

## 2 ISSUES IMPORTANT TO MARIPOSA COUNTY CITIZENS

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Updating the General Plan achieves important objectives for Mariposa County. Differing in its approach from the 1981 General Plan, this Update identifies issues of importance and systematically creates strategies and implementation programs to address those issues.

This General Plan Update began with a comprehensive review of the underlying goals and policies foundation of the 1981 General Plan. The issues of importance in 1981 are still important today and they provide the foundation for Mariposa’s future.

### 2.1 THE GENERAL PLAN ISSUES

- Economy
- Character
- Housing

These are the three primary issues driving the General Plan. Every goal, policy, and implementation measure affects all three interlinking issues. The General Plan’s objective is finding the balance that simultaneously ensures a thriving economy, safe and decent housing, and preservation of the County’s character.

This “economy” has been identified as a Public-County partnership in the General Plan. It involves more than economic development. The power to accomplish the General Plan comes from the community. The General Plan policies provide an environment in which the broader community can assist in creating opportunities for success. Economic policies evolve options and programs to systematically grow the County’s economic base while anticipating the opening of new markets. The long-term benefits of a healthy economic base include fiscal stability for the County, better paying jobs, and more career opportunities for residents. Different individuals and groups define Mariposa’s character differently. The General Plan defines rural character for the County holistically, while each area plan defines community character for the planned area. No single definition of rural or community character is defined for Mariposa County’s residents or communities. The essence of rural character in Mariposa County is the people, the volunteerism, and the commitment to the local community. Rural character ranges from those volunteering to be part of County government; to those who pick up litter along the roads; to people helping people, running errands, and watching the neighbor’s kids. While the General Plan does not define “rural character,” it does provide the policy tools that ensure that the County’s residents—whether living on a 5,000-acre ranch or a home in the Town of Mariposa—can continue to define and preserve local character for the next generation.

Housing is an important issue for the County and as character and economy is defined, the ability to house the families of the future is of greater importance. Housing is imperative for the youth who wish to stay in the County; for those who ensure the County's visitor-based economy can function; for young families to grow; and for those adding to the diversity of the economy. The economy cannot grow if appropriate housing is not provided. If the housing permitted to be developed is not appropriate for each community, the County's character suffers. The General Plan defines housing issues and needs in Chapter 8—the Housing Element. The policies within the Housing Element do not dictate who builds the housing, they instead provide the opportunity to balance housing with the County's economy and character.

## 2.2 ISSUES OF IMPORTANCE

There were a series of important issues defined early in the public participation process. The General Plan identifies these to be issues of importance. These issues are similar to those identified in the 1981 General Plan. During the public participation process, it was found that the same issues remain important to the people of the County.

- Agricultural, Forest, Water, and Mineral Resources
- County Character
- County Heritage
- Economic Environment
- Growth and Development
- Housing
- Natural Environment
- Public and Community Services
- Recreational Opportunities
- Public Lands
- Social Environment

Each of these issues is addressed within the individual elements of the General Plan at the same policy level established with the creation of the 1981 General Plan.

## 2.3 OVERARCHING GENERAL PLAN ISSUES

During the initiation period for the General Plan, between January 2001 and April 2001, many members of the public raised issues they wanted to have addressed within the Plan. Over a thousand comments were received creating more than 500 distinct issues. The Board of Supervisors interpreted, debated, and discussed each of the issues and consolidated the list to over 300. After reviewing each issue, the Board directed 176 to be included in the General Plan. Of the 176 issues for which the Board provided direction in the General Plan, most are incorporated into individual elements. However, a number of points do not fit into issue-oriented elements, but really drive the General Plan itself. These overarching issues are addressed in this chapter.

