

WHITE PAPER

Salinas East Area Specific Plan Infrastructure: Community Benefits from Higher Density

How a denser alternative to the East Area Specific Plan could provide Salinas an estimated \$137 million in funding for infrastructure, affordable housing, and other community benefits, all while reducing residents' driving and greenhouse gas emissions.

PREPARED BY LANDWATCH MONTEREY COUNTY • SEPTEMBER 2026 • LANDWATCH.ORG

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› EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

LandWatch recommends the City of Salinas develop a walkable, compact development alternative for the East Area Specific Plan (EASP) to generate funding for citywide infrastructure, make housing more affordable, and improve the preservation of agriculture and natural and open spaces. A higher-density, more sustainable alternative to Salinas' proposed East Area Specific Plan could add or preserve close to 300 acres of agricultural or natural and open space, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, reduce long-term maintenance costs, and provide nearly \$140 million in funding for community benefits, such as affordable housing, citywide infrastructure improvements, and more.

Salinas can pursue this approach and realize potential savings through an optional community benefits framework that offers the higher-density zoning in exchange for funding to support citywide priorities.

LandWatch's proposed alternative could provide Salinas an estimated \$137 million in funding for infrastructure, affordable housing, and more—while preserving 279 more acres of farmland and open space and reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

› INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

Salinas is in the process of developing the East Area Specific Plan (EASP), a proposed project in the North of Boronda Future Growth Area that would include development of a new residential neighborhood, a commercial and civic center, and parks on existing farmland and open space.¹ In the Visión Salinas 2040 General Plan, the EASP would develop 942 acres², including:

- 521 acres of low- and medium-density residential development,
- 23 acres of high-density development,
- 51 acres of mixed-use development,
- 66 acres of civic and institutional development, and
- 192 acres of parks and open space.

The area would be served by an estimated 89 acres of roads.²

The extensive low-density development in the proposed project is expected to result in significant infrastructure costs, driven by the significant distances between homes. Lower-density development also means residents must drive farther for daily needs, increasing vehicle miles traveled and greenhouse gas emissions.³ In addition, housing densities below 30 dwelling units per acre (du/ac)

in Salinas are not anticipated to be adequate for providing housing affordable to lower-income households, according to the California Department of Housing and Community Development.⁴

Salinas has an opportunity to enable a higher-density version of the project under a community benefits agreement. If adopted, this higher-density alternative could potentially provide close to \$140 million in community benefits that can help fund citywide priorities, like infrastructure or affordable housing, while simultaneously reducing greenhouse gas emissions and providing additional land area for agriculture and natural and open spaces.

› PROPOSAL & ANALYSIS

LandWatch proposes that Salinas offer developers the choice of a higher-density alternative zoning for the EASP, subject to a community benefits agreement (CBA) that provides significant funding for citywide priorities such as infrastructure, affordable housing, and more. Based on the preliminary analysis below, a financially feasible CBA could provide nearly \$140 million in community benefits. By comparison, this is roughly 40% of the City's unfunded paving needs (estimated at \$343 million)⁵, or enough to fund nearly 700 affordable homes (assuming a 25% City contribution and \$800,000 cost per unit).⁶ The City should work with potential developers to maximize funding for community benefits while ensuring the higher-density project remains feasible.

The following analysis develops the estimated development cost savings of LandWatch's higher-density alternative compared to the base density proposed for the EASP.

Cost Analysis

The proposed EASP includes the following residential land uses and areas shown in Table 1:

Table 1. EASP Residential Land Use Proposal

Land Use	Density (du/ac)	Area (acres)	Estimated Units (Midpoint)
Hillside Neighborhood	2-6	110	440
Traditional Neighborhood	6-12	304	2,736
Blended Residential Neighborhood	12-20	107	1,712
Multifamily Neighborhood	20-40	23	690
Neighborhood Centers	15-30	51	1,148
Total		595	6,726

Source: City of Salinas. Unit estimates calculated by LandWatch using midpoint densities.²

This low-density project will require the developer to finance significant infrastructure costs, paid for by the sale of new homes in the project. However, a higher-density alternative could keep the same number of units, but improve housing affordability, preserve open space, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and reduce development costs, freeing up project budget for community benefits that could help address citywide priorities like affordable housing and infrastructure. The City can retain the default low-density zoning alongside a voluntary option for higher-density zoning, which would be subject to a community benefits agreement specifying the amount and allocation of community funding. For the higher-density alternative, LandWatch recommends the following changes:

- 1) Increase the density in the Traditional Neighborhood to 12-20 dwelling units per acre (du/ac) (from 6-12),
- 2) Increase the density in Blended Residential to 16-35 du/ac (from 12-20),
- 3) Reduce the area of the Traditional Neighborhood zone to just 135 acres (from 304 acres), preserving the remaining space as nonresidential open and agricultural space, and
- 4) Reduce the area of the Hillside Neighborhood zone to 0, preserving all 110 acres as nonresidential open and agricultural space.

