

Area Plans – North County

Vision Statement

The North County Planning Area is a distinctive region containing scenic valleys and ridges, globally important agricultural lands, and Elkhorn Slough, which is part of the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary and the Elkhorn Slough National Estuarine Research Reserve. Few areas of comparable size contain the variety of locations and quality of life offered in North County. Castroville and Pajaro have agriculture-based economies, while Moss Landing is primarily dependent on coastal industries. These communities offer urban densities with a "small town" or "village" character. The rural areas of Prunedale, Aromas, and Las Lomas provide a community focus for residents in nearby secluded valleys and canyons.

The varying identities and lifestyles of North County will continue to be defined through the character of its small towns, villages and rural communities. North County residents would like to maintain their historically rural values, close-knit neighborhoods and unpretentious community. Residents are also proud of the area's role and reputation in providing globally important agricultural products and are fiercely protective of its viable farmlands.

Due to the close proximity of North County to metropolitan areas and their attractive qualities, North County has experienced tremendous growth and development in recent years. This has been particularly true in the Prunedale Area where proximity to Highway 101 makes it feasible for workers from other counties to locate here. Throughout the North County area, growth has left its mark on the land, and in the minds of long time residents, growth has diminished some of the qualities that attracted them to the area originally. Growth in the rural areas has brought traffic, noise, congestion, greater demands on limited urban services and increasing losses to the area's potable water and other precious natural resources, including the majestic oak landscape and wildlife corridors.

The North County Planning Area has unique soils and climates that allow for unusual crops and year-round cultivation. Growth has caused concern for the viability of agriculture and maintaining rural character. Vast areas of farmland at the northern and southern perimeters of the Planning Area, as well as rangelands to the east, maintain lifestyles that have prospered over many decades and residents remain closely tied to the land. A major issue is loss of this prime agricultural land to erosion and conversion to non-agricultural uses such as residential and commercial development.

The availability and quality of water remains the most crucial issue facing North County. Water is critical for both agricultural and development demands. A key component of the Planning Area's water issues is the Elkhorn Slough, with a 43,600-

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acre watershed. Lack of developed infrastructure, significant groundwater overdraft, nitrate contamination and saltwater intrusion into the groundwater aquifer are serious problems faced by all of the communities of North County. Some individual water/sewer systems and failing municipal systems are increasingly unable to meet the current and rising demand for development and services.

The imposition of a water moratorium for new subdivisions (now no longer in effect) temporarily slowed development in the Planning Area. Some residents insist that long-term solutions to the critical water issues facing the Planning Area be addressed before additional growth is permitted. Aquifer recharge is a vital need. In order to achieve aquifer recharge, significant percolation areas must be protected, water sources higher in the aquifer must be used for irrigation, dual water systems should be created in new subdivisions, and landscape watering should use properly designed and inspected “grey” water or de-ionized nitrate laden water when possible. Additional creative solutions to the water crisis, such as the use of cisterns, must be investigated.

Other important issues in the North County are traffic congestion on an inadequate country road network, such as the Highway 1, G-12 and Highway 156 corridors, and on State Highway 101. Residents are concerned about a lack of funding for infrastructure and understaffing of public safety and emergency response-

In addition to the problems posed by existing development, it is important to recognize that additional impacts will result from build-out of the large number of existing vacant lots. The 1982 General Plan and subsequent Area Plan and Local Coastal Plan for this area placed over 28,000 acres (40 percent) of the total 69,000 acres into residential zoning categories. In 2002, there were 2,707 vacant residentially zoned parcels in this area. If more than one unit is built on each parcel, build-out may result in three or four thousand new units. In addition, there are approximately 480 vacant agricultural parcels on which residential development could be built.

In order to make the land use plans and maps for the Planning Area consistent with the area’s vision, it will be necessary to limit future growth in some areas and direct reasonable growth to others. Until existing deficiencies in infrastructure and public safety systems are addressed, development must be limited to areas with sufficient services and infrastructure. North County can be a unique place where rural residential development and small towns coexist with globally important environmental resources and agriculture. That is the vision that North County residents desire. However, some tough choices have to be made. Simply maintaining the status quo will not reverse the current trends that undermine every aspect of this unique area.

