

CHAPTER 3.0

ENVIRONMENTAL SETTING

3.1 LOCATION

The Downtown Community Plan area (“downtown planning area”) encompasses the downtown San Diego area located 30 miles north of the United States International Border with Mexico and 120 miles south of Los Angeles (Figure 3.1-1). More specifically, downtown includes approximately 1,445 acres of land in the metropolitan core of the City of San Diego, located in the southern half of San Diego County. Surrounding areas include the community of Uptown and Balboa Park to the north, Golden Hill and Sherman Heights to the east, Barrio Logan and Logan Heights to the south, and the City of Coronado to the west across San Diego Bay.

The downtown planning area is bounded by Laurel Street and Interstate 5 on the north; Interstate 5, Commercial Street, 16th Street, Sigsbee Street, Newton Avenue, Harbor Drive, and the extension of Beardsley Street on the east; and San Diego Bay on the south and west (Figure 3.1-2). Major north-south access routes to downtown are Interstate 5, State Route 163, and Pacific Highway. The major east-west access route to downtown is State Route 94.

As shown in Figure 3.1-2, the proposed Downtown Community Plan shares the same boundaries with the Redevelopment Plan for the Centre City Project Area. The Horton Plaza Redevelopment Project is also located downtown, but has much smaller project boundaries and is completely surrounded by the proposed Downtown Community Plan and Centre City Redevelopment Plan areas. The Horton Plaza Redevelopment Project area is bound by Broadway, Union Street, Fourth Avenue, and G Street. Various parcels along B Street between Fourth and Eighth Avenues are characterized as “excluded” from the provisions of redevelopment law.

3.2 PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS

Downtown is characterized by a relatively high intensity and variety of urban land uses, such as high-rise commercial office, multi-family residential, retail, hotel, entertainment, and institutional/government uses. Downtown’s residential growth is currently very strong, as evidenced by the fact that the downtown population has grown from 2,000 to over 20,000 since redevelopment began in 1975. Over 20% of this growth has occurred in the last five years (CCDC, Working Paper #6, page 2-2). The growing residential market is anchored by downtown amenities including the government and business offices in the Core and Little Italy and visitor attractions such as Seaport Village, the Convention Center, the historic Gaslamp District, Petco Park, and Horton Plaza. The business economy downtown has also experienced significant growth. Downtown contains over

thirteen million square feet of civic and private office space and an estimated employment population of 74,500 (CCDC, Downtown Community Plan, 2005).

As one of the oldest communities in San Diego, downtown contains architecturally unique and historically significant structures, a number of which have been preserved, restored, or incorporated into new development. Downtown is located on the waterfront of San Diego Bay and is in proximity to Balboa Park, affording the downtown area with access to regional open space. There are also opportunities to experience culture and the arts at various theaters, music halls, galleries, Copley Symphony Hall, and the Civic Theatre.

Downtown's street network creates a grid pattern that results in relatively small (200 feet x 300 feet or 1.4 acre) blocks. A number of streets are one-way, and others limit left-hand turns against opposing traffic. These features combine to allow flexibility of choices to drivers and pedestrians, resulting in smoother traffic flow. Downtown is connected to three major freeways, including Interstate 5 (I-5), State Route 163 (SR-163), and State Route 94 (SR-94). Pacific Highway is also currently used to carry a moderate concentration of traffic flow in and out of downtown.

Transit consists of heavy rail lines along the western edge of downtown, adjacent to Pacific Highway, serving commuters, regional travelers, and to the south, freight from working areas of the Port. Two trolley lines serve downtown residents, workers, and visitors and an extensive network of public buses connects the area to the rest of San Diego. A multitude of bus routes serves downtown on almost a 24-hour basis, and transit is more prevalent downtown than in any other part of the region.

