



Chapter 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, organization, and format of the General Plan Background Report.

This chapter is divided into the following sections:

- What is a General Plan? (Section 1.1)
- Using the General Plan (Section 1.2)
- Regional Setting (Section 1.3)
- Planning Boundaries and Areas (Section 1.4)
- Purpose of the Background Report (Section 1.5)
- Organization of the Background Report (Section 1.6)
- Format of the Background Report (Section 1.7)



CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

San Benito County General Plan

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SECTION 1.1 WHAT IS A GENERAL PLAN?

Every county and city in California is required by State law to prepare and maintain a planning document called a general plan. A general plan serves as the jurisdiction's "constitution" or "blueprint" for future decisions concerning land use and resource conservation. All specific plans, subdivisions, public works projects, and zoning decisions must be consistent with the local jurisdiction's general plan.

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 covers a wide range of social, economic, infrastructure, and natural resource issues. The issues include land use, urban development, housing, transportation, public facilities and services, recreation, agriculture, biological resources, and many other topics. Section 1.6 lists the topics covered in the San Benito County General Plan Background Report.
- **Long-Range.** A general plan provides guidance on achieving a long-range vision of the future for a county or city. To reach this envisioned future, the general plan includes goals, policies, and implementation programs that address both near-term and long-term needs. The San Benito County General Plan looks out to the year 2035 (roughly 25 years in the future).
- **Integrated and Coherent.** The goals, policies, and implementation programs in a general plan present a comprehensive, unified program for development and resource conservation. A general plan uses a consistent set of assumptions and projections to assess future demands for housing, employment, and public services (e.g., infrastructure). A general plan has a coherent set of policies and implementation programs that enables citizens to understand the vision of the general plan, and enables landowners, businesses, and industry to be more certain about how they will be implemented.

SECTION 1.1 USING THE GENERAL PLAN

The General Plan is used by the Board of Supervisors, Planning Commission, and County staff on a daily basis to make decisions with direct or indirect land use implications. It 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 a particular geographic area or for a particular subject of interest to them.

The General Plan is the basis for a variety of regulatory mechanisms and administrative procedures. California planning law requires consistency between the General Plan and its implementation programs. Implementation programs and regulatory systems of the General Plan include zoning and subdivision ordinances, capital improvement programs, specific plans, environmental impact procedures, building and housing codes, and redevelopment plans.

Over time the county's population will change, its goals will be redefined, and the physical environment in which its residents live and work will be altered. In order for the General Plan to be a useful



CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

San Benito County General Plan

document, it must be monitored and periodically revised to respond to and reflect changing conditions and needs.

The General Plan should be reviewed annually. A more comprehensive and thorough review and revision should be done every five or ten years to document changes in local conditions based on the new data. State law permits the 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.

The General Plan should be user-friendly. To this end, the General Plan is divided into two documents: the Background Report and the Goals and Policies Report. The Background Report is further divided into 11 chapters (see Section 1.6), and the Goals and Policies Report is divided into 10 sections so that information can be easily referenced by subject or issue.

The following paragraphs provide a summary of the two component documents that make up the San Benito County General Plan:

- **Background Report.** The Background Report takes a “snapshot” of San Benito County’s current (2009) trends and conditions. It provides a detailed description of a wide range of topics (see Section 1.6) within the county, such as demographic and economic conditions, land use, public facilities, and environmental resources. The report provides decision-makers, the public, and local agencies with context for making policy decisions. Unlike the Goals and Policies Report, the Background Report is intended to be objective and policy-neutral. The Background Report serves as a setting for the Environmental Impact Report prepared for the General Plan.
- **Goals and Policies Report.** This report 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 full set of implementation programs that will ensure the goals and policies in the General Plan are carried out.

As part of the San Benito County General Plan Update, the County will also prepare the following supporting documents:

- **Opportunities and Challenges Report.** The Opportunities and Challenges Report identifies key physical, environmental, economic, cultural, social, and planning issues affecting San Benito County. These key conditions and issues will be derived from the Background Report, input received from the General Plan Advisory Committee (GPAC), the community survey, and other sources of information collected during the initial phases of the General Plan Update process. The information summarized in this Report and the Background Report will provide a framework for developing a vision statement.
- **Alternatives Report.** The Alternatives Report will consist of a summary and evaluation of land use and 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 for the preferred policy direction for the Draft Goals and Policies Report. The vision statement will be further refined following the selection of the preferred alternative in Phase 4, and ultimately placed in the preface of the Goals and Policy Report.

- **Environmental Impact Report.** The environmental impact report (EIR) responds to the requirements of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) as set forth in Sections 15126, 15175, and 15176 of the CEQA Guidelines Act (CEQA). The Planning Commission and Board of Supervisors will use the EIR during the General Plan Update process to understand the potential environmental implications associated with implementing the General Plan.

SECTION 1.2 REGIONAL SETTING

San Benito County is located in the Coast Range Mountains, south of San Jose and west of the Central Valley (Figure 1-1). The county is surrounded by Santa Cruz and Monterey Counties to the west, Santa Clara County to the north, and Merced and Fresno Counties to the east and south. The county encompasses over 890,000 acres (about 1,391 square miles). While San Benito County is defined as a part of the Monterey Bay Area, it is also heavily influenced by both the San Francisco Bay Area and the Central Valley. There are two incorporated cities in the county: Hollister, which is the county seat, and San Juan Bautista which is home to the historic Mission San Juan Bautista, founded in 1797. There are several historic unincorporated communities in the county including Aromas, Paicines, Panoche, Tres Pinos, and the ghost town of New Idria.

