
1. INTRODUCTION

This document is a Draft Environmental Impact Report (EIR) which has been prepared to analyze and disclose the potential environmental effects of the proposed Murrieta General Plan. An EIR is an informational document intended to inform decision-makers and the general public of the potential significant environmental impacts of a project. An EIR also identifies possible ways to minimize the significant impacts (referred to as mitigation) and describes reasonable alternatives to the project. The public agency with authority to approve or deny the project (the City of Murrieta) will consider the information in the EIR along with other information before making a decision on the project. The findings and conclusions of the EIR regarding environmental impacts do not control the agency's discretion to approve, deny, or modify the project, but instead are presented as information intended to aid the decision-making process.

1.1 AUTHORIZATION

This EIR has been prepared for the City of Murrieta in accordance with the Guidelines for the Implementation of the California Environmental Quality Act of 1970 (Sections 15000-15387 of the California Code of regulations). The Guidelines stipulate that an EIR must be prepared for any project that may have a significant impact on the environment. The General Plan under consideration is a "project" as defined by Section 15378 of the Guidelines. Upon initial environmental review of the General Plan proposal, the City determined that the General Plan could have a significant adverse impact on the environment and, therefore, the preparation of an EIR was required.

1.2 LEAD AND RESPONSIBLE AGENCIES

The California Environmental Quality Act (referred to herein as "CEQA") defines a "lead agency" as the public agency which has the principle responsibility for carrying out or approving a project. There can only be one lead agency for a project. Other agencies which also have some authority or responsibility for carrying out or approving a project are designated as "responsible agencies". Both the lead agency and responsible agencies must consider the information contained in the EIR prior to acting upon or approving the project.

The City of Murrieta is the lead agency for this project. At this time, no responsible agencies have been identified for the project.

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1.3 PROJECT PROPONENT

Because the proposed General Plan is a public policy document of the City, the City of Murrieta is the proponent for this project. Therefore, the City of Murrieta is both the proponent and the lead agency for this project. Comments or questions regarding the project should be directed to the following address:

City of Murrieta
Planning Department
26442 Beckman Court
Murrieta, CA 92562

1.4 THE EIR PROCESS

When a public agency determines that there is substantial evidence that a project may have a significant effect on the environment, the agency must prepare an EIR before a decision is made to approve or deny the project. The purpose of the EIR is to fully disclose a project's impacts and recommend measures to reduce or avoid significant impacts. The basic content of an EIR includes a description of the project and its objectives, a description of existing conditions at the project site or in the project area, a discussion of the potential significant effects of the project, recommended measures for reducing impacts, and an evaluation of feasible alternatives to the proposed project.

An EIR consists of two documents: a Draft EIR, which is circulated for review by the public and affected governmental agencies, and a Final EIR, which consists of responses to comments received on the Draft EIR, as well as any necessary modifications to the Draft EIR. After the Draft EIR has been circulated for review and the Final EIR has been prepared, the EIR must be considered and approved by the agency's decision-making body before any action can be taken on the project. If the lead agency makes substantial changes to the Draft EIR after circulation or decides to present significant new information, then the agency must re-circulate the revised Draft EIR for additional review and comment.

The decision to prepare an EIR is usually triggered by the completion of an Initial Study for the proposed project. When a public agency receives a complete project application or decides to undertake a project of its own, it first determines if the project is subject to environmental review under CEQA and, if it is, the agency staff then typically prepares an Initial Study to determine if the project has the potential to cause significant environmental effects. The Initial Study serves as a tool to help the agency determine if an EIR is needed and also helps determine what issues should be examined in the EIR. An agency can skip the Initial Study process if it already knows that an EIR will be required.

The EIR process is initiated by the distribution of a Notice of Preparation (NOP). The NOP is sent to other agencies to solicit their suggestions for appropriate issues and types of analysis to be included in the Draft EIR. When preparation of the Draft EIR has been completed, it is circulated to responsible agencies, other affected or interested agencies, and interested members of the public for review and comment. It

is also commonly available in the local public library. The review period for a Draft EIR is 45 days. All comments and concerns regarding the Draft EIR must be received by the lead agency during this 45-day period in order to be considered in the Final EIR.

Responses to comments received on the Draft EIR are prepared by the lead agency and included in the Final EIR. The Final EIR may also contain some additional information about the project's potential impacts and minor corrections or modifications to the Draft EIR. The Final EIR must be certified (approved) by the lead agency's decision-making body (sometimes this responsibility is delegated to a commission) before any action is taken to approve or deny the proposed project. Typically, certification of the EIR and deliberation on the project occur at the same hearing, and public notice of these actions are usually advertised together.

CEQA only requires that the EIR address significant adverse impacts. The CEQA Guidelines do not establish thresholds or standards which define the significance of various types of impacts. The determination of the significance of impacts is left to the discretion of the lead agency. The CEQA Guidelines do state that the significance of impacts should be considered in relation to their severity and probability of occurrence. Also, the identification of significant impacts in the EIR does not prevent an agency from approving the project. The project may be approved if the lead agency determines that there is no feasible method of mitigating significant impacts or if the agency determines that there are important overriding considerations, such as social and economic benefits, which are sufficient to justify approval of the project.

