



Laguna Hills GENERAL PLAN Introduction

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Laguna Hills GENERAL PLAN

City Council

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Introduction



Preface

Laguna Hills offers a high standard of living, making it a great community in which to live, work, shop, and play. Its beautiful natural setting of rolling hills, miles of trails, and connected open spaces make the City a welcome refuge in the heart of Orange County. People take pride in their neighborhoods and feel safe enjoying the many amenities Laguna Hills has to offer. While residents value this small town atmosphere, they also enjoy the big city amenities in Laguna Hills. The City's shopping and employment destinations provide for a strong and sound economy, further strengthening the City's quality of life. Looking to protect and enhance these qualities, the City undertook an update to its original 1994 General Plan. An important part of this update process was working with the citizens of Laguna Hills to identify opportunities to create a greater sense of community; enhance the City's identity; offer new job, shopping, and housing choices; and promote a more sustainable future.

These opportunities were articulated by the Laguna Hills citizens in an extensive community involvement process and are expressed in a set of

eight "Guiding Themes." The Guiding Themes are the vision for Laguna Hills and set the future course for the City. Through the Guiding Themes, the updated General Plan builds upon the City's existing strengths and provides opportunities to enhance the quality of life in the City. The General Plan functions as a blueprint that defines not only how the City wishes to evolve during the next 20 years, but the key steps the community will take to make this vision a reality.

What is a General Plan?

The General Plan is a legal document and much of its content, such as background data, analysis, maps, and exhibits, is established by statutory requirements. The legal adequacy of the General Plan is critical because many city actions and programs are required to be consistent with the General Plan.

California law requires every city and county in the state to prepare and adopt a comprehensive long-range General Plan for the physical development of the jurisdiction. The General Plan represents the community's view of its future and becomes



Civic Center

a blueprint for creating the view envisioned by the community. The General Plan and its maps, diagrams, and the development policies form the basis for the city's zoning, subdivision, and public works actions. Decision makers and city staff use the goals, policies, and programs of the General Plan as a basis for making decisions.

The General Plan is considered comprehensive because it addresses a wide range of issues that affect the city such as the physical development of the jurisdiction or social concerns that can affect the overall quality of life. The General Plan is considered a “long-term” plan since it looks 20 years or more into the future. Each jurisdiction can establish a time horizon that best fits its individual needs. The State General Plan Guidelines recommend that General Plans be updated every 5 to 10 years to ensure that they remain relevant—to reflect local physical and demographic changes and broader changes in culture and technology.

Seven specific “elements” in California planning law are mandatory for General Plans: land use, housing, circulation, conservation, open space, noise, and safety. These issues directly affect the community's neighborhoods and quality of life. A local jurisdiction may adopt a General Plan in the format that best fits its unique circumstances. In doing so, the jurisdiction must ensure that the General Plan and its component parts comprise an integrated, internally consistent, and compatible statement of development policies and implementation programs to achieve its vision. The Laguna Hills General Plan is intended to be an active and evolving Plan, guiding the community and decision makers in prioritizing issues related to land use, capital improvements, and budgeting.

It is not unusual for new information to become available following adoption of an updated General Plan. Alternatively, the vision for the community may change over time, and as a result, General Plans are periodically reviewed and updated to reflect the community's changing needs.

Organization of the Laguna Hills General Plan

The Laguna Hills General Plan is organized into 10 sections. The sections include this introduction, seven General Plan elements, a General Plan Implementation Program, description of related plans and programs, and a glossary of terms used throughout this General Plan.

The seven General Plan elements encompass all of the elements required by California General Plan law. The Laguna Hills General Plan combines the mandatory Open Space and Conservation Elements required by State law, and includes a separate, optional element on Community Services and Facilities.

The seven General Plan elements in the Laguna Hills General Plan include:

- Land Use
- Mobility
- Conservation and Open Space
- Community Services and Facilities
- Safety
- Noise
- Housing

The seven elements are generally organized in a similar format. Each element contains an Introduction, Background, and Plan section as described below.

