



CITY OF RANCHO MIRAGE
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**NOTICE OF PREPARATION
OF AN
ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT REPORT**

HIGHWAY 111 SPECIFIC PLAN

- Lead Agency:** City of Rancho Mirage
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- Project Title:** Highway 111 Specific Plan
- City Project No.:** **Highway 111 Specific Plan Case No. SP200001, General Plan Amendment Case No. GPA20001, General Plan & Zoning Map Amendment Case No. GPZMA20001, Environmental Impact Report Case No. EIR20001**
- Project Location:** The 684± acre planning area extends along the entire length of Highway 111's passage through the City and is further defined by the general limits of the Whitewater River on the north and the foothills of the Santa Rosa Mountains on the south. The planning area occurs in the western Coachella Valley in the central portion of Riverside County (also see attached CEQA Initial Study).
- Findings/Determination:** The City has reviewed and considered the proposed Highway 111 Specific Plan and has determined that potentially significant impacts could result from the proposed project. Therefore, an Environmental Impact Report should be prepared. The City has prepared the attached Initial Study and this Notice of Preparation.
- NOP Comment Period:** This 30-day public review period will commence at 8:00 a.m. on June 8, 2020 and end on July 7, 2020 at 5:00 p.m. A virtual scoping meeting will be held on June 17, 2020 from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. via Zoom at the following link (<https://bit.ly/3gMPFUW>) to provide an opportunity to learn more about this proposed Specific Plan and provide comments on the possible environmental effects the City should study in the Environmental Impact Report. Written comments on the NOP must be received at the City within the public review period. In addition, you may email comments to the following address: majnad@RanchoMirageCA.gov. Copies of the Notice of Preparation are available for review at the above address and at the Rancho Mirage Public Library at 71-100 Highway 111, Rancho Mirage, CA 92270.

A. Introduction

The Highway 111 corridor serves as both a major commercial corridor in Rancho Mirage and adjacent communities, and a sub-regional thoroughfare that connects the “cove communities” and others in the Coachella Valley. Less important today as a regional highway it has become more of an intra-regional, arterial-scale connector of contiguous communities. This shift in regional mobility functions allows for more focus on the local and intra-city function of Highway 111. The 111 corridor is physically constrained by the Whitewater River and the Santa Rosa Mountains, which limit the size and scale of development that can occur along the corridor. There are a few remaining undeveloped land holdings of size that can accommodate larger and mixed-use development. There are also numerous vacant in-fill lots that can be developed individually or aggregated to enhance existing development.

B. Project Description

The Project consolidates, updates, expands, and replaces the previously adopted East and West Specific Plans and revises the land use plan, including some land use designations, acreages, and residential densities. The new plan sets forth development guidelines in the context of 12 planning areas. It enhances the function of Highway 111 as a safe and efficient local and regional travel corridor with a diverse but complementary mix of land uses. Its goals include planning for future development that draws upon local and sub-regional markets and diversifies the City’s economic base, resulting in a more diverse and integrated mix of uses, services, and functions. The Specific Plan implementation will result in a more attractive and diverse mix of high-quality retail, restaurants, hotels, offices, residential developments, and important cultural assets that have and continue to develop along the corridor.

C. Environmental Setting and Surrounding Land Uses

The Project planning area is a narrow corridor defined by the historic and modern route of Highway 111 located between the Santa Rosa foothills on the south and west, and the 500+-foot wide Whitewater River Stormwater Channel on the east and north. Approximately 74% of the 684± acres located in the planning area are “developed”, with the balance of the planning area comprised of a few larger holdings and an assortment of smaller parcels. Existing development in the planning area is a mix of local, neighborhood and community-scale commercial uses, restaurants, hotels, park and open space lands, and a wide range of residential development, including apartments, condominiums, and single family homes.

Surrounding land uses include extensive open space in the foothills and mountains, with some encroachment by residential and hotel development. Portions of the planning area abut the *Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains Conservation Area*, a sensitive wildlife and habitat area established by the Coachella Valley Multiple Specific Habitat Conservation Plan (CVMSHCP). Seasonal trails can also be found in these areas. Surrounding residential development includes mobile homes, apartments and condominium, and single family homes on public streets and within gated communities.

D. Areas of Potential Environmental Concern

Introduction

The attached Initial Study has been prepared for the proposed Specific Plan in accordance with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). Implementation of the proposed Specific Plan may have impacts to important environmental resources and may be affected by potential environmental hazards. These areas of potential environmental concern have been identified and are briefly described below and in the Initial Study. A more in-depth analysis of each of these areas of concern will be provided in the EIR being prepared for the proposed Specific Plan.

