




Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Purpose



The San Marcos Creek Specific Plan represents an effort to create a planning framework for future growth and redevelopment of the approximately 214-acre area along San Marcos Creek in central San Marcos. The Specific Plan, which has been developed with a thorough analysis of environmental conditions and input from City decision-makers, landowners, neighbors, and the community-at-large, provides a comprehensive vision for the Creekside District along with goals, policies and development standards to guide future public and private actions relating to the area's development and conservation of open space and natural resources. The Plan also serves as the mechanism for insuring that future development will be coordinated and occur in an orderly and well-planned manner.



The planning area consists of a patchwork of natural areas (top), disturbed vacant lands (bottom), and urban development (next page).

1.2 Legal Context

1.2.1 Authority to Prepare

A “specific plan” is a planning and regulatory tool made available to local governments by the State of California. By law, specific plans are intended to implement a city or county’s general plan through the development of policies, programs and regulations that provide an intermediate level of detail between the general plan and individual development projects. As vehicles for the implementation of the goals and policies of a community’s general plan, State law stipulates that specific plans can be adopted or amended only if they are consistent with the jurisdiction’s adopted general plan.

The authority to prepare and adopt specific plans and the requirements for their contents are set forth in the California Government Code, Sections 65450 through 65457. The law requires that a specific plan include text and diagrams specifying:

- the distribution, location, and intensity of land uses, including open space, within the plan area;
- the distribution, location, and intensity of major infrastructure components;
- design standards and criteria for development and use of natural resources; and
- a program of implementation measures, including regulations, programs, public works projects, and financing measures necessary to carry out the Specific Plan program.

This Specific Plan is intended to be adopted by ordinance. As such, the standards contained herein are enforceable to the same extent as standards contained in the Zoning Ordinance and other parts of the City’s Municipal Code.

1.2.2 Relationship to General Plan

Together, the City’s General Plan and the San Marcos Creek Specific Plan provide a framework that will guide future land use and development decisions in the 214-acre Creekside District.” This Specific Plan is consistent with, and serves as an extension of, the San Marcos General Plan, which will provide both policy and regulatory direction. When future development proposals are brought before the City, staff and decision-makers will use the Specific Plan as a guide for project review. Projects will be evaluated for consistency with the intent of Plan policies and for conformance with development standards and design guidelines. For projects within the Creekside District, the Specific Plan’s policies and standards will take precedence over more general policies and standards that are applicable to the rest of the city. In situations where policies or standards relating to a particular subject have not been provided in the Specific Plan, the existing policies and standards of the City’s General Plan and Zoning Ordinance will continue to apply.

1.2.3 Environmental Review

The San Marcos Creek Specific Plan constitutes a “project” under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), and thus must be evaluated for its potential to create adverse environmental effects. Consistent with CEQA requirements, an Environmental Impact Report (EIR) has been prepared that assesses the potential direct and indirect environmental impacts associated with the physical changes proposed for the area.

Although this environmental analysis is included in a separate document, it is important to note that the environmental review process has been an integral component of the planning process

from the outset to ensure the Plan's sensitivity to critical environmental concerns. To keep the Specific Plan as concise as possible, much of the environmental data has not been included in the plan document. For additional information relating to the Plan's environmental foundation, one should refer to the San Marcos Creek Specific Plan EIR. In addition to analyzing the Specific Plan, the EIR also addresses the flood control and related infrastructure improvements proposed for initial implementation of the Plan. Copies of the EIR are available for review at the City of San Marcos Development Services Department (1 Civic Center Drive) and at the San Marcos Public Library (3 Civic Center Drive).

The EIR addresses the development of the Creekside District as a single project, even though the area consists of several distinct sub-areas, includes many different landowners, and is projected to be developed incrementally over many years. This approach enables the City to comprehensively evaluate the cumulative impacts of the Specific Plan and consider broad policy alternatives and area-wide mitigation measures prior to adopting the Specific Plan and permitting individual development projects.

The environmental review of the Specific Plan is also intended to expedite the processing of future projects that are consistent with the Plan. If, when considering subsequent development proposals, the City determines that the proposed development will not result in new impacts or require additional mitigation, the City can approve the project without additional environmental review. Or, if there are significant changes proposed to the approved Plan that the City concludes may result in new impacts, any additional environmental review need focus only on those areas affected by the change.