Introduction. This section indicates the purpose of each element and how it will help Laguna Hills achieve its vision for the community as articulated through the eight Guiding Themes.

Background. This section provides the reader with the existing conditions and/or the environmental setting particular to that element topic. Additionally, this information helps the reader understand the rationale and the content for the Plan section.

Plan. The Plan section is composed of three sections: issues, goals and policies, and approach. The issues section describes issues and concerns expressed by the community, City staff, and the City Council. The issues and concerns are also expressed in the Guiding Themes. The goals and policies section sets both broad and specific direction for the future of the City based on the identified issues and concerns. The approach section provides a general description and summary of the City’s course of action to achieve the goals and policies.

The Laguna Hills General Plan also contains the following appendices, which are integral parts of the General Plan:

Implementation Program. The Implementation Program follows the elements and identifies the specific actions that will achieve the goals, policies, and plans identified in each element. The Implementation Program is an important part of the City’s bi-annual budgeting process. In preparation for each budgeting cycle, each City Department actively reviews the General Plan, and Implementation Program, when determining what Major Plans will be proposed for consideration by the City Council.

Related Plans and Programs. This section identifies plans and programs related to the General Plan and applicable to future activities and land use decisions within Laguna Hills.

The Seven General Plan Elements

- Land Use
- Mobility
- Conservation and Open Space
- Community Services and Facilities
- Safety
- Noise
- Housing

Glossary. This section provides definitions for technical terms used throughout the General Plan.

Planning Area

The City of Laguna Hills is located in the San Joaquin Hills in southern Orange County, approximately 60 miles south of Los Angeles and 70 miles north of San Diego. Laguna Hills is bounded by the cities of Irvine and Lake Forest to the north; Interstate 5 (I-5) and the cities of Mission Viejo and Lake Forest to the east; the City of Laguna Niguel to the south; and, the cities of Aliso Viejo and Laguna Woods to the west. Regional access is provided by I-5 and the San Joaquin Hill Transportation Corridor (State Route 73).

Laguna Hills contains approximately 6.6 square miles of land or 4,234 acres. Figure I-1 depicts the location of Laguna Hills in the region.

The planning area for Laguna Hills consists solely of areas within the City limits and is identical to the City's jurisdictional boundary. Since all land surrounding the City is under the jurisdiction of other cities, Laguna Hills does not have a planning sphere of influence or any planning authority outside of its jurisdictional boundaries.

History of Laguna Hills

Laguna Hills is built on one of the major land grants developed during the Rancho Era. Following Mexico's independence from Spain in 1821, those who had served in the government or who had friends in authority, were given vast lands for cattle grazing. Rancho Lomas de Santiago, Rancho San Joaquin, and Rancho Niguel covered much of the western portion of the Saddleback Valley. Don Juan Avila was granted the 13,000-acre Rancho Niguel on which Laguna Hills is located.

In 1874, Lewis Moulton purchased Rancho Niguel from Don Juan Avila and increased the original grant to 22,000 acres. Moulton and his partner, Jean Piedra Daguerre, used the ranch to raise sheep and cattle. The Moulton Ranch was eventually subdivided in the early 1960s, part of which is recognized as Laguna Hills.

Incorporation efforts began in 1987 and on March 5, 1991, the goal of incorporation was finally achieved with 86 percent of the residents voting in favor of forming the City of Laguna Hills. On December 20, 1991, Laguna Hills officially became a City. Shortly after incorporation, the City undertook an extensive research and public outreach process to develop its first General Plan. The City formed a General Plan Advisory



- Laguna Hills
- Counties
- Freeway/ Toll Road
- Orange County Cities
- Conservation Land

Figure I - 1

Regional Context



Source: EDAW, 2008.

Committee (GPAC), which ensured valuable citizen input into the development of that Plan. Additionally, the City Council conducted a series of workshops, which included the opportunity for the general public to provide comments and input on the General Plan Program.