Aesthetic and Scenic Resources

The Coachella Valley and the Highway 111 corridor area are characterized by the low-lying desert valley floor surrounded by the steep, high elevation terrain of the San Jacinto, San Bernardino, Little San Bernardino, and Santa Rosa Mountains. Views of the mountain ranges and the limited expanses of desert floor that are visible within the project planning area are highly valued. The Specific Plan proposes to allow taller residential buildings than are currently permitted, which could impact scenic views in some locations. Future development could have a potentially significant impact on these resources and light or glare levels and should be considered in project design and analyzed in the EIR.

Air Quality and Greenhouse Gas/Climate Change

In general, air quality in the City of Rancho Mirage area is good, particularly in comparison to other localities in Southern California. However, continued regional urbanization in the past few decades has contributed to the degradation of the air quality due to population growth, increased traffic, construction activities and various other site disturbances. Pollutant levels are monitored daily in Indio, Mecca and at the Palm Springs International Airport.

Ozone and PM₁₀ are the two pollutants of concern in the Coachella Valley. Under the federal Clean Air Act, the planning area and vicinity are located within Federal "Non-attainment" areas for suspended particulates and ozone. Suspended particulates, including PM₁₀ (particulate matter measuring smaller than 10 microns in diameter) and PM_{2.5} (measuring smaller than 2.5 microns in diameter), and ozone present the major threat to local air quality and are the primary pollutants of concern in the Coachella Valley. The Coachella Valley is currently designated attainment/unclassifiable for PM_{2.5}. Carbon monoxide, nitrogen dioxides, and sulfur dioxide are designated as attainment within the Coachella Valley. The planning area is located within a region identified as susceptible to wind erosion in the Rancho Mirage General Plan, conditions which can contribute to elevated PM₁₀ and PM_{2.5} levels.

Air quality emissions also contribute pollutants known as greenhouse gases (GHG) that contribute to climate change and global warming. The Highway 111 Specific Plan could result in more energy efficient buildings and HVAC systems, and promote renewable, non-polluting energy systems in the form of solar photovoltaic and thermal. Air quality constraints and potential adverse (and beneficial) impacts of Plan implementation on air quality, including those associated with GHGs, will be further assessed in the EIR.

Biological Resources

The City is a permittee under the Coachella Valley Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan (CVMSHCP), and portions of the proposed Specific Plan area are located near or adjacent to lands designated as Conservation Areas established by the CVMSHCP. The planning area includes currently undeveloped desert lands that may harbor bird species protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA). To some extent, potential impacts of future development facilitated by the Specific Plan to covered species and plant communities would be mitigated through payment of development impact fees.

The West Gateway Planning Area includes Tribal lands under the jurisdiction of the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians (ACBCI) and its Tribal Habitat Conservation Plan (Tribal HCP) (2010). The Tribal HCP was established to protect and manage natural resources and habitat within the Tribe's jurisdictional territory, and to establish consistency and streamline permitting requirements with respect to protected species. The forthcoming EIR will determine whether and to what extent buildout of the Specific Plan will conflict with the CVMSHCP or Tribal HCP, and further evaluate the potential for development facilitated by the Specific Plan to adversely affect sensitive biological resources.

Geology/Soils

The planning area is located in the vicinity of at least two active faults of the San Andreas Fault Zone that extend through lands north of the city limits. The San Andreas Fault is capable of generating a moment magnitude 7.4. The planning area would be exposed to strong ground shaking during a major quake on nearby faults, with associated potential for ground failure, rockfalls and landslides, and liquefaction during such events. The local soils are also highly susceptible to wind and water erosion. The forthcoming EIR will evaluate the geotechnical conditions in the planning area and potential significant impacts from buildout of the proposed Specific Plan.

Land Use Compatibility

The proposed Specific Plan generally maintains the basic land use distribution envisioned in the General Plan, but it revises some land use designations and acreages, increases residential densities in some portions of the planning area, and reduces parking requirement for some complementary land uses. The Specific Plan will supersede certain provisions or regulations of the City's Zoning Ordinance as applied to the planning area, and will revise and update the 2014 East and West Highway 111 Specific Plans, but is also designed to be compatible with surrounding existing and planned land uses. Conflicts between the Specific Plan and other land use plans and policies could cause environmental impacts, and therefore, should be evaluated in the forthcoming EIR.

