

1 Introduction

This Environmental Impact Report (EIR) examines the potential environmental effects of the proposed City of Santa Maria (City) 2045 General Plan Update (“plan”). The environmental review process for the plan, and legal basis for preparing an EIR, are described below.

1.1 Environmental Impact Report Background

1.1.1 Overview of the Plan

State law (Government Code Section 65300) requires that each city and county adopt a comprehensive general plan. Elements of the City’s existing General Plan have been updated between 1991 and 2023. The proposed 2045 General Plan Update is a comprehensive effort to update the existing General Plan and responds to current local and regional conditions, as well as changes in State law that may not have been in effect when the General Plan was written. The proposed 2045 General Plan Update has been organized into the following elements: Land Use; Circulation; Safety; Health and Environmental Justice; Conservation and Open Space, Noise, Public Facilities and Services; Recreation and Parks; Economic Development; and Housing Element. The Housing Element was adopted in December 2023. Together, these elements cover all topics required to be included in a General Plan under State law.

The General Plan defines the policy framework by which the City’s physical and economic resources are to be managed and used over the next 20 years. City decision-makers will use the General Plan as a blueprint for:

- Choices about the use of land
- Protection of environmental resources
- Conservation and development of housing
- Provision of supporting infrastructure and public and human services
- Protection of people and property from natural and man-made hazards

Through the General Plan, the City informs its stakeholders (residents, property owners, businesses, developers, etc.) of its goals, policies, and standards, and thereby communicates expectations of the public and private sectors for meeting community objectives.

Since the plan serves as a constitution for future development in Santa Maria, any future decisions by the City affecting land use and development must be consistent with the adopted General Plan. An action, program, or project would be considered consistent with the General Plan if, considering all of its aspects, it will further the objectives and policies of the General Plan or not obstruct their attainment.

The plan contains goals, policies, and implementation programs to implement the City’s overarching objectives. Goals are statements that provide direction and state the desired end condition. Policies establish basic courses of action to achieve these goals, and directly guide the response of elected and appointed officials to development proposals and related community actions. Implementation programs are specific actions, procedures, standards or techniques that the City must take to help achieve a specified goal or implement an adopted policy.

1.1.2 Purpose and Legal Authority

This EIR has been prepared in accordance with the CEQA Guidelines. In accordance with CEQA Guidelines Section 15121(a) (California Code of Regulations, Title 14, Division 6, Chapter 3), 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 fulfills the requirements for a Program EIR. Although the legally required contents of a Program EIR are the same as those of a Project EIR, Program EIRs are by necessity more conceptual and may contain a more general discussion of impacts, alternatives, and mitigation measures than a Project EIR. As provided in CEQA Guidelines Section 15168, a Program EIR may be prepared on a series of actions that may be characterized as one large project. Use of a Program EIR provides the City (as Lead Agency) with the opportunity to consider broad policy alternatives and program-wide mitigation measures and provides the City with greater flexibility to address environmental issues and/or cumulative impacts on a comprehensive basis. Agencies generally prepare Program EIRs for programs or a series of related actions that are linked geographically, are logical parts of a chain of contemplated events, rules, regulations, or plans that govern the conduct of a continuing program, or are individual activities carried out under the same authority and having generally similar environmental effects that can be mitigated in similar ways. By its nature, a Program EIR considers the broad effects associated with implementing a program (such as a General Plan or Specific Plan) and does not, and is not intended to, examine the specific environmental effects associated with specific projects that may be accommodated by the provisions of General or Specific Plans.