The first General Plan was organized into five chapters and set major goals for land use, housing, growth management, fiscal management, circulation and transportation, infrastructure, open space, air quality, and noise. On June 28, 1994, the General Plan was adopted by the City Council and has guided growth and development in Laguna Hills since that time.

Since adoption of the City's first General Plan, two key annexations occurred. On November 14, 1995, the City Council approved annexation of the north Laguna Hills area, which became part of the incorporated City on July 1, 1996. The annexation added approximately 755 acres of land with various designations such as residential, mixed use, commercial, open space and parks. On September 18, 2000, with the overwhelming support from the 1,800 residents, the "Westside" Annexation Area officially became part of the incorporated City. The annexation added 149 acres of residential land, which includes the Aliso Viejo Community Association's Sheep Hills Park. The original incorporation boundaries plus these two annexation areas form the City's Planning Area addressed in this Plan.

Community Participation

This is the first comprehensive revision of the General Plan since the City's first General Plan was adopted in 1994. The General Plan is based on extensive research and analysis of existing conditions, changing local and regional conditions, evolving trends in urban planning, and a collaborative partnership with community members through an extensive public participation process.

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

At the heart of the update to the Laguna Hills General Plan was an extensive public involvement process. Throughout the General Plan process, the General Plan consultant and City staff team engaged the community and its decision makers in numerous workshops, stakeholder meetings, study sessions, and public hearings to understand the vision and desires for the future of Laguna Hills. Hundreds of residents, employees, business owners, and other stakeholders spent numerous fruitful hours sharing ideas, expressing views, debating policies, and making hard decisions with the intent of creating a General Plan that is right for Laguna Hills. The policy framework in the General Plan reflects the priorities, needs, and aspirations of those involved in the process. The

input received from community members is expressed in a set of Guiding Themes that provides a foundation for the City’s long-range goals.

The public participation program included the following major components.

General Plan Advisory Committee

Consisting of 18 members, the GPAC served in an advisory role to City staff and the City Council during the General Plan process. The GPAC was appointed by the City Council and made up of a cross section of representatives of Laguna Hills residents, businesses, and organizations. Throughout the process, the GPAC worked with staff to address issues associated with the General Plan, including a variety of land use alternatives, housing, mobility, open space, environmental issues, and goals and policies refinement.

The GPAC had a total of eight meetings beginning in 2007 and concluding in August 2008, all of which were open to the public.

Community Workshops

From September 18, 2007, to May 22, 2008, the City conducted a series of three community workshops involving the broader community, using hands-on activities, expert guest speakers, and focused dialogue sessions.

The purpose of the workshops was to encourage residents and other stakeholders to identify issues and opportunities to address in the General Plan and to solicit input on the General Plan Program.

Newsletters

The City used a series of newsletters to inform residents of the General Plan Program and opportunities for input. The newsletters also served as an invitation to the public workshops. The first newsletter was sent to every household in the City. Subsequent newsletters were sent to households indicating an interest in receiving General Plan Program updates.

Public Hearing and Adoption

The final step in the General Plan process was public hearings on the Draft General Plan and the Program Environmental Impact Report (PEIR). This hearing process resulted in revisions to the General Plan based on City Council direction. After final review, the City Council adopted the General Plan, superseding the previous General Plan as the City’s official guide for growth and development.



Other Outreach Efforts

In addition to the outreach efforts described here, the City also announced GPAC Meetings and Public Workshops on the City’s website and in the local newspaper. Additionally, members of the GPAC were encouraged to distribute workshop announcements to their neighbors, friends, and colleagues.

THE VISION FOR LAGUNA HILLS

A General Plan Program stimulates thinking within the community about the City’s future and generates many important questions for consideration:

- What does the future hold for Laguna Hills?
- What should the vision be for our beautiful City?
- What would you like to see in the next 20 years?
- Where are improvements needed?
- What should be preserved?
- How can we benefit from current planning trends such as green building, walkable communities, and mixed use development?

