

MERCED COUNTY

UC DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

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GREGORY B. WELLMAN
County Administrative Officer
UC Merced Project Director
ROBERT E. SMITH
UC Merced Planning Director

NOTICE OF PREPARATION

February 15, 2001

TO: Interested Parties FROM: Merced County
2222 M Street
Merced, CA 95340

SUBJECT: **NOTICE OF PREPARATION FOR THE
UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY PLAN AND AREA PLAN
ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT REPORT**

LEAD AGENCY: Merced County
2222 M Street
Merced, CA 95340

CONTACT: Mr. Robert Smith
Merced County, UC Merced Project Office Planning Director

BACKGROUND

Merced County, as lead agency under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), is undertaking the preparation of an Environmental Impact Report (EIR) for the University Community Plan (UCP) and associated University Community Plan -- Area Plan (Area Plan). Merced County is currently examining alternative locations and configurations for the University Community Plan area in eastern Merced County. Each location relates to potential alternative locations for UC Merced being examined by the University of California. These alternative locations will be addressed in the University Community Plan EIR as well as federal and state regulatory permitting processes.

The EIR prepared for these plans will be a first tier EIR and will be used as the basis for subsequent tiered CEQA documents associated with later project approvals. Merced County will be the lead agency and would like to know your views and concerns as to the scope and content of the EIR based on your agency's statutory responsibilities in connection with the UCP and the Area Plan. The County is also seeking input from residents, property owners, and concerned citizens as to the issues that should be addressed in the EIR. The project description and project location are summarized below.

For future approvals related to implementation of the UCP or the Area Plan, this EIR provides a programmatic analysis from which CEQA documents can be “tiered”. For example, CEQA documents associated with specific plans within the University Community Area will tier off this EIR, as will approvals of tentative and final maps, on- and offsite infrastructure plans, and other implementation plans. The tiering process will enable the County to streamline the environmental analysis of subsequent projects, focusing on those environmental concerns that are site- or project-specific, or which have been substantially changed since approval of the UCP.

PROJECT LOCATION

The UCP and the Area Plan will be located in eastern Merced County (see Figure 1). The area currently being planned for the University Community and which will be evaluated for this EIR is generally bounded by Yosemite Avenue to the south, Lake Road to the west, an extended Bellevue Road to the north, and the Le Grand Canal to the east, as shown in Figure 1. The Area Plan will establish policies in an area within approximately two miles of the UCP or University of California, Merced campus, as shown on Figure 1. The acreage and boundaries, however, are subject to change pending final community design and permitting requirements.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The UCP and Area Plan are two related plans that will guide future development of the area surrounding the new UC Merced campus. The UCP will establish physical plans and will provide a policy framework for specific development and infrastructure improvements.

The UCP area encompasses approximately 2,000 acres. The UCP will provide a land use plan, infrastructure plan, street design, and design guidelines. Early estimates indicate that approximately 7,000 single-family residential and 4,600 multi-family residential units would be built on approximately 1,560 acres. Other early estimates include approximately 120 acres of schools, 170 acres of parks, 65 acres of commercial uses, and 120 acres of office/industrial/business park uses would be included in the UCP. A population of approximately 30,000 residents is anticipated.

In addition to a land use plan, the UCP will include plans and policies relating to circulation and transportation, infrastructure, housing, community services and facilities, sustainability and environmental stewardship, environmental protection and conservation, economic development and public safety. Because of the presence of the UC Merced campus, specific policies and plans that address the interface between the campus and community will also be included in the UCP.

The Area Plan will provide specific policies to address the relationship between the UCP and adjacent lands and their uses. The goal of the Area Plan will be to provide policies that address development along the edges of the geographic area subject to the UCP and the relationship between existing urban, recreational, rural, residential, and agricultural uses and the new University Community.

PROJECT ALTERNATIVES

Pursuant to the requirements of the CEQA, the EIR for the UCP and Area Plan will consider a “reasonable range of potentially feasible alternatives that will foster informed decision making and public participation” (State CEQA Guidelines Section 15126.6 (a)).

