

INTRODUCTION

i. WHAT IS THE GENERAL PLAN?

The Merced County Year 2000 General Plan contains the principle statement concerning the County's goals and desires concerning land use and is designed to serve as the basis for development decision making. This Plan is thus the local "constitution" for physical development and, as a long-range planning document, it will direct the physical growth and development of the County through the Year 2000.

When the County adopted its first General Plan in 1965, State law only required such plans to contain "guidelines" for future growth. The County's Zoning Ordinance was the primary means to regulate land use and development. In 1970 and 1971, State law was changed to require a comprehensive treatment of development issues. In response, the County adopted several new mandated general plan elements addressing specific development issues: Housing, Seismic Safety, Noise, Scenic Routes, Safety and Conservation/Open Space. The new legislation also required that zoning and subdivision approval be consistent with the General Plan; thereby elevating the plan from mere academic study to the fundamental land use charter for local land use decision making.

This Year 2000 General Plan constitutes the first comprehensive review and update by the County of all mandated elements into one internally consistent General Plan document. It was prepared by the Merced County Planning Department with the assistance of three consultants who provided technical support on noise, circulation and wildlife issues. The primary focus of this Plan revision was to incorporate up-to-date information and research to meet all the State general plan requirements.

As this document represents primarily a technical update from the previous plan, the fundamental land use and development policy direction for the County has not been substantially altered from preexisting policy.

ii. HOW TO READ AND USE THE PLAN

The Merced County Year 2000 General Plan is oriented to provide a statement of goals, objectives and policies for County decision making on development issues over the next 10 years. It contains projection and addresses policy considerations based on this long-term time frame.

As a comprehensive document, it addresses all of the State mandated issues as well as those non-mandated issues important and unique to Merced County.

The Plan combines the specific requirements for individual "Elements" contained in Government Code Section 65302 into various Chapters which focus on specific general plan issue areas.

The Government Code provisions are often repetitive, requiring different elements to address the same topic areas. By using one general plan document to address all mandated issues, this overlap has been avoided.

The chapters in this General Plan correspond closely to the individual elements required in the Government Code; however, they are not separate documents or elements of the plan, but instead are an interrelated presentation of issues, goals, objectives and policies of the County which together form the basis of County planning activities.

Format of the Year 2000 Plan

In order for the reader to obtain the most value out of this Plan, a format has been used which provides a linkage between the issue discussion on a given topic and the policy direction adopted to guide decision making.

After a brief introduction and purpose section, each chapter details various issues relevant to the particular topic area of the chapter and presents findings used for policy development. The Chapters conclude with a complete list of goals, objectives, policies and implementation measures which the County has adopted to guide development decision making. The typical format of each chapter is as follows:

