



Multiple Habitat Planning Area (MHPA)
Serra Mesa Community Plan

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FIGURE

ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT ELEMENT

This element of the Plan considers the total community environment and how it should be managed to achieve the quality of life desired by the Serra Mesa community.

The **Environmental Management Element** sets forth guidelines dealing with the environment, consistent with the following general goal:

TO MANAGE THE PHYSICAL, BIOTIC AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT OF THE COMMUNITY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE SAN DIEGO REGION, TO ASSURE IMPROVED QUALITY OF LIFE, RESPECT ENVIRONMENTAL CONSTRAINTS AND PRESERVE COMMUNITY RESOURCES FOR ALL RESIDENTS AND SUCCEEDING GENERATIONS.

This element will be presented in three sections:

- Open Space and Hillside Conservation
- Physical Environment - Urban Design
- Socio-economic Environment

OPEN SPACE - HILLSIDE CONSERVATION

What is Open Space?

The issue, which has generated the greatest citizen interest in the community, is the preservation of undeveloped canyons as open space.

Open Space may be defined as:

Any urban land or water surface that is essentially open or natural in character, and has appreciable utility for park and recreation purposes, conservation of land, water or other natural resources and historic or scenic purpose.

- The psychological effects of open space have only recently been recognized. A 1968 study observed:

It is possible that most valuable purpose open space serves is its affording visual and psychological relief from the dreadful tedium and tension of interminable urban development. The human spirit must surely languish when confronted daily with a continuous and confused panorama of buildings, pavements and automobiles.

In that it provides a physical patterning for the metropolitan fabric, open space helps give the urbanized area and its constituent communities a desirable



Environmental Management (Open Space)
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FIGURE

definition, coherence, and character, which would otherwise be lacking. In turn, individual residents are better able to identify, and be identified with, their communities. The importance of these factors, while intangible, is not to be underestimated.

EXISTING CONDITIONS

The Serra Mesa community contains an open space subsystem of hillsides and canyons, identified in the report, A Plan for the Preservation of Natural Parks for San Diego⁴. The westerly branches of Murphy Canyon, all of Ruffin-Sandroch Canyon and portions of Murray Canyon are included in the open space system.

The Multiple Species Conservation Program adopted in 1997, identifies a number of areas that provide helpful support to multiple species of plants and animals. Most of these include the large canyon systems, their wetland-canyon bottoms, slopes and finger canyons.

In addition, the central portion of Murphy Canyon is worthy of inclusion in the open space-hillside protection system. Murphy Canyon is a major scenic feature visible from I-15.

Serra Mesa is characterized by spectacular canyons and hillsides that provide welcome breaks in the urban landscape. These attributes are reflected in premiums of ten to 25 percent for canyon lots. Certainly open space has a true economic value and contributes to the public welfare through higher property assessments and tax revenues.

Countering these benefits, however, is an economic problem - the cost of land to be included in the open space system. The possibility exists that not all land worthy of designation as “open space” can be acquired. Although public funds may become available for open space purposes, the Park Procedural Ordinance (assessment district) method is likely to be the only means of direct acquisition of open space for the foreseeable future. This means of preservation requires a monetary contribution by surrounding property owners.

Acquisition vs. Conservation

In view of the growing possibility that not all canyon and hillside land can be acquired, two approaches appear appropriate — acquisition of a selected open space system and conservation of remaining ecologically-sensitive land by rigorous application of strict development controls.

Lands designated for acquisition are characterized by the following qualities: are recognized by residents as being highly significant to the community, are readily visible and accessible, contain valuable and fragile natural and biotic resources, pose potential risks to development and possess slopes of 25 percent or greater. Approximately 400 acres, including the recently acquired Sandroch Open Space Park, are publicly owned at present. However, the Hillside Review Overlay Zone has been applied to the entire area.

Land designated for conservation is not as significant or as readily accessible, but still possesses the following qualities that warrant consideration: possess slopes of 25 percent or greater, pose potential risks to development such as slope instability, liquefaction and flood danger and contain fragile environments that should be conserved and protected from adverse effects of slope modification. Hillside should be protected by development controls to conserve their scenic and ecological values. The **Housing Element** of this Plan establishes density guidelines for development in identified open space areas and various slope categories.

