general plan provides general guidance for future land use, transportation, environmental, and resource decisions.
- **Comprehensive.** A general plan addresses a wide range of social, economic, infrastructure, and natural resource topics. These topics include land use, urban development, housing, transportation, public facilities and services, recreation, agriculture, biological resources, and many other issues that impact the community.

- **Long-Range.** A general plan provides guidance on achieving a long-range vision of future growth and development for a jurisdiction. To achieve this vision, the general plan includes goals, policies, and implementation programs that address both near-term and long-term needs.
- **Integrated and Coherent.** The goals, policies, and implementation programs in a general plan present a comprehensive, unified approach to development, resource conservation, and other issues that impact the health and wellness of the community. A general plan uses a consistent set of assumptions and projections to assess future demands for housing, employment, and public services (e.g., infrastructure). For instance, projections prepared at the state level (by the California Department of Finance) or regional level (by the Southern California Association of Governments), actual historical growth rates experienced in the unincorporated areas of the county, and other projections provide the basis for assessing the potential land supply needed to meet demand associated with the projections. Land use density and intensity standards specify clearly how the County expects land to develop and what the holding capacity of the land is (in dwelling units or square footage). This information combines with unit-based assumptions for employment and population (e.g., square footage per employee, population per household) to provide the basis for determining how well a plan is addressing potential demand. A general plan has a coherent set of policies and implementation programs that enables citizens to understand the vision of the County and enables landowners, businesses, and industry to be more certain about how policies will be implemented.

A general plan is made up of “elements,” or chapters, of which seven are mandatory. The seven State-mandated elements are (1) land use, (2) circulation, (3) housing, (4) conservation, (5) open space, (6) noise, and (7) safety. Communities may include other elements that address issues of particular local concern, such as agriculture or climate change. Communities can also organize their general plan any way they choose, as long as the required topics are addressed.

SECTION 1.2 USING THE GENERAL PLAN

The Board of Supervisors, Planning Commission, and County staff use the General Plan on a daily basis to make decisions with direct or indirect land use implications. The General Plan also provides a framework for inter-jurisdictional coordination of planning efforts among officials and staff of the county and other government agencies (e.g., federal, state, and local). County residents, property owners, and businesses also use the General Plan for guidance on county policies for particular geographic areas or for particular subjects of interest to them.

The General Plan is the basis for a variety of regulatory measures and administrative procedures. California planning law requires consistency between general plans and their implementing programs, such as zoning and subdivision ordinances, capital improvement programs, specific plans, area plans, environmental impact assessment procedures, and building codes. That said, a general plan should not be confused with zoning. Although both general plans and zoning ordinances designate how land may be developed, they do so in different ways. General plans have a long-term outlook. They identify the types of development that will be allowed, the spatial relationships among land uses, and the general pattern of future development. Zoning regulates development through specific standards such as lot size, building setback, and allowable uses. The land uses shown on general plan diagrams or maps will, however, typically be reflected in local zoning maps as well, as State law requires that they be consistent with one another. Development must not only meet the specific requirements of a zoning ordinance, but also the broader policies set forth in a general plan.

The Ventura County Zoning Ordinance is divided into the Coastal Zoning Ordinance (CZO) for coastal areas and the Non-Coastal Zoning Ordinance (NCZO), which covers all areas outside the Coastal Zone. Both codes exist to protect and promote the public health, safety, and general welfare; to provide the environmental, economic, and social benefits that result from an orderly, planned use of resources; to establish the most beneficial and convenient relationships among land uses; and to implement Ventura County's General Plan.

In addition to the zoning ordinances, the County's Initial Study Assessment Guidelines (ISAGs) also provide guidance related to the potential environmental effects of growth and development in the county. The purpose of the ISAGs is to inform the public, project applicants, consultants, and County staff of the threshold criteria and standard methodology used in determining if a project (individually or cumulatively with other projects) could have a significant effect on the environment. The ISAGs provide the framework for consistent, objective, and predictable evaluation of environmental effects. The guidance provided by the ISAGs must also be consistent with, and support the policies of, the General Plan. The ISAGs were comprehensively updated in 2011.

The Ventura County General Plan consists of two documents: the Background Report and the Policy Document, which are further described below.

- **Background Report.** The Background Report takes a “snapshot” of existing (2016) conditions and trends in Ventura County. It is divided into 12 chapters that cover a wide range of topics within the county, such as demographic and economic conditions, land use, public facilities, and environmental resources. Unlike the Policy Document, the Background Report is objective and policy-neutral and provides decision-makers, the public, and local agencies with context for making policy decisions. The Background Report also serves as the basis for the “Environmental Setting” section of the Environmental Impact Report (EIR) for the General Plan.
- **Policy Document.** The Policy Document is the essence of the General Plan. It contains the goals and policies that will guide future decisions within the county. It also identifies a set of implementation programs that will ensure the goals and policies in the General Plan are carried out. Finally, it includes land use designations and a land use diagram (or map) that specify the intended use of land throughout the unincorporated area of county.