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The preservation of Elkhorn Slough and its watershed is key to preserving North County. A positive vision for the future must include the preservation and restoration of an interconnected network of natural communities, including the sensitive coastal marshes within Elkhorn and Moro Cojo Sloughs, the freshwater wetlands of McCluskey Slough, a restored riparian habitat in the lower Carneros Creek, and unfragmented maritime chaparral within the series of upland ridges in the Elkhorn Highlands. In addition, the forest resources of North County must be protected. Policies must be developed to protect oak savannah and oak woodland plant communities during development. Sudden oak death, also called oak mortality syndrome, is a serious disease afflicting oak trees in Monterey County. The California Oak Foundation has determined that due to the complexity of the oak ecosystem, planting additional oaks elsewhere does not mitigate development impacts to mature oak woodland habitats. The mosaic of natural communities also includes productive and habitat-compatible agricultural land and operations and existing residential communities.

In addition to making tough choices concerning where future growth should not occur, it is equally as important to determine where it would be appropriate. The small town of Castroville has been identified as having the potential to continue to grow and become a viable healthy community where its residents can raise families and receive an urban level of services. Pajaro also has the potential and need to develop additional housing for its residents.

In the future, Pajaro and Castroville could accommodate additional housing development. Currently, there is a definite “mismatch” between the needs of the existing labor force and the type of housing available. Reconsideration of existing regulations such as limitations on residential use in mixed-use developments, height limitations, parking requirements, excessive setbacks, minimum building site size, building site coverage and parcel width and depth could help to accommodate full infill development prior to outward expansion. Building multiple units on existing buildable lots with water availability in appropriate locations is envisioned. Further information about these two communities is provided below.

Communities such as Oak Hills, Elkhorn, Royal Oaks, Aromas, Las Lomas and Prunedale are rural in nature. To provide infrastructure to most of this area would be extremely costly. The small community of Moss Landing has also reached maximum residential buildout and additional housing development is not envisioned. The policies contained in this General Plan, which restrict most new development to designated Community Areas, while permitting construction on legal lots of record, will help ensure that the desired future for North County is achieved.

In order to preserve the distinctive character of North County, the vision for the future is to make certain that applicable land use policies bring future development

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into balance with available resources and infrastructure. This will mean that no further subdivision should occur outside of the Community Areas of Castroville and Pajaro. Additionally, conservation and land use policies must be adopted that balance increased demands on the area's limited water resources, assure conservation measures to protect and connect wildlife corridors, whenever feasible, and meet the requirements for the Monterey County Trails Network, control erosion and prevent destruction of critical habitat and the majestic oak landscape. The infrastructure systems and public safety services available in North County must be improved to eliminate existing deficiencies as well as to provide for future needs. However, these improvements must not induce or accommodate levels of growth inconsistent with community assets or the carrying capacity of the Planning Area's natural resources.

Castroville

A predominately Hispanic community, Castroville now has a population of approximately 6,700 persons living in approximately 1,500 housing units. During recent years, a number of improvements have been made in this area. Planned improvements being carried out on Merritt Street and efforts to build parks, soccer fields, childcare and library facilities should make the downtown area more attractive, safer, and beneficial for all of its population. One important next step will be to provide additional housing for Castroville residents. The shortage of available workforce housing in Castroville was most recently documented in the 2000 census, which reported a rental vacancy rate of 1 percent and an average household size of 4.7 persons. Castroville's commercial core, currently underused, has potential for mixed-use development that can also contribute to meeting affordable housing goals. New commercial development in the Castroville area should be strategically located to serve area residents and visitors alike.

Castroville's goal is to improve and enhance the image, economic vitality and well being of the community and encourage visitors to the area, with an emphasis on retaining a small town character that recognizes the value and contribution of agriculture, cultural diversity, tourism and history of the community. Residents feel it should be a priority to make improvements to traffic circulation related to trucks and through traffic, water and sewage facilities; improved code enforcement and public safety; and providing flood relief from the sloughs surrounding the community.

Residential Uses in Castroville

The residents of Castroville place a high value on well-designed housing that offers a range of housing opportunities. The community will be supportive of new development when existing deficiencies in infrastructure can be corrected, when future new neighborhoods contribute to open space and recreational facilities, and when they are appropriately buffered from the agricultural fields and industries.

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Design guidelines should be adopted and used to guide future residential development to ensure consistency with these principles.