3.2.1 CLIMATE

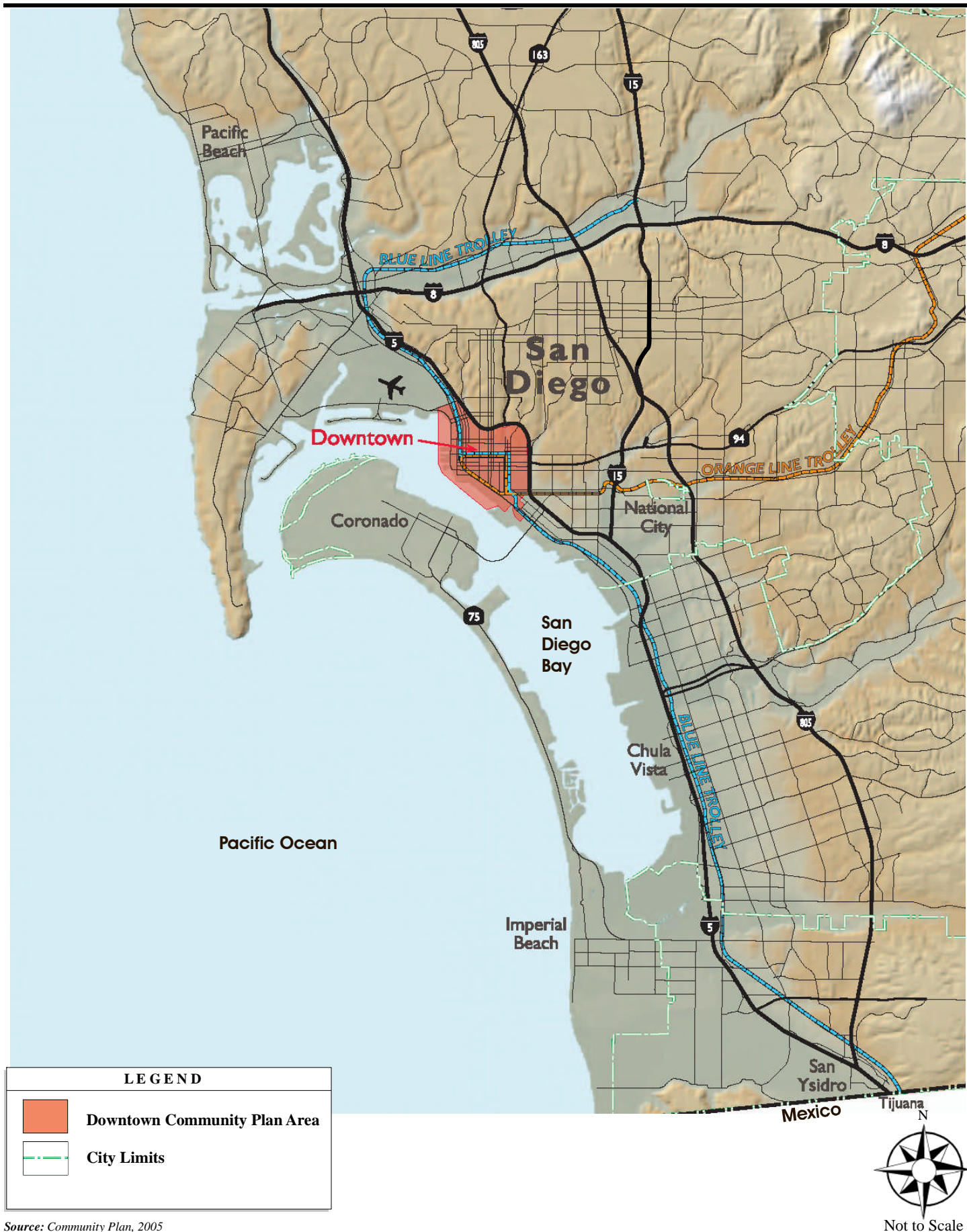
Downtown's climate significantly contributes to the overall quality of life in the area. The climate is identified as Mediterranean, which is characterized by dry, warm summers and mild winters. An average of ten inches of rain falls each year from November to early April, while the remainder of the year is typically dry. Measurable rain falls on 20 days per year, with only six days of moderate (0.5 inches in 24-hours) rainfall per year.

3.2.2 LANDSCAPE

Downtown's general landscape is characterized by urban features such as buildings, streets and sidewalks. Vegetation is comprised of ornamental trees and plantings along streets and parkways, occasional lawns and gardens, and weeds covering vacant lots. Downtown is almost entirely lacking in native vegetation.

