

INTRODUCTION

1. OVERVIEW

This section provides the reader with important information regarding (1) the project background, (2) the purpose of this Environmental Impact Report (EIR), (3) standards for assessing EIR adequacy, (4) the format and content of this EIR, (5) processing requirements for this EIR, and (6) other EIRs and documents incorporated by reference in this document.

The public agency that is principally responsible for carrying out or approving a project is designated as the “lead agency.” While the proposed Vista Canyon project is located within unincorporated Los Angeles County, an application will be made to the Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO) to annex the project site to the City of Santa Clarita (City). Because the project would be located within the City’s jurisdiction, the City will act as the lead agency. This project requires that the EIR be prepared in accordance with the requirements of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), Public Resources Code Section 21000 et seq., and Title 14 of the California Code of Regulations, Section 15000 et seq. (State CEQA Guidelines). An EIR is an informational document used to inform agencies and the public of potentially significant environmental effects of a proposed project, identify possible ways to minimize or mitigate the significant effects, and describe reasonable alternatives to a proposed project.

2. PROJECT LOCATION, BACKGROUND, AND SUMMARY

The Vista Canyon project, through its Specific Plan, proposes a comprehensive set of plans, development regulations, design guidelines, and implementation programs to develop the project site, consistent with the goals and policies of the City of Santa Clarita General Plan and the Draft General Plan Update (One Valley One Vision).

a. Project Location

The project site is located in unincorporated Los Angeles County, directly adjacent to the City of Santa Clarita, and in the Santa Clarita Valley Planning Area. The Santa Clarita Valley Planning Area is generally surrounded by the Los Padres and Angeles National Forest areas to the north; Agua Dulce and the Angeles National Forest to the east; the major ridgeline of the Santa Susana Mountains, which separates Santa Clarita Valley from the San Fernando and Simi Valleys, to the south; and, the County of Ventura to the west.

The project site is located immediately south of State Route 14 (SR-14), west of La Veda Avenue, north of the Metrolink rail line, and east of the Colony Townhome community. The site also includes a segment of the Santa Clara River.

b. Project Background

The project site includes a portion of Mitchell ranch, which was first settled in 1860 by Thomas Mitchell. Initially, he transported a dismantled miner's cabin down from Tehachapi and erected it on the property, more specifically in the southeastern portion of the project site (within the proposed Oak Park). A few years later he married Martha Taylor and built a more commodious adobe, about 40 feet from the original cabin (Perkins 1961). The adobe was 60 by 45 feet in size and redwood shingled (Worden 1997).

Eventually, Mitchell increased his holdings to nearly 1,000 acres, raising cattle, producing honey and farming. With increasing population, and thus children, in the Santa Clarita Valley, the Sulphur Springs School District was founded, circa 1872. The school opened initially in the kitchen of Mitchell's adobe, was taught by Mrs. Mitchell, and was the first school building in the area. Circa 1885, the student population had outgrown the single room and a wooden schoolhouse was constructed, at the present location of Sulphur Springs Elementary School, on land donated by Mitchell (Worden 1997). The Sulphur Springs Elementary School is directly east of the project site.

Mitchell eventually built a two-story home on the project site in 1888, and used the adobe as a guesthouse. Bricks from the adobe were eventually removed from the property and the school/adobe was reassembled at Heritage Junction in Hart Park in Newhall.

In addition to the original miner's cabin, adobe, two-story wooden house, and likely a number of outbuildings, a family cemetery also was present on the Mitchell Ranch. This was used to inter the Mitchell family, and their friends and neighbors. None of the buildings remain on the project site. The cemetery is still present and would be preserved and enhanced by the project.

c. Project Summary

The project applicant proposes to develop the approximately 185-acre Vista Canyon project site with 1,117 dwelling units (96 single-family residential lots and 1,021 attached condominiums [up to 579 of these attached condominium units may be rented or leased]), and up to 950,000 square feet of commercial and medical office, retail, theater, restaurant, and hotel uses within four Planning Areas (PA). A residential overlay with the corporate office campus site in PA-2 would allow for the conversion of up to 250,000 square feet of office floor area to 233 attached residential units. If implemented, this conversion would permit a maximum of 1,350 residential units and 700,000 square feet of commercial floor area.