Table 2, below, shows LandWatch's proposed density and area allocation, with changes in **orange bold**:

Table 2. LandWatch Residential Land Use Proposal

Land Use	Density (du/ac)	Area (acres)	Estimated Units (Midpoint)
Hillside Neighborhood	2-6	0	0
Traditional Neighborhood	12-20	135	2,160
Blended Residential Neighborhood	16-35	107	2,729
Multifamily Neighborhood	20-40	23	690
Neighborhood Centers	15-30	51	1,148
New Natural Preservation and Open Space		+279	
Total		316	6,727

Source: LandWatch alternative and calculations; baseline land-use inputs from the City of Salinas.²

Under state law, this higher-density alternative should be presented as a voluntary option, subject to a development agreement with negotiated community benefits. However, by reducing the

infrastructure needs elsewhere in the project while keeping the total number of homes constant, there could be significant savings available to leverage for those community benefits.

For the analysis of infrastructure cost savings, a simplified and conservative assumption is used that for each acre of residential development (43,560 square feet, or a square roughly 209 feet on each side), one road segment of approximately 200 linear feet was required, consisting of two 12 foot lanes, for a total of 4,800 square feet of road per acre of residential neighborhood.

Salinas' 2023 Pavement Management Program Update Report estimates that Salinas has 62,289,734 square feet of pavement, with a replacement value of approximately \$1.1 billion, or \$17.66 per square foot.⁵ Based on this replacement value, each acre of residential development requires \$84,768 in paving costs.

In addition to pavement, each linear foot of roadway length is assumed to require two linear feet of gutter, curb, and sidewalk length (one linear foot on each side). Based on Salinas' 2020 Park Development Impact Fee Study⁷, it is assumed that each linear foot of curb, gutter, and sidewalk costs approximately \$45 (based on the \$219 per linear foot from the 2020 report, adjusted to \$257 for inflation through 2023, less \$211.92 per linear foot in paving costs for the 12-foot travel lane at \$17.66 per square foot). As a result, each acre of residential development is estimated to require \$18,000 in curb, gutter, and sidewalk costs.

Lastly, each mile of residential roadway is assumed to also require one mile each of sanitary sewer, potable water, and stormwater pipeline. Salinas' recent 2023 Sanitary Sewer Master Plan Update⁸ includes cost estimates for nine Future Capital Improvement Program sewer main upgrades, with a weighted average total project cost of \$1,279 per linear foot. Because these costs are primarily for larger diameter pipes (mostly 15-27"), the project cost estimates for the 12" sewer main upgrade on San Juan Grade Road are used instead as the most comparable construction cost. An additional discount of 25% is applied to account for the lower costs of a larger-scale greenfield project, resulting in an estimate of \$650 per foot of new sewer main. For simplicity, we assume that potable water and stormwater each also have the same construction costs as sanitary sewer. As a result, each acre of residential development is estimated to require \$390,000 in new piping for sanitary sewer, potable water, and stormwater.

Under this option, by reducing the total residential acreage by 279 acres, a proposed higher-density development could potentially avoid an estimated 30.7 acres of pavement running 10.56 linear miles, saving \$23.6 million in direct paving costs and an additional \$5.0 million in sidewalks, curbs, and gutters. The project could also avoid roughly 167,400 feet of sanitary sewer, potable water, and stormwater systems combined, saving an additional estimated \$108.8 million in construction costs. Altogether, LandWatch's proposed higher-density option could potentially

provide as much as \$137.4 million in infrastructure savings available to support community benefits, in addition to reducing the city's need for ongoing annual maintenance costs.

This estimate uses simplified assumptions based on the City's expected replacement costs for existing infrastructure in smaller scale projects. New greenfield infrastructure may have different development costs, and these estimates also assume that infrastructure costs are primarily driven by the distance between homes served (since the number of homes in the project would remain roughly constant). This estimate also does not account for other potential avoided utility costs, such as electrical distribution infrastructure or telecommunications (internet/fiber optic), or the City's annual savings in avoided maintenance needs. In practice, the City would need to work closely with a potential developer to determine savings and co-develop a community benefits package that retains project feasibility.