The EIR's discussion and analysis of alternatives will include various alternative sizes and configurations of the proposed University Community. The EIR will also include (in addition to its discussion and analysis of alternatives to the proposed preferred site) a discussion and analysis of a range of potentially feasible alternative sites capable of satisfying most of the objectives of the project which may also be capable of reducing or eliminating any significant environmental impacts associated with the proposed project. In developing candidate sites for this analysis, the EIR will evaluate the sites that the County expects to be presented and analyzed as part of the federal permitting process as well as other sites that are identified in the EIR scoping process. The EIR will select from among these candidate sites a set of alternative sites that will be considered in the EIR's detailed discussion and analysis of alternatives. At this time the County anticipates that a location for the University Community and UC Merced campus in the northern portion of the City of Merced's urban area (in the vicinity of the previously adopted Bellevue Ranch Specific Plan) and a location for the community and campus on and around Castle Airport (the former Castle Air Force Base) will be among the sites that will be considered in this detailed discussion and analysis of alternatives. This discussion and analysis of alternatives will evaluate the ability of the identified alternatives to satisfy project objectives, to reduce or avoid identified environmental impacts, as well as their feasibility and practicality.

PROJECT APPROVALS

The UCP and the Area Plan will be subject to several project approvals. For instance, the UCP and Area Plan must be approved and adopted by Merced County. Other approvals include permit approvals from such agencies as the United States Army Corps of Engineers, United States Fish and Wildlife Service, California Regional Water Quality Control Board, Department of Fish and Game, and the State Water Resources Control Board. Additional project approvals would be required.

OTHER PLANNING EFFORTS IN THE PROJECT VICINITY

The University of California, Merced (UC Merced) is concurrently issuing a Notice of Preparation for the UC Merced Long Range Development Plan (LRDP) EIR. The UC Merced campus is planned for an area of approximately 2,000 acres immediately north of the UCP area. The campus is planned to eventually accommodate 25,000 students and 6,600 faculty and staff on approximately 910 acres of the campus. The University of California Board of Regents will consider the LRDP and LRDP EIR for approval and certification.

In December 2000, Merced County Department of Public Works issued a Notice of Preparation for an EIR on the Campus Parkway. This limited access road would connect Bellevue Road near the University Community (at Lake Road) with Highway 99 south of the City of Merced. The Campus Parkway project is intended to serve the long-term growth of the City of Merced and the City of Atwater, and to relieve traffic congestion on Highway 99 and the City of Merced. Merced County, Caltrans, and the Federal Highway Administration are the lead agencies for the Campus Parkway project.

Merced County and UC intend to collaborate on the future development of a regional conservation program under the federal Endangered Species Act, the California Endangered Species Act, and California's Natural Communities Conservation Planning Act. It is not anticipated that the regional conservation program will have developed sufficiently to enable its impacts to be addressed in this EIR. Any such impacts will be addressed in a later environmental document specifically for the regional conservation program.

AREAS OF POTENTIAL IMPACT

Aesthetics

The development of the UCP would permanently alter the landscape of the Lake Yosemite area. Changes in the existing visual character of the plan area and vicinity will be addressed in the EIR. In addition, the creation of light and glare and their effect on surrounding areas will be analyzed in the EIR.

Agricultural Resources

Agricultural land would be lost in the development of the UCP Area as agricultural land is converted to urban uses. The potential loss of Important Farmlands and potential conflicts between the project and existing agricultural uses will be evaluated. Williamson Act contracts will be evaluated.

Air Quality

The EIR will evaluate increases in criteria pollutants (ozone precursors, particulate matter and carbon monoxide) that could result from project-related traffic, as well as heating, cooling and other operational aspects of residential and other development that could generate air emissions. The EIR will also evaluate air emissions that could be generated by construction activities.

Biological Resources

The UCP Area is located mainly on agricultural lands, which provides minimal naturally-occurring habitat. However, there are certain species of wildlife that use agricultural lands as their habitat. The EIR will identify sensitive habitats within the plan area, including wetlands, and special-status species that could use the plan area for foraging. The EIR will evaluate the loss of sensitive habitat due to urbanization of the plan area, and the effects of this urbanization on special-status species. Potential indirect effects on sensitive habitats outside of the plan area will also be evaluated.