Transportation/Circulation

The proposed Specific Plan will result in an intensification of some land uses and a reduction of intensity of some uses along the Highway 111 corridor. The specific plan will include increased residential densities, which could impact traffic volumes and intersection operations, and reduced commercial that could more than offset potential increases associated with additional residential development. The Specific Plan will promote circulation components and urban design that will enhance traffic operations and multi-modal access and safety, and consolidated driveway access on Highway 111. The extent to which these may conflict with (or enhance) a program, plan, ordinance, or policy is currently unknown. A traffic impact analysis will be prepared to further analyze the potential effects of the proposed Specific Plan on local circulation plans, as well as transit and other alternative modes of travel. Potential impacts and the need for mitigation measures will be further analyzed in the EIR.

Hazards and Hazardous Materials

Existing development in the Project planning area includes large and small commercial enterprises, auto dealerships and related maintenance facilities, gasoline service stations, numerous restaurants, and other potential generators of hazardous materials. Comparable development and additional residential development would be facilitated by the proposed Specific Plan. The Specific Plan land use plan allows residential, commercial, office, and institutional development that can be expected to use and store limited quantities and types of potentially hazardous materials, such as cleaning chemicals, solvents, gasoline, and oils. Individual developments may be required to implement appropriate avoidance, minimization, and mitigation measures to address potential impacts. Potential impacts should be further evaluated in the EIR.

Hydrology and Water Quality

The planning area is located between the Santa Rosa foothills and the Whitewater River Stormwater Channel and is crossed by numerous surface and underground conveyance facilities that connect local runoff to the stormwater channel. In addition to existing facilities, including the East and West Magnesia Falls Channels, there are developable lands that do not yet benefit from on-site stormwater facilities. Appropriate best management practices and stormwater treatment during construction and in the post-construction period must be demonstrated for future development and will be further analyzed in the forthcoming EIR.

Cultural Resources

In the Project vicinity, numerous Native American cultural resources, including pottery scatters, grinding rocks, trail segments, and rock cairn features, have been found and documented. While the planning area does not provide perennial or even seasonal water sources, it may have provided valuable food and fiber resources. It also harbors or is located near important historic structures that could be affected directly or indirectly by the proposed Project.

The proposed Specific Plan facilitates future development and improvements in the planning area that could result in disturbance to or destruction of sensitive cultural resources or sites, historic buildings and/or structure demolition, and new development that have the potential to impact previously unknown cultural resources, including historical and archaeological resources. A cultural literature search and survey will be conducted, and potential impacts associated with Specific Plan implementation will be part of the EIR analysis.

Noise

Long-term operation of projects facilitated by the Specific Plan could result in permanent increases in ambient noise levels in the planning area. However, proposed land uses are consistent with the existing Highway 111 urban commercial and residential environment, and noise sources and levels are expected to be similar to those already experienced in the planning area, which are governed by the City's noise ordinance. Future development projects may require site-specific noise monitoring and modeling for both construction and post-construction periods conducted at locations surrounding the project site, including in proximity to sensitive receptors. Overall, impacts may be less than significant with appropriate mitigation. The forthcoming EIR and noise study will further evaluate the potential noise impacts associated with implementation of the Specific Plan.

Public Services and Facilities

Buildout of the proposed Specific Plan could increase the need for fire, police, and other municipal services, although the potential increase in demand for these services is not expected to exceed City capabilities or capacities. Nonetheless, the need for augmented public services and facilities will be further evaluated, and the impacts will be addressed in the EIR. Similarly, the increase in population within the planning area may also have a modest impact on schools and parks and will be further analyzed in the subject EIR.

Population and Housing

The Rancho Mirage population is estimated to be 18,489 in 2019. SCAG projects the City's population will grow to 25,000 by 2040. The proposed Specific Plan will facilitate new planned residential development in the planning area, including opportunities primarily for high-density residential land uses, which would directly result in population growth. At the same time, the proposed Project could enhance the City's ability to meet its affordable housing needs for the coming years and create additional affordable housing (market-rate and subsidized). The planning area is well-served by existing roads and infrastructure. Although parcel-scale extensions and improvements may be required as development occurs, they are not expected to induce substantial additional growth. The EIR will estimate the buildout population in the planning area and compare it to projections to further evaluate potential population growth impacts.

Wildfire

The planning area is not located within a fire zone classified as either a state responsibility area or a very high fire hazard severity zone. Although the West Gateway and Thunder Road planning areas are near two Very High Fire Hazard Severity Zones, those zones are of very limited size, and the historical record indicates that the wildland fire hazard in Rancho Mirage is relatively low. The City maintains a Multi-Hazard Functional Plan that addresses the planned response to extraordinary emergency situations, including natural or human-caused disasters. The implementation of the Specific Plan has the potential to exacerbate wildfire risks in the planning area or on surrounding lands. While it is not expected to create a significant exposure threat to occupants or surrounding receptors to pollutant concentrations from a wildfire this potential should be further analysed.