Over time, the county's population will increase, its goals will evolve, and the physical environment will change. For the county's General Plan to be a useful document, it must be monitored and periodically revised to respond to and reflect changing conditions, needs, and priorities. A general plan should be reviewed annually. A more comprehensive and thorough review and revision should be done every five to ten years to assess whether it needs to be refined to reflect changes in local conditions, new local priorities, or State law. State law permits a general plan to be amended up to four times in any calendar year, unless special conditions apply as defined by Government Code Sections 65358(c) and (d). Each amendment may contain more than one change to the general plan.

As part of the Ventura County General Plan update process, the County will also prepare the following General Plan supporting documents:

- **Alternatives Report.** The Alternatives Report will describe the development and evaluation of land use and/or policy alternatives. The report will be designed to frame an active discussion among stakeholders, community members, and County decision-makers, leading to direction from the Board of Supervisors that will provide the basis for preparation of the Draft General Plan.
- **Environmental Impact Report.** An environmental impact report (EIR) presents detailed information about a proposed project’s environmental effects, includes options for minimizing a project’s significant environmental impacts, and presents reasonable alternatives that would create fewer environmental impacts than the one being proposed. The analysis presented in the EIR must comply with the requirements of the California Environmental Quality Act (Sections 15126, 15175, and 15176 of the CEQA Guidelines). The Planning Commission and Board of Supervisors will review the EIR to understand potential environmental implications associated with implementation of the General Plan and to identify feasible mitigation measures.

SECTION 1.3 REGIONAL SETTING AND PLANNING BOUNDARIES

Ventura County formed on January 1, 1873, when it separated from Santa Barbara County. The county covers approximately 1.2 million acres spanning approximately 42 miles along the Pacific Coast. As shown on Figure 1-1, Ventura County is bordered by Los Angeles County to the east and south, Santa Barbara County to the west, and Kern County to the north. The Los Padres National Forest accounts for approximately 46 percent of the county’s total land area.

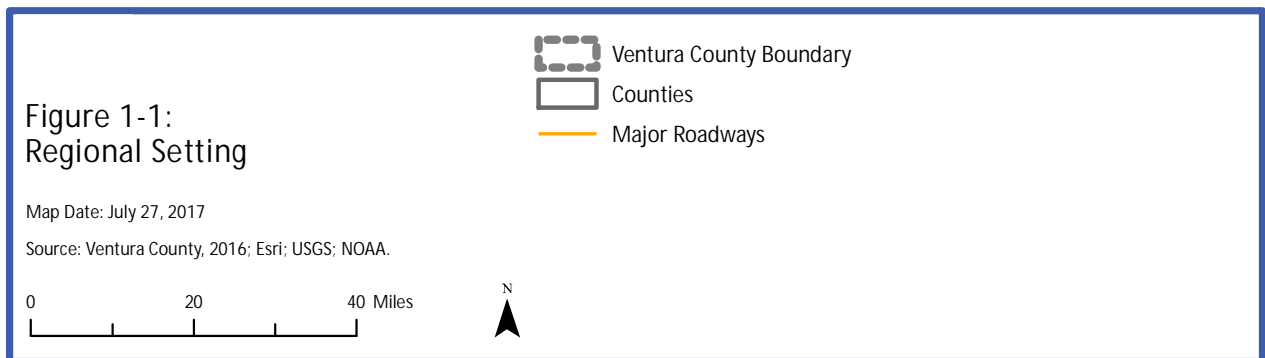
The General Plan uses several terms to describe the county and areas beyond, including the following:

- **Area of Interest.** An Area of Interest is a major geographic area reflective of community and planning identity. The Ventura Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCo) established “areas of interest” in Ventura County in the late 1960s. Areas of interest divide the south half of Ventura County (the non-Forest Service land) into 15 major geographic planning areas based primarily on topography and community identity (see Figure 3-3 in Chapter 3 of this Background Report). They are areas created by local policy that are not based on any legislative direction or mandate. The basic policies are to have no more than one city in any area of interest and to have areas of interest serve as planning referral lines between the County and cities for discretionary land use entitlements. Areas of interest have been reviewed and updated periodically in conjunction with the Guidelines for Orderly Development and the County of Ventura General Plan.
- **Area Plan.** Area plans are an integral part of a general plan. An area plan specifies the distribution, location, types and intensity of land uses, and provides specific policies concerning development in a distinct geographical area. The goals, policies, and programs of an area plan are designed to supplement, not duplicate the general plan, and, therefore, an area plan should be read in conjunction with the general plan. There are nine area plans in the county which are listed in Section 3.1 of this document.