OBJECTIVE

- To designate Multiple Species Conservation areas, canyons and hillsides for preservation as open space and for strictly controlled utilization for the enjoyment of this generation and in perpetuity.

PROPOSALS

- Multiple Species Conservation areas identified in the Multiple Special Conservation Program Subarea Plan adopted by City Council in 1997 should be zoned for minimal development with provisions for open space dedication of remaining natural and unbuilt areas conjunction with any development review and approval.
- Open space should be preserved and hillsides conserved by rigorous development controls as shown on the accompanying map. Open space and hillside conservation areas are limited to slopes of 25 percent or greater, pose potential risks to development and are otherwise environmentally sensitive.
- Open space should be initially maintained in its natural condition. Studies should be undertaken to determine uses compatible with the open space concept. Examples of open space utilization are:
 1. Outdoor recreation, such as hiking, biking, horseback riding, golfing, archery, sightseeing, picnicking, camping, wildlife observation, botanical gardens (natural and man-made) and fossil study.
 2. Cultivation for food; ornamental landscaping.
- Steep hillsides and canyons should be protected and preserved in a natural state. Where development is permitted, very low-density urbanization should occur. Natural features should be enhanced and areas of high scenic value and environmental sensitivity, conserved. This proposal can be implemented with steep hillside guidelines, open space zones and PRD which is in character with the surrounding neighborhood.
- The community should be given an opportunity to preserve designated open space affected by the following City Council actions: approval of a Tentative Subdivision Map, Planned Residential Development, Conditional Use Permit, or a Hillside Review Permit

appealed from a decision of the Planning Commission within the open space. Upon demonstration by the community of an interest to acquire open space by assessments levied against benefiting properties, a resolution would be passed by the City Council to hold a hearing on the formation of an proposal could then be deferred for up to one year to provide time to accomplish the acquisition. Should the open space effort fail, the original development proposal would be approved.

- If excessive land costs or other factors preclude purchase of proposed open space, development should be limited to “very low-density” residential use (zero to four dwelling units per net acre, depending on slope), appropriate PRD, or other uses compatible with the open space concept. (See **Housing Element**.) Any unbuilt, vacant or natural open space areas that are part of an approved development should be revegetated with native vegetation and preserved through dedicated open space easement, an open space lot designation or non-buildable easement to assure conservation of this open space area.
- Any public improvements such as roads, drainage channels and utility services or any lessee development should be compatible with open space objectives. Public road improvements within open space areas are often not feasible due to the steep terrain and habitat preservation requirements, therefore, unimproved public road easements located within open space areas should be vacated and remain unbuilt. No through roads should be permitted to traverse designated open space.
- Open space linkages should be established with the regional open space system. Hiking, biking and equestrian trails should be built in Murphy Canyon to connect Fortuna Mountain, San Clemente Canyon and Mission Valley.
- Open space linkages should be established among major activity centers, major public facilities (especially parks and schools) and within the designated open space system.
- Open space that is owned by the City of San Diego should be “dedicated.”

See **Figure 13**: Multiple Habitat Planning Area (MHPA).

PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT - URBAN DESIGN

EXISTING CONDITIONS

Most aspects of the physical environment have already been discussed elsewhere in the Plan and do not need to be repeated here. The following section focuses on a highly significant, but often overlooked aspect of the physical environment, urban design.

The discipline of urban design entails the process of integrating human activity and the natural environment. Urban design considers the overall “impression” or “image” of the community as seen by residents and visitors. It has been called “the mortar that enables all the plan’s elements to cohere.”

The following comments were drawn from *Temporary Paradise?*, the report of a “regional reconnaissance” of San Diego by the noted urban designers, Donald Appleyard and Kevin Lynch.

The image of the City has important psychological effects upon its residents. It provides organization and measures relationships that convey a sense of time and place. Additionally, views of a pleasant and varied pattern give a comforting sense of living with the environment.

Their image of the City also helps people to identify communities and neighborhoods, particularly those in which they themselves live. Recognition of such areas by their prominent features, their edges and their centers of activity breaks up a large and intense city into units that are visually and psychologically manageable.