## 2.3.01 COUNTY CHARACTER

**Issue: During the initial planning fairs and subsequent meetings with County residents, the theme of defining and preserving the County's rural character was heard repeatedly. This issue was described as the one overriding concern within the County.**

It is the interaction of human and natural resources that defines the character of Mariposa County. That character reflects not only the values and lifestyles of current residents, but also the historical patterns of human settlement. This settlement occurred in communities such as the gold rush era towns of Coulterville, Hornitos, and Mariposa; those that have developed near, and serve, Yosemite National Park; and the smaller communities that have sprung-up along major transportation routes. In addition, Mariposa County's character is greatly influenced by the natural environment, which ranges from gentle terrain and rolling foothills on the western edges of the County, to the foothills and intermountain valleys of its midsection, to the steep mountain and alpine terrain along the eastern edge of the County.

The character of the County will not be defined by a few words or phrases. The current collective vision of the County's character is embedded in the General Plan's policies and programs, as well as the public processes for preserving and keeping the vision alive.

## 2.3.02 FLEXIBILITY

**Issue: Mariposa governance is not suited to the strict application of a rigid set of planning and development rules.**

The General Plan must be and is flexible. Its flexibility is derived from the procedures for its administration and implementation by providing for a range of development options within the parameters of the Plan's policies.

The General Plan provides choice. The General Plan is fair, efficient, and predictable and allows property owners and applicant's choices. It permits one who is planning an investment in Mariposa's future to understand the requirements of carrying out the investment. The Plan ensures disclosure of the County's minimum acceptable objectives, defines maximum requirements as needed, and allows an individual to plan for the use of his or her property. The County welcomes new growth and development as long as it meets the flexible requirements of the General Plan.

## 2.3.03 THE GENERAL PLAN IS MANDATORY

**Issue: Public sentiment supports a General Plan in which well thought out goals and polices are implemented to accomplish agreed upon Plan objectives.**

The General Plan is designed to be implemented. The Board of Supervisors has not incorporated policy programs within the General Plan that the Board feels have not been confirmed in discussions with the public and that the Board does not intend on implementing. The terms "shall" and "should" are carefully used within the General Plan.

## 2.3.04 CARING FOR THE LAND

**Issue: During public discussions, it was clear that both residents and visitors value the County's varied landscape greatly. With character and economy central to the General Plan, policies ensuring stewardship of the land are necessary.**

Both the County's character and economy fundamentally depend on the land—air, water, soil, and physical and ecological processes that together sustain the County's human, plant, and animal communities. Therefore, land stewardship is the basis of conservation and development. Accepted practices of stewardship vary among using the land in different ways. Whether these are agriculture uses, timber harvesting, mining, wildlife habitat protection, or recreation use, stewardship is the watchword for land use and protection.

## 2.3.05 DECISION-MAKING AND NEIGHBORING PROPERTIES

**Issue: County landowners and residents seek assurances that the use of a neighbor's property will be compatible with the health, safety, welfare, and preservation of property values, the economy, and County's character. Therefore, facilitating land development and land use must balance a property owner's right of reasonable use and the impact of that use on neighboring property owners.**

“Balance,” “options,” and “opportunities”—these words appear throughout the General Plan. The Plan defines a property owner's rights and responsibilities and provides a policy framework allowing neighbors and others to understand the objectives of how property owners and residents can use their land. General Plan policies also establish a series of thresholds below which neighbors are assured of development acceptability. When these thresholds are crossed, neighbors become participants in the decision-making process.

## 2.3.06 GENERAL PLAN DEVELOPMENT SHOULD BE COMMUNITY, NOT STAFF, DRIVEN

**Issue: A certain level of distrust of planning professionals or outside consultants' ability to understand community needs was apparent from the beginning of the General Plan process. This prompted some to ask the County not to let planning Staff prepare the General Plan, but to instead allow the residents in each area of the County to write the Plan.**

The General Plan is a complex mix of policies, some of which are intended to guide the County as a whole, while others are for planning in certain local areas. There are many different general plan preparation options. Some jurisdictions utilize Planning Advisory Committees to prepare the preliminary version of the Plan; however, others minimally involve the public in the preparation process. The citizens of Mariposa County have had, and will continue to have, a very active role in the development of this General Plan .

