

I Introduction

This program Environmental Impact Report (EIR) has been prepared on behalf of the City of Visalia in accordance with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). This EIR analyzes the potential significant impacts of the adoption and implementation of the proposed Visalia General Plan and draft Climate Action Plan (collectively referred to as the “proposed Plan,” “proposed General Plan,” or “proposed Visalia General Plan”).

I.1 Purpose of the EIR

This environmental assessment of the proposed Visalia General Plan fulfills the requirements of CEQA and is designed to inform decision-makers, responsible and trustee agencies, and the general public of the proposed action and the range of potential environmental impacts of that action. The EIR process provides an opportunity to identify environmental benefits of the proposed Visalia General Plan that might balance some potentially significant adverse environmental impacts. The EIR recommends measures to mitigate significant adverse regional impacts identified in the analysis of the proposed Visalia General Plan. This EIR also analyzes alternatives to the proposed Plan. As the lead agency for preparing this EIR, the City of Visalia will use it in its review of the proposed Visalia General Plan prior to taking action on the Plan.

This EIR represents the best effort, at a programmatic level, to evaluate the potential environmental effects of the proposed Visalia General Plan given its long-term planning horizon. It can be anticipated that conditions will change; however, the assumptions used are the best available at the time of preparation and reflect existing knowledge of patterns of physical and economic development, travel, and technological factors.

RELATIONSHIP TO OTHER EIRS

As a program EIR, the preparation of this document does not relieve the sponsors of specific projects from the responsibility of complying with the requirements of CEQA (and/or NEPA for projects requiring federal funding or approvals). As noted, individual projects are required to prepare a more precise, project-level analysis to fulfill CEQA and/or NEPA requirements. The lead agency responsible for reviewing these projects shall determine the level of review needed, and the scope of that analysis will depend on the specifics of the particular project. These projects may, however, use the discussion of impacts in this EIR as a basis of their assessment of these regional, citywide, or cumulative impacts.

APPROVALS FOR WHICH THIS EIR WILL BE USED

This EIR is being prepared for use by the City of Visalia in its review and approval of the proposed Visalia General Plan. The EIR is intended to be solely used for the approval of the proposed Plan and should not be used for the approval of individual projects undertaken subsequent to the Plan's adoption. It will though provide a basis for "tiering" environmental review for subsequent implementation actions, such as new zoning consistent with the General Plan, anticipated Capital Improvement Programs, and infrastructure master plans. However, information in this document can be referenced as applicable.

1.2 General Plan Process and Public Involvement

ROLE OF THE GENERAL PLAN UPDATE REVIEW COMMITTEE

The General Plan update process was initiated by the City of Visalia in December 2009. To help prepare the General Plan, a General Plan Update Review Committee (GPURC) was formed. The committee included representatives from the City Council, Planning Commission, other City committees, community organizations and the business community. In order for the General Plan to accurately address community needs and values, a comprehensive public process of obtaining the input of residents, businesses, and property owners as well as City officials was initiated. The GPURC provided leadership throughout this process. This involved the sharing of information and ideas between elected and appointed officials, City staff, the planning consultants, and residents.

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT PROCESS

Two community-wide meetings were held during the General Plan update process. The first workshop, in June 2010, was for "visioning" and discussion of important planning issues, and drew approximately 75 community members. The second workshop, in June 2011, introduced sketch plan concepts, and allowed for the 60 to 70 workshop participants to discuss issues and be heard in informal settings. Spanish translators and translation of workshop materials were made available at each workshop.

In addition to the community-wide workshops, a series of four "Town Hall" style meetings, one in each quadrant of the city, were held in May 2011. These meetings allowed residents to discuss the overall themes of the General Plan and the proposed Growth Concepts, as well as any neighborhood-specific issues, in a smaller group setting. Attendance ranged from 13 to 33 participants per meeting, totaling approximately 80. Also in May 2011, three focus groups were conducted, specifically aimed at engaging low-income and non-English-speaking communities who are traditionally less involved in planning processes. A total of 36 community members attended. Interpretation was provided in Spanish, Hmong, and Lahu.

