



1 – Introduction

1.1 What is a General Plan?

Every city and county in California is required by State law to prepare and maintain a planning document called a general plan. A general plan serves as the jurisdiction’s “constitution” or “blueprint” for future decisions concerning land use and resource conservation. All specific plans, subdivisions, public works projects, and zoning decisions must be consistent with the local jurisdiction’s general plan.

The nature of a General Plan has three defining features:

- **General.** As the name implies, a general plan provides general guidance for future land use, transportation, environmental, and resource decisions.
- **Comprehensive.** A general plan covers a wide range of social, economic, infrastructure, and natural resource issues. These include land use, urban development, housing, transportation, public facilities and services, recreation, agriculture, biological resources, and many other topics. Section 1.5 lists the topics covered in the Merced County General Plan Background Report.
- **Long-Range.** A general plan provides guidance on achieving a long-range vision for the county’s future. To reach this envisioned future, the general plan must include goals, policies, and implementation programs that address both near-term and long-term needs. For Merced County, the General Plan looks out to the year 2030 (roughly 25 years in the future).

1.2 Using the General Plan

As required by State law, the General Plan must be user-friendly. To this end, the General Plan is divided into two documents: the Background Report and the Goals and Policies Report. The Background Report is further divided into 11 chapters (see Section 1.5), and the Goals and Policies Report is divided into 10 sections so that information can be easily referenced by subject or issue.

The following paragraphs provide a summary of the two component documents that make up the Merced County General Plan:

- **Background Report.** The Background Report takes a “snapshot” of Merced County’s current (2006) trends and conditions. It provides a detailed description of a wide range of topics (see Section 1.5) within the county, such as demographic and economic conditions, land use, public facilities, and environmental resources. The report provides decision makers, the public, and local agencies with context for making policy decisions. Unlike the Goals and Policies Report, the Background Report is intended to be objective and policy-neutral. The Background Report serves as a setting for the Environmental Impact Report prepared for the General Plan.
- **Goals and Policies Report.** This report is the essence of the General Plan. It contains the goals and policies that will guide future decisions within the county. It also identifies a full set of implementation programs that will ensure the goals and policies in the General Plan are carried out.

As part of the Merced County General Plan Update, the County prepared several General Plan support documents: *[These will be prepared in future phases of the Update process.]*