Once a Program EIR has been prepared, subsequent activities within the program must be evaluated to determine what, if any, additional CEQA documentation needs to be prepared. If the Program EIR addresses the program's effects as specifically and comprehensively as possible, many subsequent activities could be found to be within the Program EIR scope and additional environmental documentation may not be required (CEQA Guidelines Section 15168[c]). When a Lead agency relies on a Program EIR for a subsequent activity, it must incorporate applicable mitigation measures and alternatives developed in the Program EIR into the subsequent activities (CEQA Guidelines Section 15168[c][3]). If a subsequent activity would have effects not contemplated or not within the scope of the Program EIR, the Lead Agency must prepare a new Initial Study leading to a Negative Declaration, Mitigated Negative Declaration, or a plan level EIR. In this case, the Program EIR serves a valuable purpose as the first-tier environmental analysis. CEQA Guidelines Section 15168(b) encourage the use of Program EIRs, citing five advantages:

- Provision of a more exhaustive consideration of impacts and alternatives than would be practical in an individual EIR.
- Focus on cumulative impacts that might be slighted in a case-by-case analysis.
- Avoidance of continual reconsideration of recurring policy issues.
- Consideration of broad policy alternatives and programmatic mitigation measures at an early stage when the agency has greater flexibility to deal with them.
- Reduction of paperwork by encouraging the reuse of data (through tiering).

As a wide-ranging environmental document, the Program EIR uses expansive thresholds as compared to the project-level thresholds that might be used for an EIR on a specific development

project. It should not be assumed that impacts determined not to be significant at a program level would not be significant at a project level. In other words, determination that implementation of the plan as a program would not have a significant environmental effect does not necessarily mean that an individual project would not have significant effects based on project-level CEQA thresholds, even if the project is consistent with the plan.

This EIR has been prepared to analyze potentially significant environmental impacts associated with future development resulting from implementation of the plan and provides appropriate and feasible mitigation measures or plan alternatives that would minimize or eliminate these impacts. Additionally, this EIR provides the primary source of environmental information for the City of Santa Maria, which is the Lead Agency, to use when considering approval and implementation of the plan.

This EIR is intended to provide decision-makers and the public with information that enables intelligent consideration of the environmental consequences of the plan. This EIR identifies significant or potentially significant environmental effects, as well as ways in which those impacts could be reduced below applicable thresholds of significance, whether through the imposition of mitigation measures or through the implementation of specific alternatives to the plan. In a practical sense, this EIR functions as a tool for fact-finding, allowing concerned citizens and City staff an opportunity to collectively review and evaluate baseline conditions and plan impacts through a process of full disclosure.

1.2 Scope and Content

In accordance with the CEQA Guidelines, a Notice of Preparation (NOP) of a Draft EIR was circulated to potentially interested parties on February 15, 2025. The NOP, included in Appendix A, indicated that all issues on the City's environmental checklist would be discussed in the EIR. These include:

- Agricultural and Forestry Resources Hydrology and Water Quality
- Air Quality and Greenhouse Gas Emissions Noise
- Biological Resources Transportation and Traffic
- Cultural and Tribal Cultural Resources Utilities and Service Systems

This EIR evaluates potential impacts in each of these areas. Impacts regarding the CEQA topics of Aesthetics, Energy, Geology and Soils, Hazards and Hazardous Materials, Land Use and Planning, Mineral Resources, Population and Housing, and Wildfire were determined to not be significant and are analyzed in Section 4.10 of this EIR.

The focus of this EIR is to:

- Review and evaluate potentially significant environmental impacts that could occur as a result of the growth and development envisioned in the plan
- Identify feasible mitigation measures that may reduce or eliminate potentially significant effects associated with the plan
- Disclose any potential growth-inducing and/or cumulative impacts associated with the plan
- Examine a reasonable range of alternative growth scenarios (including growth according to the existing General Plan, reduced growth, and alternative locations within the City for growth) that could feasibly attain the basic objectives of the plan, while eliminating and/or reducing some or all of its potentially significant adverse environmental effects

The City staff circulated a NOP of this EIR from February 15, 2025 through March 17, 2025 and received seven written responses. The responses, included in Appendix A, are addressed, as appropriate, in the analysis contained in the various sections of Chapter 4, *Environmental Impact Analysis*. The City staff also conducted a scoping meeting on February 27, 2025 with three members of the public in attendance. Few comments were made during the meeting, with most focusing on the proposed annexation area. One attendee inquired about the proposed plan's intentions for Mahoney Ranch. Staff clarified that the plan does not propose changes to Mahoney Ranch. However, concerns were noted regarding potential future development in the area, particularly due to the presence of California tiger salamander (CTS) and other sensitive species. No specific questions were raised regarding the EIR itself. Table 1-1 shows a summary of the written comments. The NOP and written comments are included in Appendix A.