1.3 Planning Context

1.3.1 Approach to Planning

The “Design With Nature” approach to planning first pioneered by Wallace Roberts & Todd and Ian McHarg, one of the firm's founding partners, was the conceptual framework used to create this specific plan. The premise for this approach is that a systematic understanding of the environmental setting, including natural, cultural, social, and economic factors, is essential to creating truly sustainable human environments. In this approach, planning is a cumulative process in which layers of information on individual factors are combined to create a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the whole. While the existing natural environment is the foundation for all subsequent decisions regarding uses and development potential, no layer works in isolation. Each layer informs and influences the consideration of the other layers, resulting in a synthesis of natural and cultural patterns that is the basis for the plan.

The San Marcos Creek area is not a blank canvas. Natural conditions, such as topography, vegetation and hydrology, provide the basic setting. The natural context is influenced in turn by human activities associated with years of habitation and urban development, including structures and other alterations related to agriculture, industry and infrastructure improvements. City General Plan policies also form part of the setting, expressing the community's aspirations and expectations for the area. Finally, economic conditions, particularly as they relate to market demand, financing and implementation, represent the final layer that needs to be incorporated into the plan to ensure that the plan's vision is a practical reality.





Flood control improvements are needed if the area is to realize its potential.

1.3.2 The Background to the Plan

The background to this Specific Plan is very much the history of proposed flood control along San Marcos Creek. Although the planning area has long been envisioned as the desired location for the City's retail core, the area's development has long been constrained by the potential for harmful flooding of the creek. Thus, finding an appropriate solution for flood control has been essential to realizing the City's vision for the planning area.

Flood control improvements to San Marcos Creek have been in various stages of planning and/or construction since the early 1960's. In the early 1970's, the County Flood Control District completed hydrology and hydraulic studies that mapped the City's floodplains. In 1979, a previous specific plan was completed for the creek that specified the alignment and type of channel construction for the entire length of the creek (i.e., the current planning area as well as upstream and downstream creek sections). Based on this plan, detailed designs for construction of a concrete trapezoidal channel were prepared for sections of the creek from 1981-1986. In 1987, an EIR was completed for the main channel segment between State Route 78 and Twin Oaks Valley Road, the Twin Oaks branch, and the East branch, including the Woodland Parkway. Subsequent to the EIR, final design was completed for the Woodland Parkway facility and the East branch, east of Valpreda Road.

In 1988, the final design and accompanying environmental documentation was started for the main channel, from Lake San Marcos to Twin Oaks Valley Road. However, during the public review of the Draft EIR for this project, concern was expressed that a more focused review of project alternatives was warranted. Recognizing an opportunity to enhance the existing floodplain area between Discovery Street and State Route 78 (i.e., the current planning area), the City Council established the Waterways Task Force in 1989 to review and evaluate both existing and new data regarding the proposed solution to the City's flood control

problem. Over an 18-month period, the Task Force held a series of public meetings to review the basic assumptions that went into the original design, the environmental and regulatory agency issues associated with flood control facilities, alternative alignments and types of channelization, land use issues, property acquisition issues, construction and total project cost estimates, and the opportunities and benefits of each alternative.

In 1990, the Waterways Task Force submitted a Summary Report to City Council that concluded, among other things, that the final design and EIR should be revised to reflect a graded earth channel with rock/concrete drop structures and the use of concrete channel features only where necessary. It was also concluded that the earth channel and accompanying re-vegetation and establishment of habitat would be both an environmental enhancement to the City and a focal aesthetic amenity that would enhance the San Marcos Boulevard commercial area. The City Council concurred and adopted Resolution 90-3520.

A Design Development Study was prepared and completed in 1991 that identified the size, location and type of flood control facilities for the creek, based on the approved alternative. A revised Draft EIR was prepared, circulated, and certified by the City in 1992. Between 1991 and late 1992, a Special Area Management Plan (SAMP) was developed that encompassed San Marcos Creek, the Las Posas tributary, the Twin Oaks branch and the East branch. The SAMP was envisioned as a comprehensive plan for the natural resources associated with the creek, and it was developed in consultation with the regulatory agencies involved in granting construction permits for the proposed flood control projects. Regulatory negotiations for the SAMP took place between 1992 and 1995. While permits and agreements are in place, final agency review of construction and mitigation plans, including sign-off by the Regional Water Quality Control Board, is still required on a reach-by-reach basis. In 1998, the City selected a team of consultants to prepare a coordinated land use plan and flood control

design for the lands adjacent to the reach of San Marcos Creek between State Route 78 and Discovery Street. The results of this coordinated effort were to be documented in a specific plan.

1.3.3 The Planning Process

In July 1998, the City selected Wallace Roberts & Todd, LLC (WRT) to lead a multi-disciplinary team of consultants in preparing a specific plan and an environmental impact report for the 214-acre San Marcos Creek planning area, the “Creekside District.” The consultants were charged to work with the community and City staff to prepare a plan that is environmentally sound, financially feasible, and consistent with the City’s and planning area landowners’ goals for the Creekside District.