Cultural Resources

The EIR will identify known prehistoric and historic archeological resources in the plan area. If significant prehistoric or historic sites or artifacts exist within the plan area, the EIR will evaluate the effects of plan development on those resources. The EIR will also evaluate the potential for unknown subsurface resources to be damaged or destroyed by construction activities associated with plan development.

Geology and Soils

The site is flat agricultural land and has roughly the same geology and soil type throughout. The EIR will evaluate potential risks to occupants and constraints to development due to the soils and geologic conditions found in the plan area. Merced County is rated as a "moderate" severity zone for earthquake intensity, so seismic impacts will be evaluated.

Hydrology and Water Quality

Development under the UCP would result in new impervious surfaces, which would increase runoff. The EIR will evaluate the effects of this urban runoff on flooding, the local drainage system and water quality. The EIR will also address the effects of construction on water quality.

Land Use Planning

The UCP Area is currently in active agricultural use. Surrounding uses include rural residential, grazing land, and agricultural uses. The Fairfield Canal flows through the northeastern portion of the site, and the Le Grand Canal borders the eastern edge of the UCP Area.

The EIR will evaluate the compatibility of proposed land uses internally, and with the surrounding existing and planned uses. In addition, the consistency of the Community Plan and Area Plan with the County's General Plan will be examined.

Noise

At present, there are few noise sources in or near the plan area. The EIR will evaluate changes in the noise environment due to project-related traffic and other noise sources (e.g., schools, parks, commercial activity). The traffic noise analysis will identify noise levels within and outside of the plan area.

Population, Employment, and Housing

The EIR will report the population and employment levels that would be expected to result from the UCP. The ratio of housing to employees, both within the UCP area, and in the region, will be discussed.

Public Services

The geographic area subject to the UCP is located within Merced County and the County would provide public services. The increased demand on the provision of public services, including fire, law enforcement, schools and recreation will be addressed in the EIR.

Transportation/Circulation

The addition of 30,000 people would certainly affect the amount of traffic, number of vehicle trips, and the level of service. Since few roadways exist on the geographic area subject to the UCP, interior roadways would need to be constructed. The EIR will evaluate the effects of project-related traffic on existing and planned roadways in the county, including the projected levels of service on these roads. The EIR will also address potential impacts on the County's transit system and pedestrian and bicycle circulation.

Utilities and Service Systems

There are currently no public utilities on the geographic area subject to the UCP. In order to accommodate the project development, water, sewer, electrical/natural gas, and solid waste service to the plan area would need to be developed. The effects of increased demand on the provision of these services will be addressed in the EIR. The environmental effects of extending utilities to the plan area will also be evaluated.

Cumulative Impacts

The EIR will examine the cumulative impacts of development of probable future projects in the area as those impacts might combine or cumulate with the environmental impacts associated with development and operation of the Community. This analysis will include, but not be limited to, the cumulative impacts arising from development of the UC Merced campus, development of the Campus Parkway project proposed by Merced County, and other known projects and planned growth in the region.

HOW TO COMMENT ON THIS NOTICE OF PREPARATION

Consistent with time limits mandated by State law, your response to this notice must be sent at the earliest possible date but not later than 30 days after receipt. Based on the date of the mailing, the 30-day period will run from Thursday, February 15, 2001 through Monday, March 19, 2001.

In addition, the County will conduct a public scoping meeting on March 9, 2001 at 10:00am. The meeting will take place in the County of Merced Board of Supervisors meeting room. The public and agencies are encouraged to attend and provide oral testimony on the proposed scope of analysis in the EIR.

Written comments relating to the contents of this Notice of Preparation and the proposed scope of analysis in the EIR should be sent to:

Mr. Robert Smith
Planning Director
Merced County, UC Merced Project Office
3351 M Street, Suite 240
Merced, CA 95348

Please remember to include in your comments the name of the contact person in your agency.

Date: _____

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Title: _____