- **City Limits.** The city limits include the area within a city’s corporate and jurisdictional boundary, for which it exercises land use authority and provides public services.
- **County Boundary.** The jurisdictional boundary of the county. State law requires counties to adopt a general plan that addresses physical development within its county boundary.
- **Existing Community.** The Existing Community land use designation in the existing General Plan identifies existing urban residential, commercial, or industrial enclaves located outside urban-designated areas. Several existing communities have been identified in Ventura County, including areas such as Bell Canyon and Camarillo Heights.
- **Planning Area.** A general plan, pursuant to State law, must address all areas within the jurisdiction’s “planning area,” which is defined as the geographic territory of the local jurisdiction and any other territory outside its boundaries that bears relation to the planning of the jurisdiction. The jurisdiction may exercise its own judgment in determining what areas outside of its boundaries to include in the planning area. As a practical matter, the planning area for a countywide general plan is typically the county boundary, and this is the case with the Ventura County General Plan. This differs from municipal general plans, which may consider land outside of municipal boundaries in anticipation of potential expansion of jurisdictional responsibility (e.g., annexation of adjacent unincorporated areas). For statistical analysis purposes, Ventura County divides the county into geographical subareas, or “planning areas.” In this case, the use of the term “planning area” is not synonymous with the term as defined in State planning law. These planning areas are based on the 10 incorporated cities and five subareas for unincorporated areas, as shown in Figure 3-1 in Chapter 3 of this Background Report; they do not necessarily represent the planning areas covered by municipal general plans according to the State planning law definition.
- **Sphere of Influence.** A Sphere of Influence (SOI) is the probable ultimate physical boundary and service area of a local agency, as adopted by LAFCo. An SOI includes both incorporated and unincorporated areas within which a city or special district will have primary responsibility for the provision of public facilities and services.
- **Unincorporated Urban Center.** An existing or planned community located in an Area of Interest where no city exists. The unincorporated urban center represents the focal center for community and planning activities within the Area of Interest. For example, the community of Piru represents the focal center in the Piru Area of Interest.



Sources: Esri, USGS, NOAA



SECTION 1.4 PURPOSE OF THE BACKGROUND REPORT

The Background Report provides a “snapshot” in time of the County’s existing conditions. It presents physical, social, and economic resource information to support the preparation of the General Plan. The data and information in the Background Report have a baseline date of June 2016.

The Background Report serves as the foundation document from which subsequent planning policies and programs will be formulated. The document is also used as the “environmental setting” section of the General Plan EIR.

SECTION 1.5 FORMAT OF THE BACKGROUND REPORT

Each topical section of each Background Report chapter includes the following:

- **Introduction.** The introduction provides a brief description of the issues covered in the section.
- **Major Findings.** Each section contains a brief summary of key findings. The findings present key facts and preliminary issues from the section. These findings serve as the basis for the identification of issues to be addressed in the Policy Document.
- **Existing Conditions.** This section describes existing conditions for each resource or issue area.
- **Regulatory Setting.** Each section summarizes the laws and regulations pertaining to the topics identified. Federal, State, and local regulations are described, as applicable. In the case of local regulations, each section cites where relevant content can be found in the 2005 General Plan, the Initial Study Assessment Guidelines, and the Non-Coastal and Coastal Zoning Ordinances.
- **Key Terms.** Each section contains a list of terms that is unique to the topical areas within each chapter in the Background Report.
- **References.** Each section contains a list of documents and websites referenced and persons consulted in preparing the Background Report.

SECTION 1.6 ORGANIZATION OF THE BACKGROUND REPORT

The Ventura County General Plan Background Report is divided into the following 12 chapters:

1. **Introduction.** This chapter provides background information on the purpose of the General Plan, describes the regional setting, and outlines the organization and content of the General Plan.
2. **Demographics and Economics.** This chapter describes the fiscal setting and economic conditions in Ventura County, as well as population and employment projections.
3. **Land Use.** This chapter summarizes existing land use, describes local and regional land use plans, and explains land use designations in Ventura County.

4. **Community Health and Well-Being.** This chapter describes public health and accessibility to food, active transportation, and economic opportunities.
5. **Housing.** This chapter describes the existing and projected housing needs for Ventura County.
6. **Transportation and Mobility.** This chapter describes the transportation networks in Ventura County, including roadways, active transportation, aviation facilities, and vehicle miles traveled.
7. **Public Facilities, Services, and Infrastructure.** This chapter describes all of the services offered by Ventura County and other local governments and agencies, including water supply, utilities, law enforcement, schools, and other local services.
8. **Natural Resources.** This chapter provides an overview of energy, mineral, and biological features, as well as cultural and paleontological resources in Ventura County.
9. **Agriculture.** This chapter provides an overview of agricultural trends and issues. Summaries of existing agricultural land patterns and production in the county are described and evaluated.
10. **Water Resources.** This chapter discusses water resources found in the county and focuses on water availability, quality, systems in place for delivery, and conservation measures.
11. **Hazards and Safety.** This chapter describes geologic, seismic, flood, fire, and human-made hazards, as well as noise and aviation hazards.
12. **Climate Change.** This chapter describes Ventura County’s greenhouse gas emissions and the impact of climate change in Ventura County.