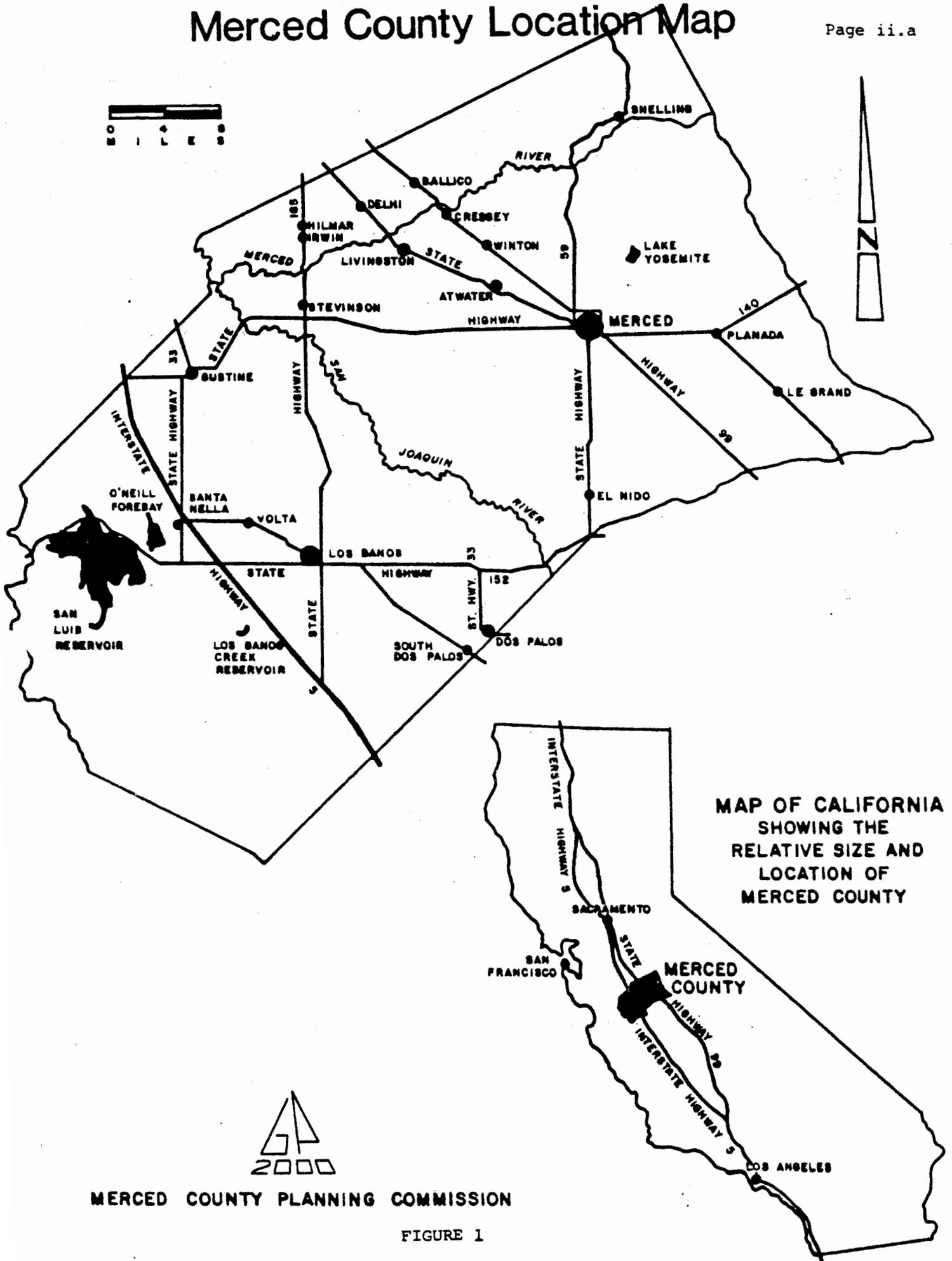
- Introduction/Purpose
- Policy Issues
 - Discussion
 - Findings
- Goals, Objectives, Policies and Implementation

Two of the Chapters also contain "Action Plans" which satisfy State mandates for the Housing and Open Space Chapters. It is the policies and how they are implemented which most clearly guides decision making for development within the County. By reviewing the policy statements and their implementation, the reader can identify how issues raised in each Chapter are to be dealt with by the County.

Several Chapters include an "Appendix" section, which may provide more detailed data or support information. A General Plan Technical Appendix was also prepared which includes those Technical Study Papers prepared by consultants: a traffic study, noise attenuation measures, and a wildlife resource inventory. This Technical Appendix is available under separate cover.

There is an additional component of the Merced County General Plan involving more focused area plans for the largest unincorporated communities. These documents, called "Community Specific Plans," detail local development, land use and infrastructure issues and provide policy direction on a community level. Currently, there are seven plans which were adopted between 1981 and 1984 covering communities with public sewer and water systems: Delhi, Franklin/Beachwood, Hilmar, Le Grand, Planada, Santa Nella and Winton. As components of the General Plan, Community Specific Plans are

Merced County Location Map



MERCED COUNTY PLANNING COMMISSION

FIGURE 1

consistent with overall County policy, but provide a more detailed local focus than appropriate in the Countywide document.

iii. EXECUTIVE SUMMARIES OF EACH GENERAL PLAN CHAPTER

LAND USE CHAPTER

Purpose and Content

The purpose of the Land Use Chapter is to identify appropriate land uses for all unincorporated areas of the County, recognizing a balance between human needs and natural and environmental limitations. This Chapter designates and describes the general category of use for all lands and includes recommended standards of population density and building intensity. The Land Use Policy diagram and the individual urban center maps designate the specific land use classifications for all property.