Greenhouse Gas Emissions Analysis

In addition to direct construction costs, LandWatch's proposed alternative has the potential to reduce greenhouse gas emissions generated by residents living in the development. A substantial body of academic literature shows that residential density is one of the strongest predictors of vehicle miles traveled (VMT) per household. A 2025 research brief from the National Center for Sustainable Transportation at UC Davis found "strong confidence in density effect sizes on per capita or per household VMT in the range of 7 to 12 percent" for each doubling of residential density, drawing on multiple California-specific and national studies.⁹ In addition, other individual studies, including a meta-analysis of 37 studies by Stevens (2017), find effects as high as 19 to 22 percent per doubling.⁹

Under LandWatch's proposed alternative, the average density of the EASP's residential development would rise from roughly 11.3 dwelling units per acre to roughly 21.3 dwelling units per acre—an increase of about 88%. Assuming that a 100% increase in density (a doubling) would reduce per capita VMT by 7 to 12%, based on the UC Davis research⁹, LandWatch's higher-density EASP alternative could be expected to reduce VMT by 6 to 11%. Nationally, the average household drives about 14,489 miles per year (based on the 2022 National Household Travel Survey)¹⁰, and so if EASP residents would otherwise have the national average VMT, the high-density alternative could reduce VMT by as much as 5 to 10 million VMT per year. At the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's standard emissions factor of approximately 400 grams of CO₂ per mile for a typical passenger vehicle¹¹, that translates to roughly 2,000 to 4,000 metric tons of CO₂ avoided annually—the equivalent of removing approximately 434 to 870 passenger vehicles from the road each year.¹¹

Results

By moving to higher density and avoiding 279 acres of residential development, the EASP can avoid an estimated 30.7 acres of pavement running 10.56 miles, saving \$23.6 million in direct paving costs, \$5.0 million in sidewalks, curbs, and gutters, and \$108.8 million in sanitary sewer, potable water, and stormwater costs, for an estimated total of \$137.4 million in one-time infrastructure savings. The City can recapture a substantial portion of those project savings through a community benefits agreement, making that funding available for citywide priorities like affordable housing, infrastructure, and more, while simultaneously saving on long-term maintenance needs. In addition, VMT reductions from moving to higher density could save an additional 2,000 to 4,000 metric tons of CO₂ per year.

› RECOMMENDATIONS

Providing a higher-density alternative subject to a community benefits agreement has the opportunity to make as much as \$137.4 million available for citywide priorities, such as addressing the \$343 million backlog in deferred roadway maintenance (identified in Salinas' 2023 Pavement Management Program Update Report)⁵ or funding more affordable housing. It also has the opportunity to save up to 4,000 metric tons of CO₂ per year, provide nearly 300 acres of additional open and agricultural space, and reduce the City's future ongoing maintenance needs.

LandWatch calls on the City of Salinas to take the following actions as it finalizes the East Area Specific Plan:

1. Adopt a higher-density, walkable alternative for the EASP's residential neighborhoods, of 12–20 du/ac in the Traditional Neighborhood and 16–35 du/ac in Blended Residential, while reducing the Traditional Neighborhood to 135 acres and eliminating the Hillside Neighborhood zone, in order to reduce infrastructure costs, improve housing affordability, and preserve an additional 279 acres of farmland and open space, subject to a negotiated development agreement that provides significant community benefits.
2. Evaluate citywide and community priorities for directing the resulting community benefits, such as towards the City's \$343 million backlog in deferred roadway maintenance⁵, meeting affordable housing targets, or other community priorities.

› CONCLUSION

The EASP represents a generational decision about how Salinas grows. The form that the development takes will determine how much the City must spend to maintain it going forward, how affordable the resulting homes are, how far residents must drive, and how much farmland and open space remain. LandWatch's proposed higher-density community benefits approach accommodates the same number of homes as the original proposed EASP, while providing as much as \$137.4 million available to fund citywide priorities, preserving 279 additional acres of agricultural and natural land, and reducing residents' driving and associated greenhouse gas emissions by as much as 4,000 tons per year. LandWatch urges the City to make this alternative a viable option subject to a community benefits agreement within the East Area Specific Plan.

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› ABOUT LANDWATCH MONTEREY COUNTY

LandWatch’s mission is to create a template for sustainability, using Monterey County as a model. By encouraging greater public participation in planning, we connect people to government, address human needs, and inspire conservation of natural resources.

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