

3 Environmental Setting

This chapter provides a general overview of the environmental setting for the proposed project. More detailed descriptions of the environmental setting for each environmental issue area can be found in Chapter 4, *Environmental Impact Analysis*.

3.1 Setting

The City of Santa Maria is located in northern Santa Barbara County, surrounded by the hills of the Santa Maria River Valley (see Figure 2-1). The plan area involves all land within the Santa Maria Sphere of Influence¹ (SOI) and includes the proposed annexation of 985-acres east of the City limits. The City of Santa Maria is generally bound by the Santa Maria River to the north, agricultural lands to the east and west, and the unincorporated town of Orcutt to the south.

U.S. Highway 101 (U.S. 101) forms the eastern edge of the city. A linear portion of Santa Maria is also located to the east of U.S.-101. This portion of the city extends south from Prell Road then extends east along an internal farm road. Santa Maria is located approximately 25 miles south of San Luis Obispo, 50 miles northwest of Santa Barbara, 250 miles south of San Francisco and 170 miles north of Los Angeles.

Principal regional transportation facilities serving Santa Maria are U.S. 101, State Route 135 (SR 135), State Route 166 (SR 166), and the Santa Maria Valley Airport. Regional transit is provided by Clean Air Express and the San Luis Obispo Regional Transit Authority. Regional rail is provided by Amtrak.

The City of Santa Maria is characterized as a suburban residential community. The plan area covers approximately 15,058 acres within the City limits and approximately 4,500 acres within the SOI. Approximately 27 percent of land within Santa Maria is occupied with residential uses, primarily consisting of single-family residences (22 percent). Agricultural uses occupy 14 percent of the city, airport uses occupy 11 percent, public and institutional uses occupy 11 percent, and commercial uses occupy 7 percent. Approximately 19 percent of the city is comprised of vacant land. Residential land uses are distributed throughout the city. Non-residential land uses, including industrial and commercial, commonly line major corridors in Santa Maria, including Broadway, Main Street, and Betteravia Road. Agricultural and vacant uses are located at the periphery of the city. The city is underlain by the Santa Maria River Valley Groundwater Subbasin. The local climate in Santa Maria is identified as a Mediterranean climate characterized by warm, dry summers and cool, moist winters.

¹ The term “sphere of influence” applies to the area designated by the Santa Barbara Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO) as the probable, future physical boundary or service area of the City. Overall, planning decisions made for the City are assumed to have a bearing on growth and development in these unincorporated adjacent areas. Areas not included as part of the annexation for the 2045 General Plan Update will continue to be deferred to the County land use designations and regulations in the SOI. Any development or change that happens in the SOI during the lifetime of the General Plan will occur under the jurisdiction of the County. Therefore, this EIR does not evaluate impacts resulting from future growth within the SOI, outside of the proposed annexation, as part of the proposed plan. However, where relevant, this EIR does evaluate potential impacts resulting from future growth within the City limits to lands within the SOI. The SOI is also included in the cumulative setting for this EIR.

3.2 EIR Baseline

Section 15125 of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) Guidelines states that an Environmental Impact Report (EIR) “should include a description of the physical environmental conditions in the vicinity of the project, as they exist at the time the notice of preparation is published.” Section 15125 states that this approach “normally constitute[s] the baseline physical conditions by which a lead agency determines whether an impact is significant.” This EIR evaluates impacts against existing conditions, at the time the notice of preparation was published, which was February 15, 2025. This EIR considers the potential impacts from buildout of the General Plan in 2045, compared to existing conditions.

3.3 Cumulative Development

CEQA defines cumulative impacts as two or more individual actions that, when considered together, are considerable or will compound other environmental impacts. Cumulative impacts are the changes in the environment that result from the incremental impact of development of the proposed project and other nearby projects. For example, traffic impacts of two nearby projects may be insignificant when analyzed separately but could have a significant impact when analyzed together. Cumulative impact analysis allows an EIR to provide a reasonable forecast of future environmental conditions and can more accurately gauge the effects of a series of projects.

Because the project is a general plan update, cumulative impacts are treated somewhat differently than would be the case for an individual development project. CEQA Guidelines Section 15130 provides the following direction relative to cumulative impact analysis and states that the following elements are necessary for an adequate discussion of environmental impacts:

A summary of projections contained in an adopted local, regional or statewide plan, or related planning document, that describes or evaluates conditions contributing to the cumulative effect. Such plans may include: a general plan, regional transportation plan, or plans for the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. A summary of projections may also be contained in an adopted or certified prior environmental document for such a plan. Such projections may be supplemented with additional information such as a regional modeling program. Any such document shall be referenced and made available to the public at a location specified by the lead agency.

By its nature, a general plan considers cumulative impacts insofar as it considers cumulative development that could occur within the plan area, which refers to the area within the City Limits and annexation areas. For example, the transportation analysis, discussed in Section 4.8 *Transportation*, considers the overall change in vehicle miles travelled (VMT) due to implementing several development projects that would add to the buildout associated with implementing the project. These cumulative VMT calculations are accounted for in the analyses within Sections 4.2 *Air Quality and Greenhouse Gas Emissions*, 4.6 *Noise* and 4.10 *Effects Found Not to be Significant*; therefore, these analyses would also be considered cumulative. Other impacts, such as geologic hazards, are site-specific impacts that are addressed on a project-by-project basis. Additionally, even when two projects occur in close proximity, their individual impacts would not necessarily compound or contribute to a greater cumulative effect. Therefore, the analysis of project impacts in this EIR also constitutes the cumulative analysis.