Commercial and Industrial Uses in Castroville

In the future the Castroville community sees a revitalized downtown area with lively new businesses that draw visitors, restored historic buildings and a comfortable pedestrian environment with an historic California flavor.

The Castroville Industrial Park is an important component of the community's economy. Expansion of the park could offer additional employment opportunities, and maintain the position as an attractive location for industry.

Transportation, Public and Quasi-Public Facilities in Castroville

The traffic congestion resulting from the convergence of three state highways, 156, 183 and 1, is a critical issue to the community of Castroville. Industrial, agricultural, tourist, commute and local traffic impact the quality of life for all residents. Design and implementation of a circulation system that will relieve congestion, while still providing visitor access to local businesses, is a key component of the future vision.

The Castroville community welcomes a conveniently located passenger rail station. Multi-modal transit-oriented development in conjunction with a station could provide attractive housing for existing residents and reduce commuter through traffic that currently impacts the community.

Pajaro

Pajaro population fluctuates from a low of approximately 3,400 during winter months to a high of approximately 7,000 during spring and summer months. According to Census 2000 data, the population is 95% Hispanic. Pajaro lacks many basic services, support systems, community amenities and housing opportunities. Efforts to add housing units in Pajaro to correct over-crowding, low vacancy rates, and the high incidence of overpayment for housing, must go hand in hand with development of infrastructure and services. Additionally, future planning must prevent the haphazard development of incompatible uses that has occurred in the past.

Pajaro's future vision is a healthy balanced community in context with agricultural uses and the culturally diverse character of the Pajaro Valley. The community of Pajaro envisions a future in which it is largely residential, with friendly, compact neighborhoods; with safe, walkable streets; with convenient access to neighborhood shopping; and with a heavy industrial base that provides jobs and supports the surrounding agricultural use.

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The residents and businesses of Pajaro want to accommodate new development when it can provide expanded, affordable housing for the existing residents; when there is adequate infrastructure, including schools and community facilities; when it is balanced with the agricultural uses that provide local jobs; and when new development provides the impetus for redevelopment of the existing developed properties.

Residential Uses in Pajaro

The existing pattern of residential development in Pajaro forms small neighborhoods adjacent to industrial uses. While the incompatibility of the uses leads to some conflicts, the resulting neighbors tend to know each other and enjoy the scale of their community. Residents want to continue the pattern of small, friendly neighborhoods. Although they primarily want homeownership opportunities, they understand that rental units will provide better housing for existing residents if it is well designed and well managed. Good design includes adequate parking for residents, and adequate provision for children's play areas, not only on site, but in nearby parks and open space. Design guidelines should be adopted and used to guide future residential development to ensure consistency with these principles.

Economic Opportunities, and Commercial and Industrial Uses in Pajaro

Pajaro provides important locations for heavy industrial uses. These businesses provide jobs for local residents. Future development offers the opportunity for well-designed mixed-use zoning opportunities and appropriately located industry with jobs that match the skills of the residents. Reuse and right sizing of existing heavy industrial properties that may be functionally obsolete can help lift the entire community.

Residents will welcome new convenience shopping that complement existing businesses, such as groceries, hardware, pharmacy and related goods and services. Improved medical clinic access will also serve existing residents.

Pajaro is also a center for automotive repair, including commercial, agricultural and individual vehicles. Maintaining the viability of and providing new opportunities for these small businesses is important to the community. New locations for growth of some of these businesses, and clustering others would offer the opportunity to recycle land through cleanup of existing soil contamination, and potentially improve compatibility of adjacent uses.

Transportation, Public and Quasi-Public Facilities in Pajaro

The community has identified the need for new community facilities, including a new larger church, new school, meeting space and recreational spaces. Parks, playgrounds and pathways that could provide a buffer between the community and the adjacent farmland are part of Pajaro's vision.

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A major priority for the businesses and residents of Pajaro is to improve pedestrian safety on Porter Street/Salinas Road. Making this road a genuine “Main Street” will be the cornerstone for the future community.

A future passenger rail hub in Pajaro offers an opportunity to explore the development of a multi-modal transit-oriented community adjacent to the station. Separation between freight, industrial, passenger and residential uses will be the key to a successful design.

The Pajaro River flood improvements will provide a new level of safety for the community. Design of the improvements in a manner that protects agriculture, businesses and homes can ensure that the river is integrated into the community.