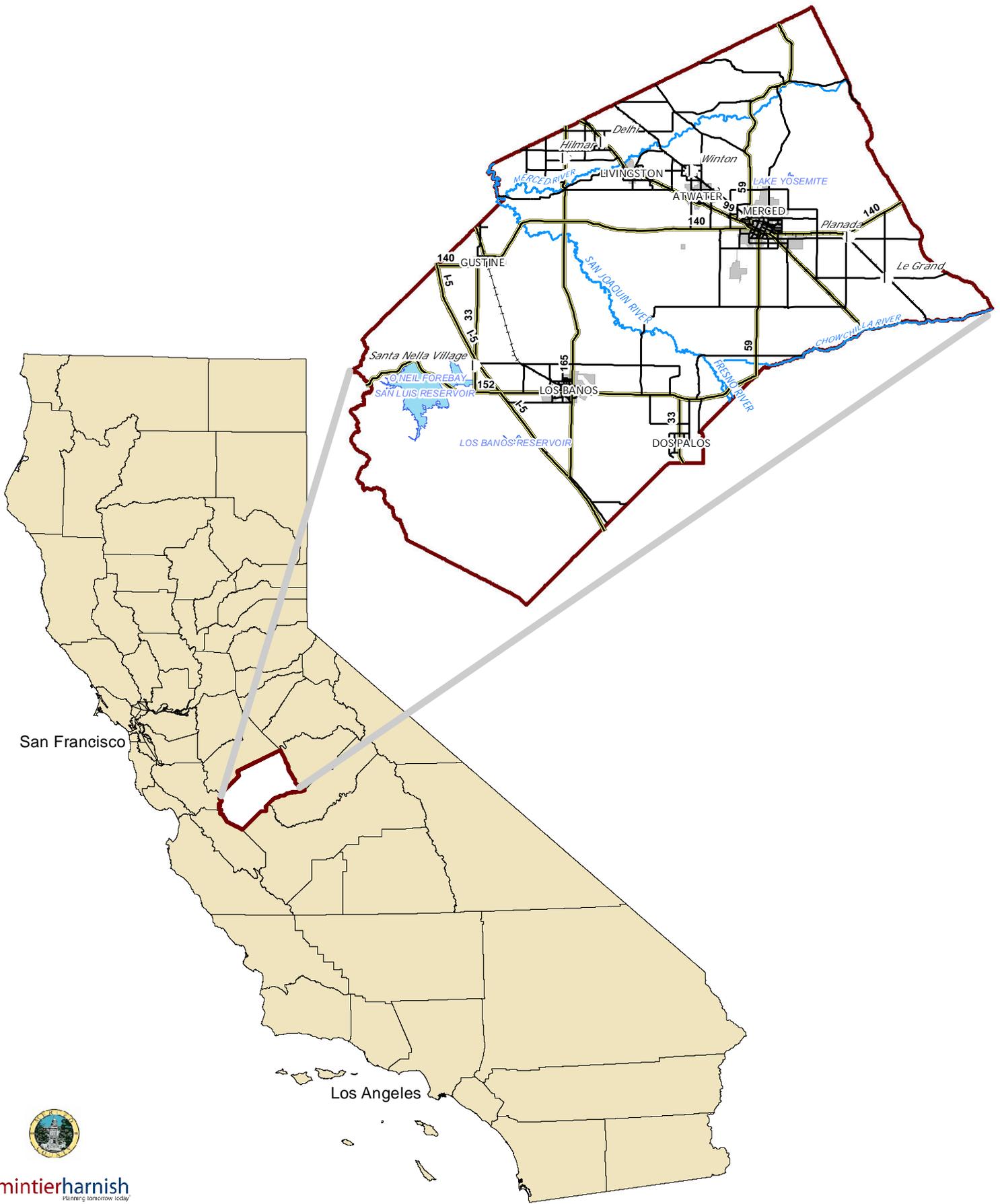
- **Issues, Opportunities, and Vision.** The Issues and Opportunities Summary identified key physical, environmental, economic, cultural, social, and planning issues affecting Merced County. These key conditions and issues were derived from the Background Report and a series of community workshops and focus group meetings conducted during the initial phases of the Update process. The information summarized in this document provided a framework for developing guiding principles and a vision statement.
- **Alternatives Report.** The Alternatives Report consisted of the development, evaluation, and selection of land use and policy alternatives. The Report was designed to frame an active discussion among stakeholders, community members, and county decision makers, leading to direction from the Board of Supervisors for the preferred policy direction for the Draft Goals and Policies Report.
- **Environmental Impact Report.** The environmental impact report (EIR) responds to the requirements of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) as set forth in Sections 15126, 15175, and 15176 of the CEQA Guidelines Act (CEQA). The Planning Commission and Board of Supervisors uses the EIR during the General Plan Update process in order to understand the potential environmental implications associated with implementing the General Plan.

1.3 Regional Setting

Merced County is located in California's San Joaquin Valley (see Figure 1-1). The county is bordered by Stanislaus County to the north, Fresno and Madera Counties to the south, Mariposa County to the east, and Santa Clara and San Benito counties to the west. The city of Merced is the county seat for Merced County.

A number of terms are used to describe the county and surrounding areas in the General Plan:

- **County Line.** The jurisdictional boundary of a county.
- **Unincorporated Areas.** Areas of the county outside of the city limits over which Merced County has direct land use jurisdiction (see Figure 1-2).
- **Sphere of Influence.** The probable ultimate physical boundaries and service area of a local agency, as adopted by a Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO). A Sphere of Influence includes both incorporated and unincorporated areas within which a local agency will have primary responsibility for the provision of public facilities and services (see Figure 1-2).
- **City Limits.** The city limits includes the area within a city's corporate boundary over which cities exercise land use authority and provide public services. Merced County does not have direct land use jurisdiction over areas within the city limits (see Figure 1-2).
- **Planning Area.** State law requires counties to adopt a general plan that addresses physical development within its county line. The General Plan Planning Area contains all land within the county line, but outside of the six incorporated cities' (Atwater, Dos Palos, Gustine, Livingston, Los Banos, and Merced), and any additional areas in which adopted County policies may relate.