Table 1-1 NOP Comments and EIR Response

Commenter	Issue Area/Issues Raised	Where Addressed in the EIR
Agency Comments		
Santa Barbara County Flood Control & Water Conservation District	Recommends all development of one acre or greater adhere to the City of Santa Maria and County of Santa Barbara Flood Control District's Standard Conditions of Project Plan Approval.	Section 4.5, <i>Hydrology and Water Quality</i>
California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW)	Requests the EIR include a discussion pertaining to the direct and indirect biological impacts creation of trails and trail management would have on habitats and special status species.	Section 4.3, <i>Biological Resources</i>
	Requests that the EIR analyze impacts to local wildlife movement.	
	Requests that the EIR provide an adequate, complete, and detailed disclosure about the effects the proposed plan would have on the environment	<i>Executive Summary</i>
	Requests the EIR include a complete discussion of the purpose and need for, and description of the proposed plan.	Chapter 2, <i>Project Description</i>
	Requests the EIR include an alternative analysis that would reduce biological resources impacts	Chapter 6, <i>Alternatives</i>
	Requests that the EIR include an adequate biological resource baseline assessment	Section 4.3, <i>Biological Resources</i>
	Requests that the EIR provide a thorough discussion of direct and indirect impacts expected to affect biological resources with specific measures to offset such impacts .	
	Recommends the EIR evaluate the plan's potential cumulative impacts on biological resources	
	Recommends specific mitigation to reduce potential impacts to nesting birds as a result of plan implementation	
	Recommends the inclusion of feasible mitigation measures to reduce potential impacts to biological resources in the EIR	
Recommends the use of compensatory mitigation measures for potentially significant impacts to sensitive and special status plants, animals, and habitats.		

Commenter	Issue Area/Issues Raised	Where Addressed in the EIR
	Requests that the EIR evaluate (an) alternative(s) with a proposal that does not include annexation; a proposal that does not include new development on prime agricultural land; and a proposed that provides opportunities for housing development and growth through land use changes and increased densities of existing land within urban boundaries	Chapter 6, <i>Alternatives</i>
California Department of Conservation	<p>Requests that the EIR discuss the loss or conversion of agricultural land and include the type, amount, and location of farmland conversion; impacts on current and future agricultural operations; cumulative impacts on agricultural land; implementation of any City or County Agricultural Mitigation Plans, Programs, or Policies; proposed mitigation measures; and the plan’s compatibility with lands within an agricultural preserve and/or enrolled in a Williamson Act contract</p> <p>Requests that the EIR discuss the compatibility of the plan with the contract and local Wiliamson Act program requirements</p> <p>Recommends that the environmental review address mitigation for the loss or conversion of agricultural land and provides mitigation measure examples</p>	Section 4.1, <i>Agricultural Resources</i>
Santa Barbara County Air Pollution Control District	<p>Requests that the EIR analyze the plan’s consistency with the District’s Ozone Plan</p> <p>Requests that the EIR should present significance thresholds for ozone precursor emissions (reactive organic compounds [ROC], and oxides of nitrogen [NO_x]) and particulate matter and determine whether the proposed plan will produce emissions in excess of the thresholds.</p> <p>Requests that the EIR include a description and quantification of potential air quality impacts associated with construction activities for the proposed plan. The analysis should consider the fact that multiple construction projects could occur simultaneously in any specific portion of the Plan area and provides examples of mitigation measures.</p> <p>Requests that the EIR examine whether any of the land use designation and zoning changes associated with the proposed plan will result in air quality impacts to sensitive land uses such as residential, childcare facilities, schools, or senior living communities and provides examples of mitigation measures.</p> <p>Recommends that sensitive land uses, such as residential, should not be sited within 500 feet of the highway. If, after consideration of the health concerns and other alternatives, sensitive uses are still planned within 500 feet of a freeway or a high traffic roadway, future development projects should be required to adopt design features to minimize exposure to roadway-related pollutants and mitigate potential impacts to the maximum extent feasible.</p> <p>Requests the EIR include a discussion of how materials will be removed in compliance with District Rule 1001 – National Emission Standards for Hazardous Air Pollutants (NESHAP) – Asbestos.</p>	<p>Section 4.2, <i>Air Quality and Greenhouse Gas Emissions</i></p> <p>This comment is about the 2045 General Plan Update and not the environmental review process.</p> <p>Section 4.2, <i>Air Quality and Greenhouse Gas Emissions</i></p>

