

DATE ISSUED: July 30, 2003

REPORT NO. 03-167

ATTENTION: Committee on Land Use and Housing
Agenda of August 6, 2003

SUBJECT: Master Environmental Assessment

SUMMARY

Issue - Should the Development Services and Planning Departments jointly prepare a master environmental assessment (MEA)?

Manager's Recommendation - Recommend that the Development Services and Planning Departments gather baseline information consistent with the description of an MEA contained in Section 15169 of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) Guidelines. The data collected will include an inventory of existing facilities and land uses in each San Diego community planning area. This information will be included in the Existing Conditions section of the environmental document prepared for the General Plan update.

Housing Affordability Impact - None with the recommended actions.

Fiscal Impact - The costs are assumed in the current Planning Department budget and are part of the existing General Plan Work Program.

BACKGROUND

At the request of Councilmember Donna Frye, staff prepared a report addressing the potential preparation of an MEA, consistent with the description.

DISCUSSION

As stated in Section 15169 of the State CEQA Guidelines, "A master environmental assessment is suggested solely as an approach to identify and organize environmental information for a region or area of the state." Several ideas are presented for the content, preparation, and uses of such a document, although none of the elements are mandatory. Notably, an MEA may be prepared as part of the Environmental Impact Report (EIR) for a general plan. In identifying the existing levels and capacities of services and facilities and defining the environmental characteristics and constraints of an area, an MEA can help a jurisdiction develop the most important goals to be included in a general plan. It can also provide a source of area-wide information, including cumulative impact descriptions, for use in preparing EIRs and negative declarations. The Guidelines caution that an MEA should be reviewed and revised periodically

to ensure an accurate and current base of information.

In February 2003, staff conducted an inventory of California jurisdictions that have prepared MEAs. Of the jurisdictions contacted, five cities responded. Information was solicited about the time and cost involved in preparing the MEA, the use of the MEA, and the useful “shelf life” of the document. . The results of the inventory are varied -- the cities’ populations range from 6,000 to 100,000, and the MEAs were prepared for general plans, specific projects, and as general baseline information documents. Of the five cities, one updates their MEA along with their general plan every five years, one prepared a 50-acre site-specific MEA in 2000, two have replaced their MEAs with program and master EIRs, and one city is reconsidering whether to continue updating their MEA due to the costs and legal problems associated with it. The MEA inventory is included as Attachment 1 of this report.

Current Efforts

On October 22, 2003, the City Council adopted the Strategic Framework Element and Action Plan. As part of their motion, the Council directed staff to initiate specific priority actions which included collecting citywide existing conditions data, implementing the Pilot Village Program, updating the balance of the City’s General Plan, and completing several community plan initiatives.

On February 12, 2003, the City Council Committee on Land Use and Housing approved the Planning Department’s General Plan Work Program. The work program identifies the Existing Conditions Data Collection effort as the highest priority task by implementation of the Pilot Village Program and updating the rest of the City’s General Plan (Attachment 2).

The primary goal of the Existing Conditions Data Collection effort is to provide a citywide inventory of existing facilities and land use conditions including but not limited to: public facilities, transportation facilities, land use, and open space. This information will be utilized to provide a baseline for the preparation of future environmental documents, community plan amendments, other elements of the General Plan, and a citywide public facilities financing strategy. A Fact Sheet has been prepared and distributed to the public that provides an overview of the effort including a purpose, roles, timeframe and list of data to be collected (Attachment 3).

In March 2003, the Planning Department initiated the Existing Conditions Data Collection effort with a test case in the Uptown Community Planning Area. This test case allowed the Planning Department to identify a process for citywide implementation as well as to identify the data that would be included in a series of maps for community review (Attachment 4).

Conducting an Existing Conditions Data Collection on existing public facilities and land uses was identified in the approved General Plan Work Program as the highest priority. This effort entails collecting an accurate documentation of all current land uses and existing facilities including parks, recreation, open space, libraries, fire and police stations, public art and transportation. The data collection also includes population data and special community features such as view corridors, noise contours, environmentally sensitive areas, special districts, and

historical landmarks, were applicable. When completed, the data collection will serve as a valuable asset for future Community Plan updates, the General Plan update, environmental analysis, and aid in developing a financing strategy.

A major component of the Existing Conditions Data Collection effort involves the integration of current technologies for proper collection, presentation and data maintenance. Specifically, the effort utilizes Geographic Information Systems (GIS) technology and programs that allow for extensive data to be mapped upon real community images. Furthermore, the centralization of all data collected ensures that all departments have access to the same data for their respective planning efforts. Upon completion of a community's data collection and review process, final maps are placed on the Planning Department's web site for easy access and viewing. Resources permitting, the goal in the near future is to make the maps and layers of data interactive for all users.

Another significant component of the Existing Conditions Data Collection is the community outreach. In addition to regularly interfacing with Community Planning Groups and the general public throughout the process, staff also prepares press releases and media advisory notes to solicit maximum community participation in their community's data collection review effort. Furthermore, Planning-Facilities Financing has also engaged the participation of a Citywide Facilities and Infrastructure Review Ad Hoc Committee to provide input on the Existing Conditions Data Collection effort among other areas of focus.

Effectively managing existing resources, staff anticipates completing the Existing Conditions Data Collection effort in June 2004 in accordance with City Council Land Use and Housing Committee direction. An initial test case on the community of Uptown was successfully completed in July 2003. A second phase focusing on Kearny Mesa, Ocean Beach, and Mission Valley will be completed in the late fall, while the third phase including potential Pilot Villages communities is scheduled for completion just after the new year. The remaining communities will be scheduled throughout the late winter and spring of 2004.

CONCLUSION

Moving forward with the current Existing Conditions Data Collection effort is a critical first step in assessing where we are today. The data collected will provide the background necessary for amending or updating community plans and the General Plan. It will also be used as a baseline for conducting future environmental analysis consistent with an MEA. Finally, it will be used for preparing a financing strategy for public facilities and infrastructure. Although led by the Planning Department, this effort is truly a collaborative effort between all City departments and the community. Using an intensive public involvement element, the Existing Conditions Data Collection will ensure that our citywide data is as accurate and up-to-date as possible.

Respectfully submitted,

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Note: Attachments 2-4 are not available in electronic format. A copy is available for review in the Office of the City Clerk.

- Attachments: [1. Master Environmental Assessment Inventory](#)
2. Prioritized General Plan Work Program
 3. Existing Conditions Data Collection Work Program Fact Sheet
 4. Existing Conditions Data Collection Work Program Maps