The citizens of Laguna Hills were asked these types of questions in a variety of community meetings to launch the update to the Laguna Hills General Plan. The community responded with their desires, issues, passions, concerns, and aspirations for the future of the City. This feedback from the community was captured and synthesized into a set of “Guiding Themes” that set the future course for the General Plan. The Guiding Themes build on what residents of Laguna Hills already know: Laguna Hills is a great community and a great place to live. Through the Guiding Themes, the updated General Plan builds upon the City’s existing strengths and provides ways to enhance the quality of life for the citizens, employees, and visitors of Laguna Hills.

The Guiding Themes establish the vision and direction for the General Plan and the City of Laguna Hills and include:

- A City Prepared for the Future
- Focused Revitalization in Commercial Centers
- Efficient Transportation System
- Strong Community Identity
- Healthy and Supportive Community for Families and People of All Ages
- Protecting Environmental Resources and Open Spaces for Future Generations



- Maintaining Safety within the Community
- Sustaining Community Connections as Laguna Hills Advances

A City Prepared for the Future

Managing growth and proactively meeting residents' needs are key issues for the future of Laguna Hills. Residents recognize the need to provide housing opportunities for all segments of the community. In addition, the need to continually improve municipal services and facilities (such as water, sewer, trash, library, sports facilities, and animal services) is important to the City's welfare. The City will continue to look for opportunities to integrate City services with the best technology available.

Maintaining community connections is important as development occurs in Laguna Hills. Attention should be paid to the amount, type, and design of new development to ensure compatibility with existing neighborhoods and to create new gathering spaces.

Expanding local retail will reduce residents' shopping trips to adjacent cities, increasing local tax revenues, reducing vehicle trips, and enhancing overall quality of life.

Focused Revitalization in Commercial Corridors

Promoting revitalization that enhances the public realm, expanding the City's unique offerings, and cultivating environmental and economic sustainability are important goals of the General Plan. Some of the commercial and business centers have aged and are ripe with opportunities for new activity and redevelopment. At the same time, many residents are wary of development out of scale and character with the community and instead prefer development (of neighborhood centers) that is locally oriented (as opposed to regionally oriented).

People recognize that goals for development in the northern area of the City may vary from those for the central/southern portions. "Neighborhood centers" in the central and southern areas of the City are envisioned as walkable environments serving one or more neighborhoods and integrating a mix of uses, such as shopping, services, culture and civic facilities, housing, and/or small parks and plazas. To the north, the Laguna Hills Mall and business park sites may be more suitable for greater amounts of employment and services that serve both local and regional markets. The future of the Mall may be as a "town center/urban village" with retail, restaurants, entertainment, gathering spaces, and residential activity. Integrating the town center with the hospital area and the Laguna Hills Transit Center will allow people to live close to work and to use transit or walk to reach destinations. Redevelopment of older, underutilized business parks in the "north district" will result in new environments with rejuvenated employment and shopping opportunities mixed with residences.



Efficient Transportation System

Safe, well-functioning roads are essential and significantly contribute to people's day-to-day experience in the City. The impact of traffic volume, speed, accidents, and congestion are significant issues for Laguna Hills' residents, employees, and businesses. The General Plan strategically links land use and transportation to make efficient use of existing capacity. General Plan goals, policies, and programs for mobility emphasize pedestrian paths, bikeways, equestrian trails, and transit that connect neighborhoods to commercial districts, other activity centers, and regional transportation systems. The General Plan also establishes policies to address congestion points throughout the City, regional traffic impacts, and coordinated signalization to enhance smooth traffic flow.

Strong Community Identity

Bolstering the unique attributes of Laguna Hills is an important goal Citywide. The City will benefit from a defined consistent character that connects to the City's origins and culture, while reflecting its natural setting. General Plan goals and policies promote more identifiable local facilities (such as the Civic Center and community centers) and defined streetscapes that tie neighborhoods and districts within the City together. Efforts also focus on City beautification. Reinforcing identity Citywide will also help to better knit together the northern and southern portions of the City and strengthen community connections.