Prominent features, “edges” and activity centers give one a “sense of place” in a community or neighborhood. The Serra Mesa community possesses sharply defined edges, both natural and manmade. Mission Valley and the canyons contrast sharply with the mesa. The freeway network and sand and gravel sites also form important edges. Locational reference to any of these focal points can create an immediate “sense of place.” The top of the mesa, however, is virtually flat and few dominant features are visible. If one is not intimately familiar with his surroundings, disorientation can easily occur, especially in the interior portions of large residential neighborhoods.

OBJECTIVE

- To preserve and enhance the physical environment, visual appearance, safety, identity and character of the Serra Mesa community through aesthetic improvement and careful urban design.

PROPOSALS

- Community resources and development constraints are environmental considerations that should be respected at all times.
- Potential sources of water contamination should be monitored, especially sand and gravel operations, sanitary sewers and petroleum distillate storage facilities.
- The visual appearance of the community should be improved by: systematic undergrounding of utility distribution lines, encouraging the use of cable television and removal of television and other outdoor antennas, imposing sign controls in all areas, limiting the size and number of billboards and off-premises advertising structures, installing street trees and landscaping along heavily traveled streets and freeways and shielding residences facing Mission Valley from lights emanating from San Diego Stadium.

- The effects of noise should be mitigated by: controlling flight patterns (especially Montgomery Field), discouraging residential uses in areas impacted by environmental noise exceeding 65dB CNEL or Ldn, using noise-buffering material in all new construction, retaining noise-absorbing native vegetation in open space areas and rigorously enforcing all local, state and federal laws relating to noise abatement. Findings of the SANDAG study should be incorporated into the environmental review process.
- Energy resources should be conserved by: encouraging efficient land use and transportation patterns, making available energy-saving modes of travel as alternatives to the automobile, using alternative sources of energy to conventional fossil fuels (for example solar, wind, geothermal), recycling solid waste materials whenever possible and encouraging remodeling and rehabilitation of deteriorating structures in preference to replacement.
- An Environment Impact Report (EIR) or equivalent should be prepared for each project, whether public or private, that would have a significant effect on the environment.
- Litter cleanup and prevention campaigns should be conducted and the weed abatement ordinance vigorously enforced.
- On-street parking of campers, trailers, boats and other pleasure vehicles, trucks and buses should be discouraged. On-site storage should be encouraged in screened parking or storage areas.
- Safety considerations should be introduced into the planning process, including: placement of hydrants to better control canyon fires, adequate assessment of geologic hazards for all new development and installation of devices in institutional care facilities and industrial plants capable of detecting toxic fumes and gases.
- Development proposals should be consistent with the overall growth management policies of the City.
- Development should be managed through appropriate zoning and other development controls.
- Diversity within neighborhoods should be encouraged to improve “sense of place” by: varying the type of street surfaces, sidewalks, lights, signs and other street furniture, innovative yet tasteful remodeling and individually distinctive landscaping.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT

It is appropriate to address social and economic issues based on (1) the need to achieve social comprehensiveness, (2) the desire to enhance the social environment and (3) the realization that plan implementation is largely dependent on economic reality.

The purpose of this section of the Plan is to recommend guidelines for the best social and economic use of physical and human resources in order to improve the quality of life in the community.

EXISTING CONDITIONS

The community's pattern of physical development was largely established during the 1950s and early 1960s. Although physical appearance of residential neighborhoods has changed little, subtle shifts in social characteristics have been occurring.

Population and the average number of persons per household have been declining, despite a growing number of households. Although the decline in household size coincides with a national trend that began about 1955, it strongly suggests that Serra Mesa has matured as a residential community. Initially, the moderately-priced new housing attracted young families with young children. By necessity, community facilities and services were oriented to this group. These included recreational facilities such as baseball fields, elementary schools and heavy emphasis on juvenile books in the library.

Another indicator of community maturation is the age profile. A shift in age group distribution has occurred between 1960, 1975 and 1998. The largest age group in 1998 was "25 to 34" years of age compared with "zero to four" in 1960 and "15 to 19" years of age in 1975. This shift has been strongly reflected in school enrollment figures. In twenty years, it is possible that the cycle will begin anew, with another generation of young families with young children.