The project also includes approximately 18 acres of parks/recreation facilities, including the approximately 7-acre Oak Park and the 1-acre River Education Center, both of which are proposed to be dedicated to the City. Other recreational facilities include the Community Garden, Town Green and up to six private recreational facilities. Further, there are approximately 10 acres of proposed public streets, including the extension of Lost Canyon Road from Fair Oaks Ranch to Vista Canyon Road and the construction of the Vista Canyon Road Bridge to connect Lost Canyon Road and Soledad Canyon Road.

The applicant also is proposing construction of a water reclamation plant, located adjacent to the western project boundary and directly north of Lost Canyon Road, which would provide recycled water for use in the project's landscaped areas and toilets within public restroom areas in commercial areas of the project.

Finally, the EIR addresses annexation to the City of various properties surrounding and including the Vista Canyon Specific Plan site, all of which currently are located under the jurisdiction of the County of Los Angeles. In total, the annexation area includes approximately 3,250 acres, including the Vista Canyon project site (approximately 185 acres), Fair Oaks Ranch (approximately 1,082 acres), Jakes Way multi-family area (approximately 260 acres), and the unincorporated Sand Canyon area (approximately 1,723 acres). **Section 4.24, Ancillary Annexation Area**, of the EIR analyzes the environmental impacts associated with the annexation areas outside of the Vista Canyon project site.

3. PURPOSE OF AN ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT REPORT

As stated in Section 15121(a) of the *State CEQA Guidelines*, an EIR is an “informational document which will inform public agency decision makers and the public generally of the significant environmental effects of a project, identify possible ways to minimize the significant effects, and describe reasonable alternatives to the project.” While the information in an EIR does not control the public agency's ultimate discretion on the proposed project, the public agency must respond to each significant effect identified in the EIR by making findings consistent with Section 15091 of the *State CEQA Guidelines* and, if necessary, by making a statement of overriding considerations pursuant to Section 15093 of the *State CEQA Guidelines*.¹

As stated in *State CEQA Guidelines* Section 15120, an EIR must contain the information required by Sections 15122 through 15131 of the *State CEQA Guidelines*, but the format of the document may vary. The required “contents” of an EIR include a table of contents or index, and a brief summary of the proposed project and its consequences, as outlined in *State CEQA Guidelines* Sections 15122 and 15123. The summary must also identify each significant environmental effect, along with proposed mitigation

¹ *State CEQA Guidelines*, Section 15121(b).

measures and alternatives that would reduce or avoid the identified effects; areas of controversy known to the lead agency; and issues to be resolved.²

In addition, an EIR must contain a description of both the proposed project and the environmental setting.³ An EIR also must consider all phases of a project when evaluating its impact on the environment, including consideration and discussion of potentially significant environmental effects; growth-inducing impacts; mitigation measures proposed to minimize significant effects; and alternatives to the proposed project.⁴ Relatedly, an EIR also must contain a statement describing the project effects not found to be significant; discuss the cumulative impacts of the project, if any; identify the agencies, organizations, and persons consulted in preparing the Draft EIR; and may include economic or social information, if applicable.⁵

As described in *State CEQA Guidelines* Section 15132, a “Final” EIR must consist of the Draft EIR, or a revision of the Draft EIR; public comments on the Draft EIR (either verbatim or in summary); a list of persons, organizations and agencies commenting on the Draft EIR; the lead agency's written responses to significant environmental points raised in the public review and consultation process; and any other information desired by the lead agency. In this regard, the “comments and responses” are a critical component of the Final EIR because they bring focus to the environmental analysis of different subjects and issues. Another critical component is the “appendices” to an EIR. CEQA encourages placement of technical supporting analyses and information in “appendices” to an EIR. Pursuant to *State CEQA Guidelines* Section 15147, the appendices may be provided in volumes separate from the EIR, but must be readily available for agency and public review.

This EIR has been prepared by the City in accordance with the “purpose” and “content” requirements of the *State CEQA Guidelines*. Please refer to this EIR's table of contents to locate the required analysis of different subjects and issues.

4. EIR ADEQUACY

The standards for adequacy of an EIR, as defined in Section 15151 of the *State CEQA Guidelines*, are as follows:

An EIR should be prepared with a sufficient degree of analysis to provide decision makers with information which enables them to make a decision which intelligently takes account of

² *State CEQA Guidelines*, Section 15123(a) and (b).