3.2.3 TOPOGRAPHY

As shown in Figure 3.2-1, downtown's topography is relatively flat, with elevations that range from sea level to a maximum of 180 feet above mean sea level. Near San Diego Bay, the western and southwestern areas of downtown have the lowest elevations. Elevations gradually rise to the northeast, with the highest elevation near Balboa Park in the downtown neighborhood of Cortez Hill.



Regional Location Map _____ Figure 3.1-1

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LEGEND



Downtown Community Plan Area

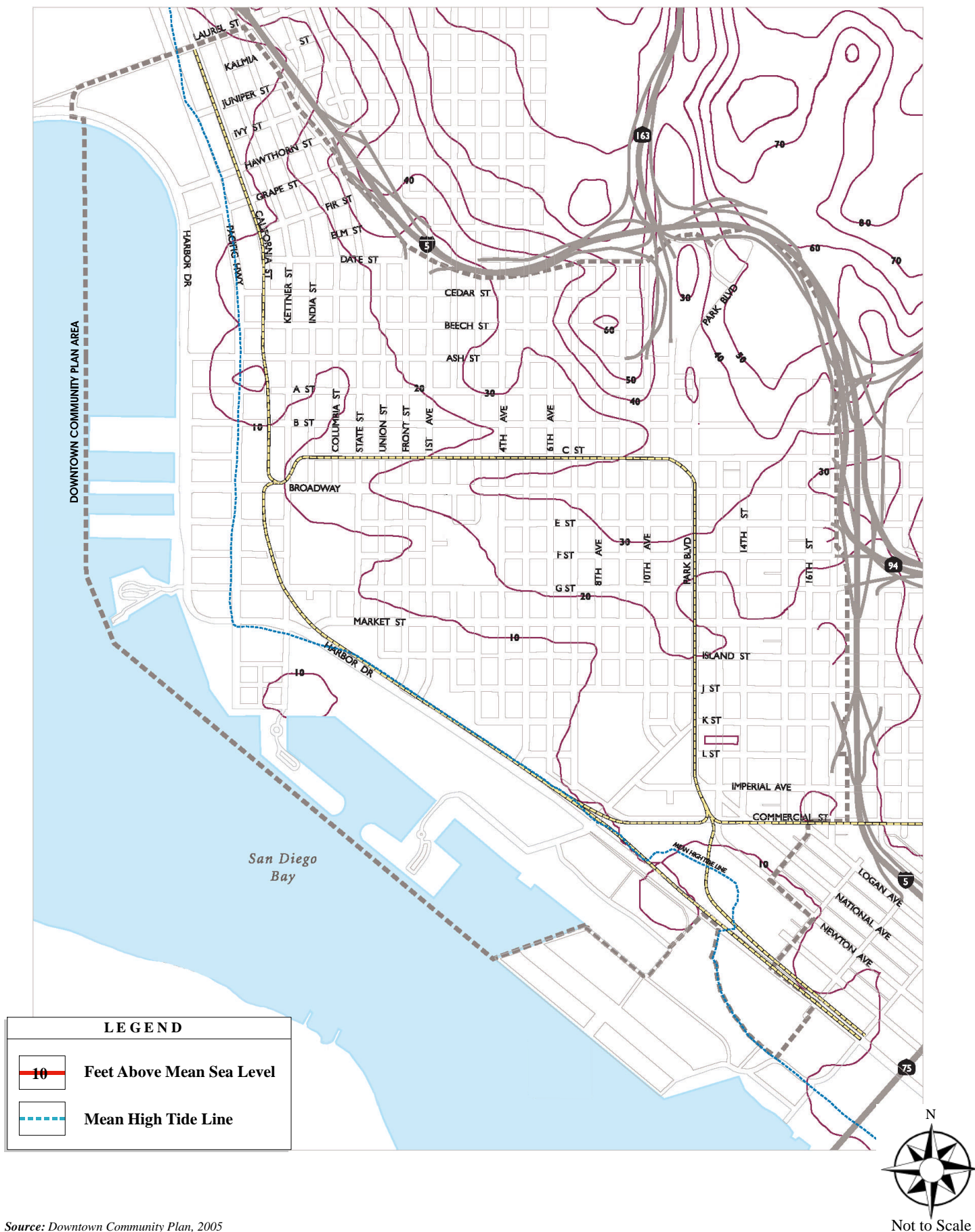


Not to Scale

Source: Downtown Community Plan, 6/2005, Air Photo USA, 1/2005

Project Area _____ Figure 3.1-2

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Source: Downtown Community Plan, 2005