In order to provide a sound basis for the Specific Plan, an environmental baseline study was prepared. Data was collected and evaluated for six categories: hydrology, biological resources, visual resources, land use, infrastructure and transportation. To the degree possible, information related to each of these factors was mapped. Each factor was then evaluated for its implications for future uses and rated according to its environmental sensitivity. Ultimately, the maps for the key environmental factors were compiled to identify areas of environmental sensitivity, those areas most constrained for use or modification. This synthesis of environmental sensitivities provided the foundation for formulating the land use plan and appropriate responses to infrastructure and circulation needs.

While this background analysis was being prepared, the consultants worked with the staff and interested public in a series of public meetings to make more explicit the Plan’s goals, objectives, and assumptions. The consultants held a series of workshops to explore with landowners and the community those characteristics of the local landscape that make the planning area distinctive, and to identify possible implications for the area’s development patterns and built form. This process resulted in a set of planning area “de-

velopment principles” that have guided the formulation of site planning and architectural design standards for the proposed development.

Working from the City’s direction to provide for flood control by using a landscaped, earthen channel that would minimize biological impacts, WRT worked closely with the City’s engineering consultants (O’Day Consultants, Inc., Nolte, and Parsons Brinckerhoff) to formulate and evaluate a series of alternative flood control improvement scenarios. Each alternative explored different approaches to achieving adequate flood control while minimizing impacts to natural resources and planning area landowners. In conjunction with these flood control scenarios, the consultant team also prepared a series of land use scenarios to determine how to most efficiently and effectively accommodate new development and redevelopment in the area. The selection of the preferred land use scenario was based on an evaluation of which alternative best met the diverse interests of the City and planning area landowners. These interests included factors such as: development potential, biological sensitivity, flood control efficacy, aesthetic character, and cost. The preferred land use and flood control scenarios provided the basis for this Specific Plan.

In 2003, the City Council formed the San Marcos Creek Task Force. Comprised of city residents and business owners, the Task Force worked with City staff and the consultant team to refine the preferred scenario into a viable specific plan. To better advise the consultant team, the Task Force visited communities that had successfully implemented similar “downtown” development plans to learn of their challenges and successes. The Task Force and City Council also sponsored Saturday afternoon workshops during which City residents and property owners, all of whom were notified by mail, could learn about and comment upon the proposed plan.

This intensive, environmentally-focused and community-based process has resulted in this Specific Plan.



Portions of the creek channel are heavily vegetated.

1.4 Organization Of The Specific Plan

This Specific Plan is organized to provide a step-by-step understanding of the Plan's components and the rationale behind its policy recommendations, design concepts, and implementation measures. The first two chapters are primarily descriptive, characterizing the plan, the planning context, and the existing setting. The goals, policies, standards, guidelines and implementation measures that will regulate future development in the planning area are presented in subsequent chapters. These planning tools are organized into a series of chapters that correspond to topics identified by the City and established in the State's Specific Plan guidelines.

Chapters in the Specific Plan include:

1. Introduction — articulates the broad purpose of the Specific Plan, describes the legislative authority under which specific plans exist, summarizes the general conditions and sequence of events leading up to the Plan's preparation, and outlines the organization of the Plan.
2. Planning Area — describes the location and general character of the planning area, and identifies ownership patterns and key environmental factors that influence the Plan's form and policies.
3. Land Use — identifies land use goals and policies, and describes the land use patterns and associated development concepts.
4. Open Space & Conservation — describes the planning area's natural resources, including vegetation, wildlife, hydrology, and open space resources, establishes associated policies for resource protection and enhancement, and defines the planning area's public open space framework.
5. Circulation & Transportation — describes the circulation network and identifies the components and design standards required to create a more pedestrian- and transit-oriented system that accommodates the efficient access and movement of transit, pedestrians, and bicyclists, as well as automobiles, in and around the Creekside District.
6. Community Design — sets forth design concepts, policies and objectives, and translates them into guidelines and standards for buildings, landscape elements, open space, and other physical improvements.
7. Form-Based Code — codifies the Plan's design intent into development standards and land use regulations against which proposed development projects will be reviewed as well as establishes the general process under which development applications will be processed to ensure compliance with the Plan.
8. Infrastructure, Utilities & Public Services — describes the infrastructure systems necessary to provide sewer, water, storm drainage and other public utilities to proposed development as well as important public services, such as police, fire protection, and schools.
9. Implementation — describes actions necessary to implement the Plan by identifying approval and amendment processes as well as potential financing mechanisms for proposed public improvements.

For more details, visit:

<http://www.san-marcos.net/departments.asp?id=5329>