Although Serra Mesa has remained a stable middle-income community, two changes in work patterns have occurred. Working women, including mothers with young children comprise a much larger proportion of the labor force than formerly. Secondly, there has been an increase in leisure time (three-day weekends and longer vacations). These two factors have long-term planning implications.

The community is relatively homogeneous in terms of socio-economic characteristics, but there is one readily identifiable subgroup. This group is comprised of military enlisted personnel and families occupying the Cabrillo Heights housing development. Due to rapid turnover, this subgroup has managed to retain the social profile that characterized the entire community in 1960, (large family with young children).

PROBLEMS AND ISSUES

A basic community issue is the existing and future social environment. Problems include:

- Alienation from authority.
- Lack of activities for specific age groups, especially senior citizens and teenagers.
- Inefficient utilization of community facilities (for example, overuse of the recreation center and under-use of schools).
- Economic problems including inflation, joblessness, lack of childcare facilities.

In addition, there are regional issues to be considered. These are:

- Commitment to a socially, ethnically and economically balanced community.
- Growing realization that public funds are limited and must be allocated with care for both physical improvements and social good.

These concerns will be addressed in the objectives and proposals that follow.

OBJECTIVES

- To encourage the most efficient social and economic use of physical and human resources.
- To ensure the maximum opportunity for social and intellectual development of every individual.
- To assist youth in maximizing their potential.
- To ensure that policies and programs funded wholly or in part by government will include provisions to improve the quality of life for the aged and disadvantaged.
- To strive for economic, social and ethnic balance in the community in concert with citywide policies.
- To enable the military families in the Cabrillo Heights housing development to assimilate into and contribute to the community.

PROPOSALS

Community Facilities and Services

- “Rap” sessions should be encouraged between authority figures (police, fire fighters, teachers, principals and the like) and youth in the community. Crime and substance abuse prevention programs should be encouraged and well publicized.
- The City Library Department should continue to evaluate population characteristics and adjust book collections accordingly. Also, additional operating hours should be considered for the Serra Mesa Library.
- A community bulletin board or marquee should be established to announce community-wide events.
- One or more meeting places in the community should be designated to alleviate overtaxed conditions at the recreation center.
- “Community schools” programs should be established at each of the elementary schools and at Taft Junior High School, modeled after the successful Fletcher Community School. Such programs would make schools available to all age groups in the community and would enable more complete utilization of school facilities.
- Alternatives to the conventional K-6, 7-9, 10-12 separation of elementary, junior high and senior high schools should be considered to redistribute enrollment to underused school facilities in the community.

- Religious institutions should be encouraged to offer space and facilities to the community for meeting rooms, movies, recreation, childcare and other activities.
- The location of mail pickup boxes should be evaluated to better service the community, especially with respect to the elderly.

Housing and Other Development

- Housing for the elderly should be encouraged on remaining vacant land located near the Mission Village Shopping District and in the Phyllis-Abbotshill neighborhood.
- Government-assisted housing for low and middle-income households should be encouraged throughout Serra Mesa in accordance with the density proposals of this plan.
- Principles of “defensible space” should be applied, wherever feasible, for individual structures as well as project layouts. Architectural design that prevents or inhibits crime should be strongly encouraged.

Transportation

- The use of carpool formation services (for example “Commuter Computer”) should be encouraged to reduce automobile usage.
- The needs of the elderly and handicapped should be considered when determining bus design, sequencing of signals at intersections and wheelchair ramps located at pedestrian crossings that connect shopping facilities and residential areas.

Other Social and Economic Proposals

- Merchants, churches, schools, hospitals and other facilities and organizations should be encouraged to provide volunteer and paid work for teenagers, senior citizens and other groups lacking meaningful employment or activities.
- Activities should be organized that appeal to teenagers, the elderly and other groups. Examples may be skateboarding contests, racquetball and handball contests, movies for young and old, sewing bees.
- Skills training opportunities should be encouraged in the community schools’ programs.
- The need for childcare facilities should aid military families in becoming a viable part of the community.
- The community should be made aware of social services available in the community and the San Diego region. Examples include crisis intervention centers, senior citizen affairs, suicide prevention and child abuse hotline.
- The Serra Mesa Community Planning Group and its successors should continue as a clearing-house for community issues, even after adoption of this plan.

See **Figure 14:** Environmental Management.