
CHAPTER 3.0 ENVIRONMENTAL SETTING

3.1 PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PLANNING AREA

La Mesa covers approximately 9 square miles of land and is located in central San Diego County. La Mesa is in an ecological transition zone between the coastal plain and the foothills. Elevations in La Mesa range between 400 and 1,000 feet above sea level. The City's territory is fully developed with a range of residential, commercial, and institutional land uses. Future development will occur as infill of vacant property and redevelopment of existing developed sites. La Mesa is well served by transportation infrastructure, including freeway access, arterial and local streets, trolley and bus service, and non-motorized modes. Fourteen parks and three urban walking trails that are located throughout the City provide recreation space within 0.5 mile of most residents.

3.2 ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES OF THE PLANNING AREA

La Mesa's topography is characterized by hillsides with gentle to steep slopes and a series of mesas cut by water courses. Most of La Mesa is underlain by soil of the Redding Series. Redding soils are derived from the sedimentary rock of marine terraces. Because it contains relatively large amounts of clay, this soil expands when wet and contracts as it dries. It is also highly erosive.

La Mesa's varied topography provides many opportunities for interesting views of the surrounding territory. Panoramic views from the ocean to Mexico and the eastern mountains, as well as more modest views within neighborhoods and along street corridors, are important aesthetic resources that are highly valued by the community.

La Mesa is located in the central portion of the San Diego Air Basin (SDAB). The boundary of the SDAB coincides with the County of San Diego boundary. The basin consists of a variety of landforms, including a broad coastal plain that borders the Pacific Ocean. To the east, valleys cut through mesas and low hills that lead to the mountains in the far eastern portion of the county.

The eastern mountains act as a barrier to the dispersal of air pollutants, trapping them in temperature inversion layers. The SDAB currently meets National Ambient Air Quality Standards (NAAQS) for all criteria air pollutants except ozone, and meets the California Ambient Air Quality Standards (CAAQS) for all criteria air pollutants except ozone, respirable

particulate matter with an aerodynamic resistance diameter of 10 micrometers or less (PM₁₀), and fine particulate matter with an aerodynamic resistance diameter of 2.5 micrometers or less (PM_{2.5}). The SDAB is currently classified as a state “serious” ozone nonattainment area and a state nonattainment area for PM₁₀ and PM_{2.5}.

The San Diego Air Pollution Control District (SDAPCD) is the agency responsible for protecting air quality in the region. In addition to collecting and monitoring ambient air quality, it prepares and implements air quality plans that outline the strategies and tactics used to improve and maintain air quality in the region to meet state and federal air quality requirements.

All watercourses in La Mesa are tributary to larger regional drainage systems. Dry most of the year, during storm episodes, they fill quickly with water, resulting in localized temporary flooding conditions. Three watersheds are located in La Mesa: Alvarado Creek, Chollas Creek, and Spring Valley Creek. Alvarado Creek runs parallel to and south of Fletcher Parkway. Most of the area north of I-8 is in the Alvarado Creek drainage basin. Alvarado Creek joins the San Diego River near Qualcomm Stadium in Mission Valley. A branch of Chollas Creek runs parallel and south of University Avenue. The drainage basin includes the area south of El Cajon Boulevard, west of downtown and north of the ridgeline of Eastridge. Chollas Creek and all the tributary drainage basins drain into San Diego Bay near the 32nd Street Naval Station. A branch of Spring Valley Creek flows off the west slope of Mount Helix, along Bancroft Drive. Spring Valley Creek drains Mount Helix, Casa de Oro, and Spring Valley, and flows into the Sweetwater Reservoir. Flood hazard and storm water pollution prevention are the two primary environmental issues related to the watersheds in La Mesa.

Water supply in La Mesa is provided by the Helix Water District, a public agency, operating under Irrigation District Law of the State of California. The Helix Water District covers nearly 50 square miles, serving the communities of La Mesa, El Cajon, Lemon Grove, Spring Valley, and unincorporated neighborhoods near El Cajon. Population in the Helix Water District is 268,000, with 55,600 water service connections. The Helix Water District’s primary water collection and storage facilities are at Lake Cuyamaca, Lake Jennings, and El Capitan Reservoir. Grossmont Reservoir, located under Harry Griffin Park, has a storage capacity of 30 million gallons. Twenty-two other aboveground storage tanks are located throughout the Helix Water District. Eleven of these are located in La Mesa. The aboveground tanks provide an additional 35 million gallons, for a total storage capacity of 68.8 million gallons of water.