Commenter	Issue Area/Issues Raised	Where Addressed in the EIR
	Requests that the EIR include a quantification of GHG emissions from all plan sources (direct and indirect), present significance thresholds, and make a determination regarding the significance of impacts. Climate change impacts be mitigated to the extent reasonably possible, regardless of whether they are determined to be significant.	
Native American Heritage Commission	Recommends consultation with California Native American tribes that are traditionally and culturally affiliated with the geographic area of the proposed plan as early as possible to avoid inadvertent discoveries of Native American human remains and best protect tribal cultural resources	Section 4.4, <i>Cultural and Tribal Cultural Resources</i>
Individual Commenters		
Laurie Temura	Provided comments and edits on the project description	Chapter 2, <i>Project Description</i>
Source: Appendix A		

The Draft EIR was circulated for a 45-day public review period that began on August 14, 2025 and ended on September 28, 2025. Two public meetings were held to receive comments on the Draft EIR, including a virtual meeting on August 19, 2025 and an in-person meeting at the City of Santa Maria Public Library on August 20, 2025. The City of Santa Maria received nine comment letters on the Draft EIR. Comments on the Draft EIR and responses are provided in Chapter 2 of the Final EIR.

1.3 Lead, Responsible, and Trustee Agencies

The City of Santa Maria is the lead agency under CEQA for this EIR because it has primary discretionary authority to determine whether or how to approve the plan. CEQA Guidelines Section 15381 defines responsible agencies as other public agencies that are responsible for carrying out/implementing a specific component of a plan or for approving a plan that implements the goals and policies of a General Plan. There are no responsible agencies for the plan. Although not responsible agencies under CEQA, several other agencies have review authority over aspects of the plan or approval authority over plans that could potentially be implemented in accordance with various objectives and policies included in the plan. These agencies and their roles are listed below.

- The Santa Barbara Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO) has responsibility for approving the annexations to the City that might occur over the life of the plan.
- The California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) has responsibility for approving future improvements to the U.S. Highway 101 and State Route Highway 135.
- The CDFW 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.
- Any other public agencies which may own land within City boundaries.

Trustee agencies have jurisdiction over certain resources held in trust for the people of California but do not have a legal authority over approving or carrying out the plan. CEQA Guidelines Section 15386 designates four agencies as trustee agencies: CDFW with regards to fish and wildlife, native plants designated as rare or endangered, game refuges, and ecological reserves; the State Lands Commission, with regard to state-owned “sovereign” lands, such as the beds of navigable waters

and State school lands; the California Department of Parks and Recreation, with regard to units of the State park system; and the University of California, with regard to sites within the Natural Land and Water Reserves System. The CDFW, due to the potential for rare or endangered species, is the only trustee agency for the plan.

The California Department of Housing and Community Development has authority over the City's Housing Element. The Housing Element has undergone separate CEQA review and for that reason is not part of the plan being evaluated in this EIR. The Housing Element and Initial Study – Mitigated Negative Declaration were adopted on December 5, 2023.