Downtown Topography _____ Figure 3.2-1

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3.3 APPLICABLE GENERAL PLANS AND REGIONAL PLANS

3.3.1. GENERAL PLANS

3.3.1.1 City of San Diego Progress Guide and General Plan

The City of San Diego Progress Guide and General Plan (General Plan) is a comprehensive long-term plan for the physical development of the City of San Diego. The General Plan considers downtown as an urbanized area that is the focus of metropolitan San Diego. Specifically, the General Plan's Strategic Framework Element encourages the further intensification of downtown to increase its role as a Regional Center. This would be accomplished by maintaining and enhancing its role as the pre-eminent business center in the region and developing as a major urban residential center with the largest concentration of high density multifamily housing in the region. The objectives for downtown include attracting intensive and varied land use, and strengthening the viability of downtown through renewal, redevelopment, and new construction.

As discussed in Chapter 5.1, development in accordance with the proposed Downtown Community Plan would be consistent with the City's General Plan and, specifically, its Strategic Framework Element. Understood as the primary urban area within the City of San Diego, the proposed Plans and Ordinance seek to promote the type of uses that would be encouraged under the General Plan.

3.3.1.2 San Diego Port Master Plan

Development along the waterfront is guided by the Port Master Plan. The Port Master Plan divides tidelands around San Diego Bay into ten Planning Districts. Each Planning District has a corresponding Precise Plan. The downtown tidelands are included in Planning District 3, named Centre City Embarcadero. The Precise Plan for Planning District 3 in the Port Master Plan allows for the development of commercial fishing and recreation uses; aviation and marine-related industrial uses; parks, plazas, promenades, and open space; public facilities; and commercial uses.

3.3.2 REGIONAL PLANS

3.3.2.1 Regional Comprehensive Plan

SANDAG's Regional Comprehensive Plan (RCP) is a long-range planning document that encourages local jurisdictions to address the San Diego region's housing, economic, transportation, environmental and overall quality of life needs. The RCP establishes a planning framework and implementation actions that aim to increase the region's sustainability and encourage "smart growth" (development that promotes alternative transportation use and minimizes environmental impacts).

To encourage regional sustainability and smart growth, the RCP aims to reduce the number of housing units and residents that are expected to be "exported" from the region by 2030. To achieve this, the Plan identifies certain areas in the region as Smart Growth Opportunity Areas. Designation of these opportunity areas is intended to provide guidance to local governments, property owners,

and service providers as to where smart growth development should occur from a regional perspective, and encourages local jurisdictions to focus attention on these areas as they update their general plans and redevelopment plans. Once these areas are designated by local jurisdictions for development types, densities, and intensities consistent with the goals of this Plan, transportation facility improvements and other infrastructure to these areas will be prioritized. The intended effect of this effort is to attract housing units that are anticipated to be exported from the San Diego region to Baja California, Riverside County, Orange County and Imperial County by 2030. The RCP would redirect those housing units to areas within the region that are located along the existing and proposed regional transportation corridors as well as other locations where compact development is appropriate. A portion of this redirected development will occur in areas of vacant land and a portion will occur as redevelopment and infill development in existing communities.

As discussed in Chapter 5.1, the proposed Plans and Ordinance would be consistent with the goals of the Regional Comprehensive Plan. The Downtown Community Plan's neighborhood concept would result in pedestrian-oriented and -scaled neighborhoods, each focused on a mixed-use center and a park. The mixed-use center would be located within a relatively short walking distance of employment and housing, with a goal of making neighborhood amenities accessible without the use of a car. In addition, smart growth would be achieved with the proposed increase in intensity of uses. Downtown would maximize its infill development potential by encouraging multi-story residential, office, and mixed uses in appropriate areas, in anticipation of local transit improvements.

3.3.2.2 Regional Transportation Plan

SANDAG's Regional Transportation Plan, also known as MOBILITY 2030, serves as a blueprint to address the transportation and transit challenges created by the region's growing population and employment. It contains an integrated set of public policies, strategies, and investments to maintain, manage, and improve the transportation system in the San Diego region. The SANDAG Board of Directors approved the 2030 Regional Transportation Plan on March 28, 2003.