Consistent with past General Plan policy, the Land Use Chapter is oriented to an "urban centered concept" which directs future urban land use activities to established urban areas where services are available and impacts on agricultural and other natural and open space resources can be minimized. The Chapter recognizes two primary categories of land use--urban and rural--and presents a discussion on urban boundaries and land use designations, and rural land use characteristics and values. A discussion of special land uses and land use issues is also presented to address items including public facilities, hazardous and non-hazardous waste, flood hazards and airports.

List of Land Use Chapter Goals

1. A land use pattern which enhances the integrity of both urban and rural areas.
2. A high quality living environment within unincorporated communities.
3. Coordinated, orderly development in city fringe areas.
4. Sufficient opportunity provided for satisfying the demand for a semi-rural living environment.
5. Sufficient opportunity to accommodate the specialized needs of the traveling public balanced with circulation and other County needs.
6. The daily commercial and service needs of rural populations are served by Agricultural Services Centers (ASCs).
7. Conservation of productive agricultural and other valuable open space lands.
8. A rural environment which achieves a balance between its agricultural and other open space resource values.

9. Accommodation of public land uses and private facilities which satisfy specific County needs.

CIRCULATION CHAPTER

Purpose and Content

The purpose of the Circulation Chapter is to provide a plan for an infrastructure system designed to accommodate the anticipated land use activities throughout the County. The Chapter identifies important issues related to automobile transportation including: designating roads into categories based on their traffic characteristics for proper right-of-way acquisition and design; road construction and maintenance problems; and individual property access considerations. Additional transportation topics include public transportation systems and alternative modes of travel including air, rail, and bicycle and pedestrian routes. In addition, other infrastructure systems are identified including power transmission and distribution systems, irrigation water distribution and urban water, sewer and drainage systems. The Countywide Circulation diagram, together with individual urban boundary maps, contain the classification for all major County and State thoroughfares.

List of Circulation Chapter Goals

1. A road system which provides free movement of vehicles throughout the County.
2. A circulation system which provides for a variety of transportation modes and for the safe and efficient movement of people and goods throughout the County.
3. An adequate system for the transmission and distribution of energy, water and information.
4. Adequate water, sewer and drainage are provided to meet urban needs of the County.

HOUSING CHAPTER

Purpose and Content

The Housing Chapter provides a guide to the development of decent, suitable and affordable housing for the citizens of Merced County from 1992 to 1997 in partial fulfillment of the Statewide Housing Goal. It represents the responsibility of the County in a cooperative effort with the public and private sector, to expand housing opportunities, facilitate housing improvements and development, and accommodate the housing needs of Merced County.

The content of the Chapter includes an assessment of existing housing needs among various segments of the population, a determination of prospective housing needs, an

identification of "quantified objectives" for the supply of housing over the five year time frame of the Chapter and an "Action Plan", promoting measures to achieve the low-income housing objectives. Additional topics include market and government constraints to housing development, and energy conservation measures to reduce energy costs.

List of Housing Chapter Goals

1. Concentrate future housing development and redevelopment in established urbanized communities and designated Rural Residential Centers where public services already exist.
2. Revitalize existing neighborhoods and communities, thereby reinforcing and maximizing public investment in services delivery systems and enhancing economic stability.
3. Provide a mixture of residential uses including high density in urbanized communities and low density in Rural Residential Centers.
4. Conserve and protect agricultural lands to ensure continued productivity and long-term stability of agricultural activities.
5. Provide adequate housing at reasonable cost to all residents regardless of income, age, sex, religion or ethnic background.