Interviews were conducted with 47 representatives of various community stakeholders and organizations. City staff was invited to make presentations before business, educational, social, and non-profit segments of the community to discuss the General Plan Update and the Growth Concepts Report.

Joint City Council meetings were held with Visalia Unified School District Board of Trustees, College of the Sequoias District Board of Trustees, Kaweah Delta Health Care District Board of Directors, and the Visalia Planning Commission. Joint meetings included discussion items on the General Plan Update to focus on specific issues relating to these entities. These meetings were open to the public.

The City published a newsletter in English and Spanish to introduce the planning process and provide details on means of participation. The newsletter and an accompanying survey were distributed in May 2010 to City residents, property owners, business owners, developers, service organizations, and other interested agencies as inserts into three local newspapers. Copies were also available at various City sites, including recreation centers, and City Hall offices. The newsletter contained a survey on issues and priorities for the new General Plan, which was also translated into Spanish. In all, 634 surveys were returned.

A website was created for the General Plan Update process, linked to the main City website. All meeting agendas, staff reports, workshop summaries, planning documents and maps created during the update process were posted on the site. The website also allowed interested community members to submit comments and sign up for the General Plan Update mailing list. The website can be accessed at: <http://www.visaliageneralplanupdate.com>. Finally, those interested in receiving information and notices were placed on the General Plan update email distribution list.

The GPURC served as a “sounding board” for ideas and alternatives during the update process, formulating consensus and providing direction for City staff and consultant team work. The GPURC also heard public comment and participated with invited speakers in discussions on a range of planning topics. Committee members also attended public workshops to facilitate dialogue and understand community concerns. The Committee held 33 meetings throughout the process, through February 2012.

The proposed General Plan will be considered by the City Council at public hearings following public review of this Draft EIR. If approved, the proposed Plan will become the City’s new General Plan and be used to guide land use decision-making to the year 2030 or until a subsequent General Plan is adopted.

1.3 Notice of Preparation

A Notice of Preparation (NOP) for the EIR on the proposed City of Visalia General Plan was circulated in April 2010 (dated April 22, 2010 by the State Clearinghouse) and the City received comments during a 30-day review period. The NOP and comments on that NOP received by the City are in Appendix A of this EIR. An environmental review meeting was held at Council Chambers on May 7, 2010. NOP comments, along with input received during public workshops and meetings, helped to identify the major planning and environmental issues and concerns and establish the framework of this EIR.

1.4 EIR Approach and Issues Addressed

The Visalia General Plan EIR is a program EIR, defined in Section 15168 of the CEQA Guidelines as: “[An EIR addressing a] series of actions that can be characterized as one large project and are related either: (1) Geographically; (2) A[s] logical parts in the chain of contemplated actions; (3) In connection with the issuance of rules, regulations, plans, or other general criteria to govern the conduct of a continuing program; or (4) As individual activities carried out under the same authorizing statutory or regulatory authority and having generally similar environmental impacts which can be mitigated in similar ways.”

Program EIRs can be used as the basic, general environmental assessment for an overall program of projects such as the Visalia General Plan, intended to be developed over a 20-year planning horizon. A program EIR has several advantages. First, it provides a basic reference document to avoid unnecessary repetition of facts or analysis in subsequent project-specific assessments. Second, it allows the lead agency to look at the broad, regional impacts of a program of actions before its adoption and eliminates redundant or contradictory approaches to the consideration of regional and cumulative effects.

As a programmatic document, this EIR presents a citywide assessment of the potential impacts of the proposed Visalia General Plan. It does not separately evaluate subcomponents of the proposed Plan nor does it assess project-specific impacts of potential future projects under the General Plan, all of which are required to comply with CEQA and/or NEPA as applicable.