1.5 A PROGRAM EIR

The California Environmental Quality Act defines the adoption or amendment of a General Plan as a project which requires environmental review. As a result of such review, if any aspect of the proposed General Plan is determined to have the potential to cause significant impacts to the environment, then an EIR must be prepared. The CEQA Guidelines recognize that an EIR for a General Plan will not be as specific as an EIR for a development proposal or site-specific projects. Therefore, the CEQA Guidelines define a type of EIR known as a *program EIR* as suitable for a project such as a General Plan.

A program EIR is prepared for a series of related actions that can be characterized as one large project, such as a General Plan, master plan, or regulatory program. As a practical matter, projects suitable for a program EIR generally have at least two of the following features:

- An implementation schedule of longer than two years;
- General parameters or conditions which will be applied to future activities such as site-specific development proposals; and
- A requirement for subsequent agency discretionary approvals for future development projects or regulations.

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Program EIRs contain less detail than typical development project EIRs because the level of detail in the environmental impact analysis can only reflect the level of detail in the program description itself. Section 15146 of the CEQA Guidelines states: "The degree of specificity required in the EIR will correspond to the degree of specificity involved in the underlying activity which is described in the EIR".

One of the advantages of the use of a program EIR is that it allows the lead agency to consider broad policy alternatives and city-wide mitigation measures before important policy decisions have been made. It also ensures consideration of cumulative impacts that could otherwise be slighted in project-by-project analysis. Program EIRs also avoid the need for unnecessary reconsideration of basic policy matters in future EIRs and provide level a of environmental analysis on certain issues that does not need to be repeated in the future in EIRs for development projects or other individual actions.

1.6 FOCUS OF ANALYSIS

The City has determined that the proposed project has the potential to cause certain types of significant impacts and, therefore, the analysis of the Draft EIR has been focused on the following topics:

- Land use
- Population, employment, and housing
- Transportation and circulation
- Noise
- Geology
- Hydrology and water quality
- Air quality
- Biological resources
- Utilities
- Public services
- Aesthetic/visual impacts
- Cultural resources

1.7 EIR CONTENT AND FORMAT

The Draft EIR is organized into seven chapters, each dealing with a separate aspect of the required content of an EIR as described by the CEQA Guidelines. Following this introductory chapter (Chapter 1.0) is a complete description of the proposed project, including project location, objectives, and characteristics (Chapter 2.0). The results of the impact analysis along with recommended mitigation measures are summarized in Chapter 3.0. The complete and detailed impact analysis is presented in Chapter 4.0.

Certain mandatory topics dealing with the long-term implications of the project are discussed in Chapter 5.0. Chapter 6.0 is a discussion of various alternatives which have been identified by the lead agency for evaluation in comparison to the proposed project. Chapter 7.0 lists resources and persons consulted in conducting the environmental analysis and presents a list of the persons who prepared the Draft EIR. Responses to the NOP and technical studies prepared for the Draft EIR are contained in the Appendix.

Chapter 4.0, entitled "Environmental Impact Analysis", is the focal component of the Draft EIR. The environmental impact analysis has been organized into a series of sections addressing each environmental topic (Traffic, Noise, Air Quality, etc.). The sections covering each individual environmental topic are divided into the following subsections to assist the reader in understanding the organization and basis of the analysis:

- Setting. This subsection describes existing conditions at the project site and the immediate area which may be subject to change as a result of implementation of the proposed project. There is a separate description of existing conditions for each environmental topic.
- Standards of Significance. Before potential impacts are evaluated for significance, the standards which will serve as the basis for judging impact significance are presented.
- Impacts and Mitigation Measures. This subsection states and explains impacts caused by the project. If the impacts are considered to be potentially significant, mitigation measures are proposed to reduce or avoid the impacts.

The summary presented in Chapter 3.0 provides a comprehensive overview of the project's impacts. For a more detailed description of project impacts, it is recommended that the reader review the project description (Chapter 2.0) and then read the sections on the topics of interest in the environmental impact analysis (Chapter 4.0). For a more detailed investigation of certain technical topics, the reader is referred to the various technical studies in the Appendix and those available at the City Planning Department.

1.8 EIR RELATIONSHIP TO THE CITY OF MURRIETA MASTER ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

The California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) Guidelines Section 15169, establishes that a public agency may prepare a Master Environmental Assessment (MEA) to provide information that may be used or referenced in Environmental Impact Reports (EIRs) or Negative Declarations. The CEQA Guidelines suggest that the MEAs can be used to assist in the formulation of a general plan by identifying environmental characteristics and constraints that need to be addressed in the general plan. In consideration of the above, the City of Murrieta prepared a MEA in October of 1992 to identify environmental constraints and assist in development of the City's General Plan. As a comprehensive data

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base on existing environmental conditions in the City the MEA is referenced throughout this document as a source for more comprehensive information on existing conditions under the heading "Setting" for the various issue areas addressed in Chapter Four of the EIR. In an effort to avoid unnecessary duplication of information contained in the MEA, information on existing conditions in the EIR is limited to that which is fundamental in showing the line of logic used in determining the significant of environmental impacts. The City of Murrieta MEA and the technical background reports used in development the various General Plan Elements are available for review at the City of Murrieta Planning Department located at 25442 Beckman Court in the City of Murrieta.