Healthy and Supportive Community for Families and People of All Ages

Attention to the needs of all community members, including seniors, children, persons with special needs, and residents of all ages, is an important value in Laguna Hills. This is evident in the great schools, senior activities, and recreation opportunities available in the community. These qualities will be maintained and expanded. Residents also recognize the need for opportunities for increased physical activity and desire to maintain and increase access to parks and recreational amenities to foster healthy lifestyles within the community.

Protecting Environmental Resources and Preserving Open Spaces

Laguna Hills' natural amenities are highly valued. The community is envisioned as a healthy and clean environment where resources are protected. This includes preservation of existing open spaces, parks, trails, and creeks, and the conservation of energy and water resources. Reducing air and noise pollution and improving recycling efforts are also goals of the community.



Maintaining Safety within the Community

The City's neighborhoods will be secure. People of all ages will be safe walking or bicycling to schools, recreation, or work. Problems with traffic and speeding cars need to be addressed by traffic calming measures to improve the overall safety of the community. Laguna Hills also has a very low crime rate, and residents want that low rate maintained.

Sustaining Community Connections as Laguna Hills Advances

The City will strive to protect the small town atmosphere that residents identify with living and working in Laguna Hills. Residents feel connected to the community and local government and enjoy knowing their neighbors and their neighborhoods in addition to participating in civic life. Planning will focus on fostering a community feel that creates opportunities for community connections (both social and physical). General Plan goals and policies will foster more community traditions and events by creating additional community activity centers (where residents can congregate), and by establishing physical connections between the residents and the community activity centers.

Using the General Plan

The City's General Plan is intended for use by all members of the community, including residents, businesses, developers, and decision makers. The organization of the General Plan allows users to find topics or sections that interest them and to quickly review City policies. Readers should keep in mind that policies throughout all elements are interrelated and should be examined comprehensively and must be considered together when making planning decisions.

While the Plan's narrative text and maps frame the key proposals, the essence of the Plan lies in its goals, policies, and implementation programs. These are declarative statements that set forth the City's approach to various issues. Goals, policies, and implementation programs are described as follows:

- Goals are statements that describe in general terms a desired future condition or "end" state. Goals describe ideal future conditions for a particular topic and tend to be very general and broad.
- Policies provide guidance toward a specific course of action for decision makers to achieve a desired goal.

- Implementation Programs identify the specific steps to be taken by the City to implement the policies. They may include revisions of current codes and ordinances, plans and capital improvements, programs, financing, and other measures that should be assigned to different City departments after the General Plan is adopted.

The adopted General Plan is a dynamic, not static, document. State law allows up to four General Plan amendments per mandatory element per year. Most amendments propose a change in the land use designation of a particular property (and thus propose a change to the Land Use Element).

As time passes after a number of such amendments, the City may find it desirable to revise portions of the General Plan text to reflect the land use map changes or other changing circumstances or philosophy. The City should comprehensively review the Plan every 5 years to determine whether it is still in step with community values and physical and economic conditions.

Documents Related to the General Plan

Although the General Plan serves as the primary means to help the City implement its vision, several other documents that serve as implementation tools are needed to ensure that the goals and policies identified in the General Plan are fully realized. The General Plan is implemented in tandem with a number of federal, State, regional, and local plans and regulations. These applicable plans and programs are summarized in Appendix A of this General Plan.

PROGRAM ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT REPORT (EIR)

As required by the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), an Environmental Impact Report (EIR) is prepared for the General Plan. The EIR is a separate document that describes environmental conditions in the City, assesses the possible effects that future development pursuant to the General Plan will have, identifies actions that will be undertaken to reduce these impacts, and evaluates the comparative impacts of alternatives to the General Plan. Many of the policies in the General Plan serve as mitigation for potential impacts. The document is a “program level” EIR, meaning that it examines the general nature of impacts at a Citywide scale. The findings of the EIR help determine the appropriate level of environmental review that should be performed when subsequent projects consistent with the General Plan are proposed. Although the EIR is certified by the City Council, it is not adopted as a policy document.