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUE AREAS

As provided for in the CEQA Guidelines, the focus of this EIR is on those environmental issues and concerns identified as possibly significant by the City of Visalia in its Notice of Preparation (see Appendix A). These issue areas of concern include:

- **Land Use:** *Would the Visalia General Plan:* Conflict with applicable area land use plans, including the County General Plan? Result in community residential or business disruption or displacement of substantial numbers of existing population and housing? Result in permanent alterations to the characteristics and qualities of an existing neighborhood or community?
- **Transportation:** *Would the Visalia General Plan:* Conflict with policies in the General Plan establishing level of service (LOS) standards? Conflict with the applicable Concept Route Reports for State Highways? Conflict with adopted policies, plans, or programs regarding public transit, bikeways, or pedestrian facilities, or otherwise substantially decrease the performance or safety of such facilities?
- **Air Quality:** *Would the Visalia General Plan:* Conflict with or obstruct implementation of the applicable air quality plan? Violate any air quality standard or contribute substantially to an existing or projected air quality violation? Result in a cumulatively considerable net increase of any criteria pollutant for which the project region is in non-attainment under an applicable federal or state ambient air quality standard, including releasing emissions that exceed quantitative thresholds for ozone precursors? Expose sensitive receptors to substantial

pollutant concentrations? Create objectionable odors affecting a substantial number of people?

- **Greenhouse Gases and Climate Change:** *Would the Visalia General Plan:* Result in a substantial increase in per service population (residents + jobs) energy consumption? Require a substantial increase in energy supply capacity or infrastructure, the construction of which could cause adverse environmental effects? Conflict with any existing local, regional, state or federal standards for energy production or efficiency? Conflict with existing local, regional, or state efforts to implement AB 32 or SB 375 or, specifically, result in the generation of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, either directly or indirectly, in an amount greater than 6.6 metric tons of CO₂-equivalent (MTCO_{2e}) GHG's per service population in the year 2020, or result in the generation of GHG emissions from passenger vehicles in an amount greater than 3.53 metric tons per capita by 2020, not accounting for State-mandated improvements to fuel efficiency? Result in buildout that would interfere with reasonable further progress towards post-2020 AB 32/SB 375 targets?
- **Agriculture and Soil Resources:** *Would the Visalia General Plan:* Convert Prime Farmland, Unique Farmland, or Farmland of Statewide Importance to non-agricultural use? Involve other changes in the existing environment which, due to their location or nature, could result in conversion of such farmland to non-agricultural use?
- **Hydrology, Flooding, and Water Quality:** *Would the Visalia General Plan:* Violate any water quality standards or waste or storm water discharge requirements? Substantially deplete groundwater supplies or interfere substantially with groundwater recharge? Substantially alter the existing drainage pattern of the area causing flooding or erosion? Create or contribute runoff water that would exceed the capacity of existing or planned stormwater drainage systems or provide substantial additional sources of polluted runoff? Otherwise substantially degrade water quality? Place housing within a 100-year flood hazard area, or place structures within a 100-year flood hazard area that would impede or redirect flows? Expose people or structures to a significant risk of loss, injury, or death involving flooding?
- **Geology, Soils and Seismicity:** *Would the Visalia General Plan:* Increase exposure of people or structures to the risk of property loss, injury, or death involving earthquake ground shaking, seismic-related ground failure, liquefaction, or landslides? Result in substantial soil erosion or topsoil loss? Be located on a geologic unit or soil that is unstable or that would become unstable as a result of the project? Result in development relying on septic systems on soils incapable of supporting septic systems? Result in the loss of availability of a known mineral resource, or of a locally-important mineral resource recovery site?
- **Biological Resources:** *Would the Visalia General Plan:* Have a substantial adverse effect, either directly or through habitat modifications, on any species identified as a candidate, sensitive, or special status species? Have a substantial adverse effect on riparian habitat, federally protected wetlands, or other sensitive natural community? Interfere substantially with the movement of resident or migratory fish or wildlife species or wildlife corridors? Conflict with adopted conservation plans?
- **Public Services, Facilities, and Utilities:** *Would the Visalia General Plan:* Result in new development for which the provision of increased staffing, facilities and equipment necessary to maintain acceptable levels of public services could cause adverse environmental effects? Interfere with the provision of existing or planned school services? Exceed wastewater

treatment requirements of the applicable Regional Water Quality Control Board? Require more water than currently available to serve the project from existing entitlements and resources? Result in adverse environmental effects due to the provision of necessary new, altered, or expanded water, wastewater, storm drainage, or solid waste disposal systems? Conflict with existing city standards for parks provision?