San Benito County is largely rural, with over 90 percent of land use for farming, ranching, forestry, or other public uses. Pinnacles National Monument, the Hollister Hills State Vehicular Recreation Area, and Fremont Peak State Park, are major recreational attractions. The San Andreas Fault also runs through the center of the county.

U.S. Route (HWY) 101, State Route (SR) 129, and SR 156 connect San Benito County to the San Francisco Bay Area and Monterey Bay Area. SR 25 bisects the county and provides access to Pinnacles National Monument. SR 152, while not in the county, connects SR 156 to Interstate 5 and the Central Valley towards the east. The Union Pacific Railway provides freight service, and the Hollister Municipal Airport supports commercial and recreational aviation.



CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

San Benito County General Plan

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 **Figure 1-1**
Regional Setting

SECTION 1.3 PLANNING BOUNDARIES AND COMMUNITY AREAS

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

- **County Line.** The jurisdictional boundary of a county. State law requires counties to adopt a general plan that addresses physical development within its county line.
- **Sphere of Influence.** A sphere of influence (SOI) is the probable physical boundary and service area of a local agency, as adopted by a Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO). A 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 (see Figure 1-2 and Chapter 4, Land Use, Section 4.7).
- **Unincorporated Communities.** Unincorporated communities include towns and settlements outside of city limits over which San Benito County has direct land use jurisdiction (see Figure 1-2). Unincorporated communities include Paicines, Panoche, and Tres Pinos.
- **City Limits.** The city limits includes the area within a city's corporate boundary over which cities exercise land use authority and provide public services. San Benito County does not have direct land use jurisdiction over areas within the city limits of Hollister and San Juan Bautista.

SECTION 1.4 PURPOSE OF THE BACKGROUND REPORT

The Background Report provides a “snapshot” in time of the county's existing conditions. The Background Report presents the physical, social, and economic resource information required to support the preparation of the General Plan. The data and information in the Report are generally current as of June 2009.

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

SECTION 1.5 ORGANIZATION OF THE BACKGROUND REPORT

The Background Report is organized into 13 chapters, a glossary, and a bibliography, as follows:

- **Chapter 1 – Introduction.** This chapter provides an introduction to the Background Report and covers the following topics: what the general plan is and how it is used, San Benito County's regional setting, purpose of the Background Report, and organization of the Background Report.
- **Chapter 2 – Demographic and Economic Trends.** This chapter describes the population and demographic characteristics of the county and a discussion of the county's economic and fiscal conditions as of June 2009. This chapter includes: a summary of population, age, ethnicity, income, housing, employment, and other statistical information as reported by various agencies and historical demographic and growth trends; and an evaluation of the performance of various countywide economic sectors.



CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

San Benito County General Plan

- **Chapter 3 – Land Use.** This chapter provides an overview of existing land use conditions and land use regulations in the county. This includes an overview of the 1985 General Plan, zoning regulations, and related county plans. This chapter also provides an overview of the surrounding city and county plans, regional plans, and State and Federal planning requirements that affect the county.
- **Chapter 4 – Agriculture.** This chapter provides an overview of agricultural trends and issues. This includes a description and evaluation of existing and potential agricultural land preservation and conservation programs in California and the county.
- **Chapter 5 – Housing.** This chapter describes existing and future housing needs facing San Benito County residents. It includes a description of the housing stock and a demographic profile, an assessment of special housing needs, a description of housing resources and opportunities, and an analysis of constraints to providing affordable housing in the county. The County will adopt a new housing element in Fall 2009.
- **Chapter 6 – Transportation and Circulation.** This chapter describes the transportation network and operating conditions in San Benito County. Included in this chapter is a summary of existing roadway facilities and traffic levels-of-service at intersections and roadway segments.
- **Chapter 7 – Public Services and Utilities.** This chapter covers the existing infrastructure capabilities and public services provided in the county including: water supply and delivery, wastewater collection and disposal, stormwater drainage, flood control, solid and hazardous waste, public utilities, law enforcement, fire protection, schools, and County services.
- **Chapter 8 – Natural Resources.** This chapter discusses the natural resources found in the county, including water resources, energy and mineral resources, biological resources, agricultural resources, and oil and gas resources.
- **Chapter 9 – Scenic Resources.** This chapter discusses the scenic quality of the county's townscapes, working landscapes, and travel routes.
- **Chapter 10 – Recreation and Cultural Resources.** This chapter discusses the recreation and cultural resources found in the county, including recreation, archeological resources, and historical resources.
- **Chapter 11 – Safety.** This chapter discusses existing public health and safety issues and concerns relevant to the planning process, such as geologic and seismic hazards, flood hazards, fire hazards, human-made hazards, airport safety, and air quality.
- **Chapter 12 – Climate Change.** This chapter provides an overview of what climate change is, what factors (i.e., greenhouse gas emissions) are contributing to changes in the climate, and how these changes may impact the county. Summaries of greenhouse gas emissions produced in the county for 1990 and 2008 are described and evaluated. This chapter also provides an overview of local, regional, and State measures and actions that have been enacted or are being pursued to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and mitigate the effects of climate change.



- **Chapter 13 – Noise.** This chapter discusses the existing and future noise environment and includes a survey of noise sources in the county.
- **Bibliography.** The bibliography, which is organized by chapter, provides a list of references, document citations, and personal communications used to prepare the report.

SECTION 1.6 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.
- **Key Terms.** Each section contains a list of terms that are unique to the topical areas within each chapter in the Background Report.
- **Regulatory Setting.** Each section summarizes the laws and regulations pertaining to the topics identified. Federal, State, and local regulations are described, as applicable.
- **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 as of June 2009 for each resource or issue area. Supplemental information developed since that time is provided in some cases.