1.4 Environmental Review Process

The environmental impact review process required under CEQA is summarized below and illustrated in Figure 1-1. The steps appear in sequential order.

1. **Notice of Preparation Distributed.** Immediately after deciding that an EIR is required, the lead agency must file a NOP soliciting input on the EIR scope to "responsible," "trustee," and involved federal agencies; to the State Clearinghouse, if one or more state agencies is a responsible or trustee agency; and to parties previously requesting notice in writing. The NOP must be posted in the County Clerk's office for 30 days. A scoping meeting to solicit public input on the issues to be assessed in the EIR is not required but may be conducted by the lead agency. The NOP public comment period for the plan was from February 15 2025 to March 17, 2025 and a scoping meeting was held on February 27, 2025. Public comments were received in response to the NOP and scoping process.
2. **Draft EIR Prepared.** The Draft EIR must contain: a) table of contents or index; b) summary; c) project description; d) environmental setting; e) significant impacts (direct, indirect, cumulative, growth-inducing and unavoidable impacts); f) alternatives; g) mitigation measures; and h) irreversible changes.
3. **Public Notice and Review.** A lead agency must prepare a Public Notice of Availability of an EIR. The Notice must be placed in the County Clerk's office for 30 days (Public Resources Code Section 21092) and sent to anyone requesting it. Additionally, public notice of Draft EIR availability must be given through at least one of the following procedures: a) publication in a newspaper of general circulation; b) posting on and off the plan site; and c) direct mailing to owners and occupants of contiguous properties. The lead agency must consult with and request comments on the Draft EIR from responsible and trustee agencies, and adjacent cities and counties. When a Draft EIR is sent to the State Clearinghouse for review, the public review period must be 45 days, unless a shorter period is approved by the Clearinghouse (Public Resources Code 21091). Distribution of the Draft EIR may be required through the State Clearinghouse. This EIR will be circulated for a 45-day public review and will be sent to the State Clearinghouse.
4. **Notice of Completion.** A lead agency must file a Notice of Completion with the State Clearinghouse as soon as it completes a Draft EIR.
5. **Final EIR.** A Final EIR must include: a) any revisions to the Draft EIR; b) copies of comments received during public review; c) list of persons and entities commenting; and d) responses to comments.

6. **Certification of Final EIR.** The lead agency shall certify that: a) the Final EIR has been completed in compliance with CEQA; b) the Final EIR was presented to the decision-making body of the lead agency; and c) the decision-making body reviewed and considered the information in the Final EIR prior to approving a plan.
7. **Lead Agency Plan Decision.** A lead agency may: a) disapprove a plan because of its significant environmental effects; b) require changes to a plan to reduce or avoid significant environmental effects; or c) approve a plan despite its significant environmental effects, if the proper findings and statement of overriding considerations are adopted.
8. **Findings/Statement of Overriding Considerations.** For each significant impact of the plan identified in the EIR, the lead or responsible agency must find, based on substantial evidence, that: a) the plan has been changed to avoid or substantially reduce the magnitude of the impact; b) changes to the plan are within another agency's jurisdiction and such changes have or should be adopted; or c) specific economic, social, or other considerations make the mitigation measures or plan alternatives infeasible. If an agency approves a plan with unavoidable significant environmental effects, it must prepare a written Statement of Overriding Considerations that set forth the specific social, economic, or other reasons supporting the agency's decision.
9. **Mitigation Monitoring/Reporting Program.** When an agency makes findings on significant effects identified in the EIR, it must adopt a reporting or monitoring program for mitigation measures that were adopted or made conditions of plan approval to mitigate significant effects.
10. **Notice of Determination.** An agency must file a Notice of Determination after deciding to approve a plan for which an EIR is prepared. A local agency must file the Notice with the County Clerk. The Notice must be posted for 30 days and sent to anyone previously requesting notice. Posting of the Notice starts a 30-day statute of limitations on CEQA challenges.

Figure 1-1 Environmental Review Process