NOISE CHAPTER

Purpose and Content

The purposes of the Noise Chapter are to provide mechanisms to reduce and/or eliminate existing conflicts between land use and noise and also to minimize the creation of such conflicts in future land use decisions. As the component of the General Plan most closely associated with noise issues, this Chapter is oriented to provide policy direction for the County to recognize noise conflicts when making land use decisions.

The Chapter presents an inventory of the existing noise environment of the County by source, including roadways and railways, airports, industrial and other major sources. This noise environment is expressed by noise contours (Ldn). It also includes a community survey conducted to identify the level of noise exposure to specified noise sensitive land uses throughout the County. In recognition of noise exposure and land use compatibility criteria, policies are presented to avoid future conflicts from incompatible land uses and reduce future exposure in the existing noise impacted areas.

List of Noise Chapter Goals

1. All citizens of the County free from excessive noise.

2. Noise generating land uses and facilities important to the economic health of the County, are not adversely affected by the encroachment of incompatible noise sensitive land uses.

SAFETY CHAPTER

Purpose and Content

The purpose of the Safety Chapter is to identify the various hazards impacting the County and to provide policies for the protection of County residents and properties from unreasonable risks associated with these hazards. The Chapter discusses the major natural and man-made hazards within the County including: seismic activity and related impacts; slope and landslide hazards; ground subsidence and related geologic hazards; flood plains and flooding problems; urban and wildland fires; and emergency evacuation routes. Goals and policies are identified to protect County residents from these hazards. A central theme of this Chapter is to recognize the use of rural land use designations to limit urban development in identified hazards areas.

List of Safety Chapter Goals

1. Merced County residents protected from known seismic and geologic hazards.
2. Merced County residents free from unacceptable risks resulting from dam failure.
3. Merced County residents free from personal injury and property damage resulting from unstable soils.
4. Merced County residents and structures protected from harmful effects of flooding.
5. The risk of injury and property damage resulting wildland and urban fires is minimized.

OPEN SPACE/CONSERVATION CHAPTER

Purpose and Content

The purpose of the Open Space/Conservation Chapter is to provide a plan to carefully manage open space resources in order to support the County's anticipated population growth while preserving non-renewable assets for future generations. The Chapter provides an inventory of the open space resources of the County and details issues and policies related to their conservation and preservation. This Chapter is oriented to provide a balance among all Chapters of the General Plan recognizing competing uses of land for urban and rural activities and the value of open space for: natural resource preservation; the managed production of resources; outdoor recreational uses; and public health and safety.

The content of the Chapter includes discussion and policies related to the following issues: natural vegetation, wetland and wildlife resources; soil and mineral resources; historical and archaeological values; water quality, quantity and watersheds; natural and man-made hazards; visual and recreational values; energy resources; and air quality.

List of Open Space/Conservation Chapter Goals

1. Habitats which support rare or endangered species are not substantially degraded.
2. Soil, water, air, mineral, energy and historical resources are properly managed.
3. Open space for recreation, aesthetics and protection from hazards.

AGRICULTURAL CHAPTER

Purpose and Content

The Agricultural Chapter is an effort by the County to analyze the status of agriculture and to enact policies that will improve the viability of agricultural operations and promote the conservation of agricultural land. The agricultural resources of the County are discussed through a variety of topic areas including: the economics of agriculture and its benefit to the County economy; the soil resources of the County; conversion of agricultural land; analysis of land parcelization; agricultural related support and processing services; and the importance of water issues including irrigation, flooding and drainage problems. The Chapter relies on the "urban centered concept" developed in the Land Use Chapter for the clear identification of urban areas in order to promote the conservation of agricultural lands and reduce urban and rural land Use conflicts.

List of Agricultural chapter Goals

1. The financial viability of the agricultural sector is improved.
2. Productive agricultural lands are conserved.
3. Land uses which are potentially disruptive to the agricultural economy are properly located and operated.
4. The management of water resources to benefit the agricultural community is improved.