The City of La Mesa was founded in 1869 and incorporated in 1912. The City has grown steadily since then, and examples of residential and commercial development from the early decades are present in many neighborhoods. In the 1980s, the City developed a comprehensive historic preservation program to identify and protect cultural resources that reflect the unique identity

and heritage of La Mesa. More than 300 structures and non-structural sites have been identified and are collectively referred to as the La Mesa Historic Resources Inventory. Thirty-eight sites have been designated local landmarks, qualifying for the Mills Act property tax relief program for historic sites. One historic district, the Date Avenue Historic District, is recognized by the City. No property included in the Historic Resources Inventory or located within the historic district may be altered or demolished, except in compliance with procedures established in the Historic Preservation Ordinance of the La Mesa Municipal Code.

La Mesa is similar to other urban areas of San Diego County where urbanization has fragmented native habitats, compromising the ability to support viable populations of numerous species. Remaining native habitat is primarily limited to isolated vegetation communities in slope areas and small riparian and wetland habitats along Alvarado Creek, Chollas Creek, and Spring Valley Creek.

The City is located within the range for coastal sage scrub, which grows from the coast to approximately 1,500 feet in elevation. Since the majority of the land within La Mesa is developed, only small areas of open space and coastal sage scrub habitat are scattered throughout the City. Disturbances resulting from current and historic land uses have degraded or replaced most of the native biological resources. Native vegetation is primarily limited to isolated patches that occur in stream channels or drainages, hillsides paralleling some roadways, and small urban canyons. These remaining native habitat areas are discontinuous and interspersed with nonnative, disturbed (i.e., ruderal or weedy) vegetative cover.

3.3 EXISTING LAND USE AND DEVELOPMENT PATTERN

Most of the City's 9 square miles are devoted to two main uses: single-family homes on individual lots and transportation rights-of-way. While large tracts of single-family developments are located north of I-8, in the west end of the City, and on hillsides, more than half of the 25,000 housing units in La Mesa are part of multi-family developments located in clusters near major arterial streets.

Commercial developments include suburban shopping centers, a regional shopping center, a downtown shopping village, and strip commercial areas. Within the established land-use patterns of La Mesa are areas needing protection to preserve the community's quality of life and areas that need reinvestment and redevelopment to remain viable in the region's real estate market.

There is very little industrial development located within the City: 23 acres divided into 70 parcels north of I-8 and east of Spring Street. The remaining land within the City is used for a

variety of public or private institutions, including school, parks, and churches. For the most part, the existing land-use pattern will remain the same.

3.4 EXISTING TRANSPORTATION NETWORK

La Mesa is centrally located within San Diego County's transportation network. Most jurisdictions of San Diego County are within a one-half-hour drive from the City, and many destinations are accessible by the transit system. Three freeways (I-8, SR-94, and SR-125) and two trolley lines (MTS Green and Orange Lines) cross the City. These regional transportation corridors, combined with La Mesa's topography, create barriers to circulation between La Mesa's neighborhoods. Neighborhoods are crisscrossed by arterials that lead to activity centers and provide access to the freeway network, but that also present challenges to bicycle and pedestrian travel. The transportation network in La Mesa is well established and functionally complete. However, more work is needed to complete pedestrian and bicycle access in the City. Planning for the future involves improvements to existing infrastructure to ensure that all modes of travel are accommodated.

3.5 EXISTING INFRASTRUCTURE, SERVICES, AND UTILITIES

All areas of La Mesa are served by water supply, waste water treatment, and storm water management facilities. Energy and communication infrastructure is in place. A full range of municipal services, including police, fire, and park and recreation is provided to City residents and visitors. Education and health care services are provided by a combination of private and public organizations. As future development occurs, upgrades to utility and infrastructure networks and expanded service levels may be required to accommodate growth and facilitate modernization.