Special Policies For North County Area

North County Policy #1 – Major Coastal Access Areas

Major coastal access areas, whether in public or private ownership, shall be permanently protected for long-term public use. They shall be improved where necessary and managed properly. Major access locations are:

- Giberson Road - Access to Zmudowski State Beach
- Jetty Road - Access to Bennett Slough and Moss Landing State Beach
- Sandholdt Road - Access to "The Island" Beaches and North Harbor
- MBARI - Access to Beaches
- Potrero Road - Access to Salinas River State Beach
- Monterey Dunes Way - Access to Salinas River State Beach
- Kirby Park - Access to Elkhorn Slough

North County Policy #2 – Secondary Coastal Access Areas

Secondary access areas which, because of natural or man-made constraints, are suitable for limited public use shall also be protected for such use. When new access is provided or existing access is formalized or expanded, an appropriate public agency or private organization must assume management responsibility for public use, or agreements concerning such responsibility must be reached with landowners. Secondary access areas are:

- McGowan Road - Access to Pajaro River
- Trafton Road - Access to Pajaro River
- Struve Road - Access to Bennett Slough and Struve Pond
- Moss Landing North Harbor - Access to Elkhorn Slough and Harbor
- Highway One Bridge - Access to Elkhorn Slough
- Moss Landing Road - Access to Moro Cojo Slough
- Twin Bridges - Access to Salinas River
- Molera Road - Access to Tembladero Slough and Old Salinas River
- Nature Conservancy - Access to Elkhorn Slough
- Elkhorn Road Bridge – Access to Elkhorn Slough
- Hudson Landing Road - Access to Elkhorn Slough
- Porter Ranch - Access to Elkhorn Slough

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- Elkhorn Slough National Estuarine Research Reserve - Access to Elkhorn Slough
- Castroville Boulevard - Access to Moro Cojo Slough
- Salinas River Mouth - Access to Salinas River State Beach
- Salinas Wildlife Area - Access to Salinas River Lagoon and Beach

Public access to the sensitive habitats around Elkhorn Slough should be planned carefully. Existing access opportunities should be encouraged and promoted, and future access should be restricted to only those areas where various levels of human activity will not be deleterious to wildlife.

North County Policy #3 – Snowy Plover Habitat

The coastal beaches in North County are recognized as important wildlife habitat areas due to extensive use by shorebirds and other wildlife. Use of North County beaches by Western Snowy Plovers for foraging and nesting requires that public access be regulated and limited in the most sensitive habitat areas.

North County Policy #4 – Elkhorn Highlands

Within the Elkhorn Highlands Environmentally Sensitive Area, an area bounded by Hall Road on the north; Elkhorn Road and Walker Valley roads on the west; Castroville Boulevard on the south, and San Miguel Canyon Road and the Coastal Zone Boundary on the east, conversion of uncultivated land to cultivation shall be prohibited on slopes exceeding 20 percent, to minimize impacts on Elkhorn Slough. Oak woodland areas in the Elkhorn Highlands on a 20 percent slope or greater shall be left in their native state, except where this renders an existing legal lot unusable in which case the least environmentally damaging site design shall be required.

North County Policy #5 – Central Maritime Chaparral

Central Maritime Chaparral is an uncommon, highly localized plant community. Remaining stands of Maritime Chaparral are identified as Significant Ecological Areas (SEAs). Maritime Chaparral should be protected from development or conversion to agricultural uses unless this prohibition would render an existing legal lot unusable; any development permitted shall take place consistent with the requirements of Conservation Element Policy #23.

North County Policy #6 – Oak Hills and Monte del Lago

A wetland restoration program for degraded wetlands now used as sewage treatment ponds shall be required in the event that Oak Hills or Monte del Lago connect to the Castroville or regional wastewater treatment plant. The wetland restoration program must be consistent with the resource protection policies of this Plan.

North County Policy #7 – Coastal Wetland Restoration

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Restoration of coastal marsh and wetlands should be encouraged. Adaptive management practices should be used to determine how best to operate, maintain and/or remove levees within this area to protect coastal priority land uses such as the existing salt pond complex, existing aquaculture, and agriculture. Water impoundments created by placement of dikes across canyons, should be studied to determine whether their net impact on wildlife is positive or adverse and removed where appropriate.