As discussed in Chapter 5.2, traffic generated by future development in accordance with the proposed Plans and Ordinance.

3.3.2.3 California State Implementation Plan (SIP)

The State Implementation Plan (SIP) was adopted by the California Air Resources Board (ARB) and Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to bring non-attainment air basins into compliance with the National Ambient Air Quality Standards (NAAQS). Due to continued violations of NAAQS standards in the San Diego Air Basin (SDAB), the San Diego Air Pollution Control District (APCD), in conjunction with SANDAG, prepared a Regional Air Quality Strategy (RAQS) for its portion of the SIP.

The proposed Downtown Community Plan would be consistent with the California SIP. The assumptions of the SIP are based on growth trends anticipated by regional land use plans, including the Centre City Community Plan. The proposed Downtown Community Plan proposes increases in residential and employment populations above that anticipated by the Centre City Community Plan. However, the regional growth assumed by the SIP would not be substantially different, as anticipated growth would be concentrated to the downtown area providing relief from growth

pressures in other parts of metropolitan San Diego and the county. The downtown planning area would complement the goals of the RAQS by offering a variety of transit opportunities and by providing employment and neighborhood amenities within walking distance of residential areas. Therefore, there would be no conflict with the RAQS.

3.3.2.4 San Diego Regional Water Quality Control Board Basin Plan

The San Diego Regional Water Quality Control Board's Basin Plan is designed to preserve and enhance water quality and protect the beneficial uses of all regional waters. Downtown San Diego is located in the Pueblo San Diego Hydrologic Unit of the Basin Plan, a 60 square mile-area with no major stream system. The Pueblo San Diego Hydrologic Unit primarily drains into San Diego Bay. Groundwater in downtown is not designated as having current or potential beneficial use in the San Diego Basin Plan and further is noted as being exempt from municipal use designation.

The Municipal Storm Water National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) Permit, issued on February 21, 2001 to the City of San Diego, and other jurisdictions by the Regional Water Quality Control Board, requires that private and public development projects include storm water best management practices to reduce pollutants discharged from the project site to the maximum extent practicable.

As discussed in Chapter 5.9, future development downtown would not interfere with the water quality goals of the Basin Plan for the basin which includes downtown. No major natural water courses exist downtown and no uses of groundwater occur within the area. Water quality of San Diego Bay would be protected by short and long-term water quality control measures required by City and State regulations. Thus, the proposed Downtown Community Plan would be consistent with the Basin Plan.

3.3.2.5 City of San Diego Multiple Species Conservation Program

The Multiple Species Conservation Program (MSCP) is a comprehensive habitat conservation program that addresses multiple species habitats and preserves native vegetation communities within a 900-square-mile (582,243 acres) area in southwestern San Diego County. The MSCP area includes 11 city jurisdictions, portions of the unincorporated County of San Diego, and several special districts. The MSCP is intended to allow local jurisdictions, including the City of San Diego, to maintain land use control and development flexibility by planning a regional preserve system that can meet future public and private project mitigation needs.

As discussed in Chapter 8.0, no natural terrestrial vegetation or wildlife exist within the downtown area. Therefore, future development in accordance with the proposed Downtown Community Plan would be consistent with the MSCP.

3.3.2.6 San Diego International Airport Comprehensive Land Use Plan

The Regional Airport Authority's Comprehensive Land Use Plan (CLUP) for the San Diego International Airport (SDIA) is intended to ensure compatible land use development on and surrounding the airport. The CLUP describes the Airport Influence Area (AIA), which is determined by aircraft-generated noise. Within the AIA, all future land uses are reviewed for CLUP consistency. This process can result in limitations to building construction and use designations. The CLUP also identifies runway protection zones, the Airport Approach Overlay Zone, and aviation easements and noise attenuation efforts intended to correct the incompatibility of some land uses.

The proposed Downtown Community Plan would be consistent with the CLUP for the SDIA. It recognizes the risks of injury, life loss, and property damage associated with an airport in close proximity to the downtown planning area. The Downtown Community Plan includes goals and policies in terms of building height, use, and noise sensitivity in a manner consistent with the CLUP.