³ *State CEQA Guidelines*, Sections 15124 and 15125.

⁴ *State CEQA Guidelines*, Sections 15126 to 15127.

⁵ *State CEQA Guidelines*, Sections 15128 through 15131.

environmental consequences. An evaluation of the environmental effects of a proposed project need not be exhaustive, but the sufficiency of an EIR is to be reviewed in the light of what is reasonably feasible. Disagreement among experts does not make an EIR inadequate, but the EIR should summarize the main points of disagreement among the experts. The courts have looked not for perfection but for adequacy, completeness, and a good faith effort at full disclosure.

This EIR has been prepared by the City in accordance with the above legal standards for adequacy of an EIR under the *State CEQA Guidelines*.

5. TYPE OF EIR AND LEVEL OF ANALYSIS

CEQA provides a lead agency with the flexibility to prepare different types of EIRs, and to employ different procedural means to focus environmental analysis on the issues appropriate for decision at each level of environmental review.⁶ CEQA further confirms that the “degree of specificity required in an EIR will correspond to the degree of specificity involved in the underlying activity which is described in the EIR.” (*State CEQA Guidelines*, Section 15146).

Per *State CEQA Guidelines* Section 15161, a “Project EIR” is:

The most common type of EIR examines the environmental impacts of a specific development project. This type of EIR should focus primarily on the changes in the environment that would result from the development project. The EIR shall examine all phases of the project including planning, construction and operation.

This EIR can be classified as a project EIR. There has been a great deal of information submitted for Vista Canyon project. Given the volume of information and the level of detail provided for Vista Canyon project, there is enough information contained in this EIR to support adequate environmental documentation.

6. DRAFT EIR FORMAT AND CONTENT

Preliminary environmental review of the Vista Canyon project was conducted by the City’s Community Development Department. In the initial Notice of Preparation (NOP) and subsequent revised NOPs, the City determined that the proposed Vista Canyon project may have potentially significant effects on several environmental impact categories, including: (a) hazards (geotechnical, flood, and noise); (b) resources (water quality, air quality, biological, cultural resources, agricultural resources, and visual resources/aesthetics); (c) services (transportation/circulation, sewage disposal, education, fire/sheriff and utilities); and (d) other categories (general, environmental safety/hazardous materials, land use and demand for new recreation facilities).

⁶ California Pub. Resources Code, Section 21093(a).

The initial NOP was circulated for a 30-day review period from July 11, 2007 to August 10, 2007. Revised NOPs were circulated from February 26, 2008 to March 21, 2008, and October 1, 2009 to November 2, 2009, due to revisions to the project. These NOPs were circulated pursuant to the requirements of the *State CEQA Guidelines* in order to solicit input from responsible and interested public agencies and the community regarding the content of the EIR. In addition, to facilitate local participation, the City held a scoping meeting on the project and solicited suggestions from the public and other agencies on the scope and content of this Draft EIR. The meeting took place at the Century Room at the Santa Clarita City Hall, 23920 Valencia Boulevard, Santa Clarita, California, on February 27, 2008.

In response to the NOPs and scoping meeting, comment letters and other input were received from interested agencies, organizations and others, copies of which are presented in **Appendix I** to this EIR.

Based on the results of the City's NOPs and scoping efforts, the following topics are evaluated in this EIR:

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| 1. Geotechnical Hazards | 13. Fire Services |
| 2. Flood | 14. Sheriff Services |
| 3. Traffic and Access | 15. Human-Made Hazards |
| 4. Air Quality | 16. Visual Resources |
| 5. Noise | 17. Population, Housing, and Employment |
| 6. Biological Resources | 18. Cultural Resources |
| 7. Land Use | 19. Agricultural Resources |
| 8. Water Service/Water Quality | 20. Santa Clara River Corridor Analysis |
| 9. Solid Waste Disposal | 21. Wastewater Disposal |
| 10. Education | 22. Global Climate Change |
| 11. Library Services | 23. Utilities |
| 12. Parks and Recreation | 24. Ancillary Annexation Area |

This EIR is organized into 11 sections:

1. **Section 1.0, Project Description.** This section contains a detailed description of the proposed project.
2. **Section 2.0, Environmental Setting.** This section addresses the environmental setting in which the project is proposed.
3. **Section 3.0, Cumulative Impact Analysis Methodology.** This section identifies the cumulative impact analysis and methodology used for the proposed project.