North County Policy #8 – Aquifer Recharge

Due to the regional aquifer recharge characteristics in the North County Coastal Area, impervious surface coverage in this area shall be discouraged or reduced to the maximum extent feasible.

North County Policy #9 – Coastal Wetland Habitats

The wetlands of Elkhorn Slough, McCluskey Slough, Bennett Slough, Struve Slough, Moro Cojo Slough, Tembladero Slough, and the Old Salinas River Channel and Lagoon are identified as Significant Ecological Areas (SEAs). Alteration of these wetlands, including diking, filling, dredging, or the installation of tide gates, shall maintain or enhance the biological productivity of the wetland or estuary. Any alteration of the coastal estuaries and wetlands in North County shall be limited to restorative measures and appropriate facilities associated with access, research and education according to specific criteria designated in a wetland management plan. In the absence of a wetland management plan, “appropriate facilities” means only those facilities that are identified as consistent with Section 30233(a) of the Coastal Act.

North County Policy #10 – Tidal Scour in Elkhorn Slough

The County, in coordination with the Elkhorn Slough National Marine Estuarine Research Reserve and other natural resource management partners, shall encourage and promote both study and action to address the serious ecological issue and impact of tidal scour in Elkhorn Slough.

North County Policy #11 – Tidegates At Moro Cojo

The full wildlife habitat value of Moro Cojo Slough has been limited by the extensive construction of levees and tidegates. Adaptive management practices should be used to determine how best to operate, maintain and/or remove the tidegate at the mouth of the slough under Moss Landing Road to ensure adequate tidal flushing and exchange while not endangering agricultural land.

North County Policy #12 – Archaeological Resources

Whenever development is proposed to occur in the North County Planning Area, including any proposed grading or excavation activity, or removal of vegetation for agricultural use, the Archaeological Site Survey Office or other appropriate authority

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shall be contacted to determine whether an archaeological survey has been carried out for the property on which the development would take place. If an archaeological survey has not been carried out, then such a survey will be conducted if the property on which the development is proposed is located:

- a. **Within 100 yards of the floodways of the Pajaro or Salinas Rivers; or**
- b. **Within 100 yards of McCluskey, Bennett, Elkhorn, Moro Cojo, or Tembladero Sloughs; or**
- c. **Within 100 yards of the Old Salinas River Channel or the Moss Landing Harbor; or**
- d. **Within 100 yards of any known archaeological site (unless the area has been previously surveyed and recorded).**

The archaeological survey should describe the sensitivity of the site and appropriate levels of development, and recommend mitigation measures consistent with the site's need for protection, which measures shall be incorporated into any permit allowing development on the property.

North County Policy #13 – Water Use

Until the construction of projects included in the North Monterey County Water Management Plan, the County shall limit the intensification of water use on existing lots of record to the construction of the first single family home on an existing lot of record, or to some other land use that has a water usage equal to or less than the water use of a single family home.

North County Policy #14 – Groundwater Overdraft

Groundwater overdraft has eliminated most natural seeps and springs in the watershed essentially eliminating many critical natural freshwater ponds for wildlife. The development and management of freshwater ponds and other freshwater habitats for wildlife should be encouraged and promoted.

North County Policy #15 – Eucalyptus Trees

Habitat restoration efforts often include the conversion of land with non-native, invasive eucalyptus trees to native habitat. Removal of eucalyptus trees of all sizes as part of an overall habitat restoration effort should be encouraged and promoted by the County.

North County Policy #16 – Union Pacific Railroad

The Union Pacific Railroad runs through Elkhorn Slough and along the western boundary of the Elkhorn Slough National Estuarine Research Reserve. The railroad

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carries many hazardous materials through some of the most sensitive and rare habitats on the Central Coast. In order to prevent the catastrophic loss of wildlife and habitat the Railroad should implement above-average safety standards for the section of track from the Pajaro Station to Castroville.

North County Policy 17 – Public Viewsheds

The beaches, dunes, and coastal wetlands of North County are key scenic resources that should be protected from visual disturbance to the fullest extent possible. Shoreline views of Monterey Bay and Elkhorn Slough and other coastal wetlands from public vantage points including Highway 1, Highway 156, Elkhorn Road, and Hall Road are identified as public viewing areas according to Open Space Element Policy #6.