1.4 Purpose of the Background Report

The Background Report provides a “snapshot” in time of the county’s existing conditions pertaining to the Planning Area. The Background Report presents the physical, social, and economic resource information required to support the preparation of the General Plan. The data and information in the Report has a baseline date of October 2006.

The Background Report serves as the foundation document from which subsequent planning policies and programs will be formulated. The document is also used as the “Existing Setting” section of the General Plan EIR.

1.5 Organization of the Background Report

The Background Report is organized into 11 chapters, as follows:

- **Chapter 1 – Introduction.** This chapter provides an introduction to the Background Report and covers the following topics: what the general plan is; and how it is used; Merced County’s regional setting, purpose of the background report, organization, and format of the Background Report.
- **Chapter 2 – Demographic, Economics, and Fiscal Conditions.** This chapter describes the population and demographic characteristics of the Planning Area and a discussion of the county’s current economic and fiscal conditions as of October 2006. This chapter includes: a summary of population, age, ethnicity, income, housing, employment, and other statistical information as reported by various agencies and historical and current demographic and growth trends; evaluation of the performance of various countywide economic sectors; the long term viability of costs and revenues levels; and an understanding of the county’s fiscal condition.
- **Chapter 3 – Land Use.** This chapter provides an overview of existing land use conditions and land use regulations in the Planning Area. This includes an overview of the 1990 General Plan, zoning regulations, and other related County plans. This chapter also provides an overview of the surrounding city and county plans, regional plans, and State and Federal plans that affect the Planning Area.
- **Chapter 4 – Agriculture.** This chapter provides an overview of agricultural trends and issues relevant to the Planning Area. Summaries of existing and potential agricultural land preservation and conservation programs in California and the county are described and evaluated.
- **Chapter 5 – Housing.** Merced County adopted its Housing Element in June of 2003. The element has been prepared under a separate cover.
- **Chapter 6 – Transportation and Circulation.** This chapter describes the transportation resources and operating conditions in Merced County. Included in this chapter is a summary of existing roadway facilities, traffic level-of-service at key intersections and roadway segments, and current County transportation goals, policies, and programs.
- **Chapter 7 – Public Facilities and Utilities.** This chapter covers the existing infrastructure capabilities and public services provided in the Planning Area including: water supply and delivery,

wastewater collection and disposal, stormwater drainage, flood control, solid and hazardous waste, public utilities, law enforcement, fire protection, schools, and County services. Also included is an analysis of infrastructure financing.

- **Chapter 8 – Natural Resources.** This chapter discusses the natural resources found in the Planning Area. This chapter discusses water resources, energy and mineral resources, biological resources, agricultural resources, oil and gas resources, and scenic resources.
- **Chapter 9 – Recreation and Cultural Resources.** This chapter discusses the recreation and cultural resources found in the Planning Area. This chapter discusses recreation, archeological resources, and historical resources.
- **Chapter 10 – Safety.** This chapter discusses existing public health and safety issues and concerns relevant to the planning process, such as geologic and seismic hazards, flood hazards, fire hazards, human-made hazards, airport safety, and air quality.
- **Chapter 11 – Noise.** This chapter discusses the existing and future noise environment and includes a survey of county noise sources in the Planning Area.

1.6 Format of Background Report

Each section of each chapter of the Background Report includes the following:

- **Introduction.** The introduction provides a brief description of the issues covered in the chapter.
- **Existing Conditions.** This section describes the existing conditions as of October 2006 for each resource or issue area. Supplemental information developed since that time is provided in some cases.
- **Regulatory Context.** Each section summarizes the regulatory context pertaining to the topics identified. When applicable, Federal, State, and local regulations are presented.
- **Findings.** Each section contains a brief summary of key findings. The findings present key facts and preliminary issues from the section. These findings serve as the basis for the identification of technical issues to be addressed in the Goals and Policies Report.