- **Noise:** *Would the Visalia General Plan:* Expose persons to indoor or outdoor noise levels in excess of City standards? Result in a substantial permanent, temporary, or periodic increase in ambient noise levels? Expose persons to or generate excessive groundborne vibration?
- **Hazards and Hazardous Materials:** *Would the Visalia General Plan:* Create a significant hazard to the public or the environment through the routine transport, use, or disposal of hazardous materials, or through reasonably foreseeable upset and accident conditions resulting in the release of hazardous materials? Emit hazardous emissions or handle hazardous or acutely hazardous materials, substances, or waste within one-quarter mile of an existing or proposed school? Impair implementation of or physically interfere with an adopted emergency response plan or emergency evacuation plan?
- **Cultural Resources:** *Would the Visalia General Plan:* Cause a substantial adverse change in the significance of a historic resource? Cause a substantial adverse change in the significance of a unique archaeological resource? Disturb any human remains, including those interred outside of formal cemeteries? Destroy, directly or indirectly, a unique paleontological resource or site or unique geologic feature?
- **Visual Quality:** *Would the Visalia General Plan:* Block panoramic views or views of significant landscape features or landforms as seen from public viewing areas? Substantially damage scenic resources that would alter the appearance of or from scenic highways? Substantially degrade the existing visual character or quality of the planning area or its surroundings? Create a new source of substantial light or glare which would adversely affect day or nighttime views in the area?

TYPES OF IMPACTS

According to CEQA Guidelines, the following general types of environmental impacts need to be considered:

- **Direct or primary impacts**, which are caused by the project and occur at the same time and place as the project.
- **Indirect or secondary impacts**, which are caused by the project and are later in time or farther removed in distance, but are still reasonably foreseeable. Indirect or secondary impacts may include growth-inducing impacts and other impacts related to induced changes in the pattern of land use, population density, or growth rate, and related impacts on air and water and other natural systems, including ecosystems. Indirect or secondary impacts may also include cumulative impacts.
- **Short-term impacts**, which are those of a limited duration, such as the impacts that would occur during the construction phase of a project.
- **Long-term impacts**, which are those of greater duration, including those that would endure for the life of a project and beyond.

- **Significant unavoidable impacts**, which cannot be mitigated to a level that is less than significant.
- **Irreversible environmental changes**, which may include current or future irretrievable commitments to using non-renewable resources, or growth-inducing impacts that commit future generations to similar irretrievable commitments of resources. Also, irreversible change can result from risks of accidents and injury associated with the project.
- **Cumulative impacts**, which include two or more individual impacts that when considered together are considerable or which compound or increase other adverse environmental effects. The individual impacts may be changes resulting from a single project or a program of projects. The cumulative effect from several projects is the change in the environment that results from the incremental effect of the proposed project when added to other closely related past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future projects. Cumulative impacts can result from individually minor, but collectively significant, projects taking place over a period of time.

TIMEFRAME

For analytic purposes in this EIR, the year 2010 is the base year (existing conditions), while the year 2030 is the horizon year (future conditions) when the proposed Visalia General Plan will be fully implemented. In cases where current data is not available, the default is to use the latest known data to depict the baseline (i.e., existing conditions). The proposed Plan covers approximately a 20-year planning period, and the year 2030 represents the target year of the plan when projects/programs are anticipated to be fully implemented. However, plan buildout may take more than 20 years, or it may take less. For the purpose of this EIR, a 20-year buildout is a reasonable assumption for a General Plan.