4. **Section 4.0, Environmental Impact Analysis.** This section analyzes and identifies the existing conditions, project and cumulative impacts, mitigation measures, and unavoidable significant impacts of the proposed project for the environmental impact categories identified above.
5. **Section 5.0, Unavoidable Significant Impacts.** This section identifies the project's significant impacts, including those, which can be mitigated but not reduced to a level of insignificance.
6. **Section 6.0, Project Alternatives.** This section describes, identifies, and analyzes project alternatives.
7. **Section 7.0, Growth-Inducing Impacts.** This section identifies the project's growth-inducing impacts.
8. **Section 8.0, Significant Irreversible Environmental Changes.** This section describes the significant irreversible environmental changes associated with the proposed project.
9. **Section 9.0, Organizations and Persons Consulted.** This section provides a list of EIR preparers, and a list of the organizations and persons consulted in preparing this EIR.
10. **Section 10.0, References.** This section contains a list of the documents cited in this EIR.

7. ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW PROCESS FOR THE DRAFT EIR

The review process for the Draft EIR will include the procedural steps described below:

Public Notice/Public Review. The City of Santa Clarita Department of Community Development directed and supervised preparation of this Draft EIR, which will be circulated for a 45-day public review period as mandated by CEQA.

On file at the City of Santa Clarita Department of Community Development is a copy of the Draft EIR and all adopted City ordinances and documents. All comments concerning the adequacy of the Draft EIR must be addressed to:

City of Santa Clarita
23920 Valencia Boulevard, Suite 300
Santa Clarita, California 91355
Attention: Jeff Hogan/Patrick LeClair, Community Development Department
(Vista Canyon EIR)

Public hearing(s) will be held before the City of Santa Clarita Planning Commission regarding the proposed project and the adequacy of the Draft EIR, at which time public comments will also be heard.

Responses to Comments/Final EIR. Following the 45-day public comment period and public hearing(s) on the Draft EIR, the Final EIR for the proposed project will be prepared in order to respond to the comments received on the Draft EIR. As required by CEQA, the Community Development Department

will distribute responses to comments submitted by public agencies to those agencies for review 10 days prior to consideration of the Final EIR.

Certification of the EIR/Project Consideration. At the conclusion of the EIR public hearing process, the Planning Commission will vote on whether to recommend to the City Council: (i) certification of the adequacy of the EIR and (ii) approval of the proposed project (Master Case 07-127) and other requested changes or actions. The recommendation will then be presented to the City Council, who will decide what action to take with respect to the EIR and project.

8. INCORPORATION BY REFERENCE

As permitted in Section 15150 of the *State CEQA Guidelines*, the Draft EIR references technical studies, analyses, and reports. Information from the referenced documents has been briefly summarized in the appropriate section(s) of the Draft EIR. All referenced documents are available for public inspection and review upon request at:

Impact Sciences, Inc.
803 Camarillo Springs Road, Suite A-1 or
Camarillo, California 93012
Susan Tebo; (805) 437-1900

City of Santa Clarita
Community Development Department
23920 Valencia Boulevard, Suite 300
Santa Clarita, California 91355
Jeff Hogan/Patrick LeClair;
(661) 255-4330

The *State CEQA Guidelines* set forth three methods that may be used to incorporate data from other sources into an EIR: (1) use of an EIR appendix (*State CEQA Guidelines* Section 15147); (2) citation to technical information (*State CEQA Guidelines* Section 15148); and (3) incorporation by reference (*State CEQA Guidelines* Section 15150). Information in an EIR appendix may include summarized technical data, maps, plot plans, diagrams, and similar information in sufficient detail to permit the public and reviewing agencies to fully assess the proposed project's significant environmental effects. To achieve a balance between the highly technical analysis referenced in an EIR and an EIR's public information function, the *State CEQA Guidelines* allow technical analyses as appendices to the main body of the EIR. Appendices are included in volumes separate from the body of the Draft EIR, but are readily available for public examination because they are part of the Draft EIR.

Source documents that are not project-specific have been cited in the Draft EIR. To keep the Draft EIR to a manageable length, such documents are not included in the Draft EIR or EIR appendices.

All documents referenced in the Draft EIR are incorporated by reference and available for public inspection and review at the locations and addresses shown above.