ALTERNATIVES

CEQA requires EIRs to evaluate a reasonable range of alternatives to the proposed Project that could feasibly attain most of the basic project objectives and would avoid or substantially lessen any of the significant environmental impacts. This EIR evaluates two alternatives, namely **Alternative 1: Neighborhood Nodes and Compact Growth** and **Alternative 2: Expanded Growth**; and the **No Project Alternative**. Alternatives 1 and 2 were considered by the GPURC and the community during the planning process; the No Project Alternative represents the continuation of the City's currently adopted General Plan.

See Chapter 4 for more details about the alternatives.

CUMULATIVE IMPACTS ASSUMPTIONS

The EIR attempts to distinguish between the impacts of the proposed Plan and the independent impacts of forecasted future population and employment growth in the larger area, together with assumptions about where this growth will occur. Projections for the proposed Project are based on the regional growth projections prepared by the Tulare County Association of Governments (TCAG), in addition to other sources, such as Caltrans and departments within the City of Visalia, as identified in individual resource sections. Notably, the transportation, air quality, energy

and greenhouse gases, hydrology and water quality, and noise analyses are largely cumulative impact analyses.

1.5 EIR Organization

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This EIR begins with an executive summary of the environmental analysis, which includes a review of the potentially significant adverse regional environmental impacts of the proposed Visalia General Plan and the measures recommended to mitigate those impacts. The executive summary also indicates whether or not those measures mitigate the significant impacts to a less than significant level. Finally, the executive summary describes the alternatives and their merits as compared to the proposed Visalia General Plan, and identifies the environmentally superior alternative among them.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND ORGANIZATION

Chapter 1 (this chapter) describes the relationship between the proposed Visalia General Plan and the EIR, the organization of the EIR, and the basic legal requirements of a program level EIR. It discusses the level of analysis and the alternatives considered as well as how this EIR is related to other environmental documents and the EIR's intended uses.

CHAPTER 2: PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Chapter 2 introduces the purpose and objectives of the proposed Visalia General Plan and summarizes specific information to describe the proposed Plan and complete the EIR analysis. This includes a description of the existing project setting, an outline of the projected population and employment growth rates and development patterns through the 2030 planning horizon year, and land use maps, tables, and key policy direction.

CHAPTER 3: SETTINGS, IMPACTS, AND MITIGATION MEASURES

Chapter 3 describes the existing physical and regulatory settings for each of the environmental issue areas analyzed in the EIR, the potential impacts of the proposed Visalia General Plan on these environmental issue areas, the proposed Plan policies that help to reduce those impacts, and, if necessary, measures to mitigate potential impacts identified. Each issue area is analyzed in a separate numbered subsection of the chapter. Each subsection is organized as follows:

- Environmental Setting
 - Physical Setting
 - Regulatory Setting
- Impact Analysis
 - Significance Criteria
 - Methodology and Assumptions
 - Summary of Impacts

- Impacts and Mitigation Measures

CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS OF ALTERNATIVES

Chapter 4 includes a description of alternatives to the proposed Visalia General Plan and an assessment of their potential to achieve the objectives of the proposed Plan while reducing potentially significant adverse environmental effects. As required by CEQA, an environmentally superior alternative is identified.

CHAPTER 5: CEQA-REQUIRED CONCLUSIONS

Chapter 5 provides the assessment of impacts of the proposed Plan in several subjects areas required by CEQA, including:

- Significant irreversible environmental changes;
- Significant unavoidable impacts;
- Growth-inducing impacts;
- Cumulative impacts; and
- Effects found to be not significant.

CHAPTERS 6, 7, 8, 9, AND 10: BIBLIOGRAPHY, ORGANIZATIONS CONSULTED, REPORT AUTHORS, GLOSSARY, LIST OF ACRONYMS, AND APPENDICES

Chapter 6 is a bibliography, Chapter 7 is a list of organizations consulted, Chapter 8 contains report authors, Chapter 9 includes a glossary, and Chapter 10 is a list of acronyms. Appendix A includes the Notice of Preparation (NOP) of this EIR and the comments received on the NOP, Appendix B includes transportation volume figures and modeling results, while Appendix C shows a list of special status species potentially occurring in and adjacent to the Planning Area.

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