The General Plan addresses issues mandated by the State and those that are of countywide interest. Citizen input on the countywide issues was critical. The Board of Supervisors defined clear objectives for Staff based on input from, and on behalf of, countywide constituents. The Planning Commission provided clear policy direction to Staff for assembling the planning policy and implementation tools for the Update. Although the

Planning Commission Draft of the General Plan Update reflects Staff-generated proposals for consideration, its course was set by decisive Board leadership and was refined by public input to the Planning Commission during its deliberations.

During Planning Commission deliberation and development of the Draft General Plan, extensive public participation and review resulted in extensive rewriting—removal of some features, inclusion of others, and further clarification of many ideas—reflecting what the Commission heard from citizens, as well as the initial direction from the Board of Supervisors. Additionally, the Board of Supervisors’ held a series of public involvement activities to review the Planning Commission’s Draft to ensure that the Final General Plan truly reflected broad community objectives and goals. The Mariposa County General Plan Update provides unique opportunities for the development or amendment of sixteen area plans. Each of the four currently adopted area plans addresses issues of importance specific to local communities that were written by a local Planning Advisory Committee.

### 2.3.07 GENERAL PLAN PROGRAM ENFORCEMENT

**Issue: A frequent comment heard from the public to explain why the 1981 General Plan did not accomplish all that it could have was that policies were sometimes not implemented. Clearly, to be effective, General Plan programs must be carried out.**

The General Plan is not a regulatory document, so it is not “enforced” as a zoning ordinance is enforced. The Plan is a policy document, and its enforcement is implemented through project review, guiding development of new ordinances, and changes in operational policy. The Plan includes mandatory implementation measures. The key to “enforcing” the Plan’s objectives is to include only those policy programs the County is committed to carry out. When necessary, there will be enforcement of General Plan implementation measures. The County will ensure that this is done by appropriately trained professionals.

### 2.3.08 ENHANCING MARIPOSA COUNTY’S WAY OF LIFE

**Issue: Citizens were clear that the quality of life in Mariposa County is something precious that needs to not only be “maintained,” but must be nurtured and enhanced as well.**

Quality of life, or the way of rural life, in Mariposa County is a major component of “character” in the General Plan. The entire General Plan—its policies, processes, and implementation programs—is designed to define, nurture, and enhance the quality of life in the County.

### 2.3.09 EFFECTIVE AND EFFICIENT APPLICATION PROCESSING

**Issue: Obtaining permits and approvals requiring Planning Commission action takes a significant amount of time and the amount of time is extended when an appeal is made to the Board of Supervisors.**

The General Plan provides policy direction allowing the permitting and approval process to become a more effective and efficient system. The idea of permit streamlining is not to bypass legally required processes, but to establish clear, well-defined procedures and objective standards that are understandable. When procedures are followed and projects meet standards, application processing is less complex and costly.

### 2.3.10 RAISING HOUSEHOLD INCOME IN MARIPOSA COUNTY

**Issue: Mariposa County’s median household income is below the State’s and region’s median household income. The Community desires to raise the median income level.**

The County’s lower household median income reflects the large number of seasonal workers. However, the number of lower wage jobs in the County also affects the County’s median household income. State data from 1999 identified County median household income as approximately \$25,000, equal to two family members earning a minimum wage. Although higher, the Census 2000 median household income of \$34,626 still creates significant concern about the need to raise area wages.

The General Plan recognizes that the County’s tourism base will continue to rely on seasonal and low paying jobs, which have minimal career ladder opportunities. The General Plan proposes economic diversification as part of the solution. Public-private sector partnerships providing housing and other programs to offset inherently low wages is an option being explored. Further discussion of this important issue and a comprehensive economic development strategy are included in the Economic Development Element (Chapter 6).

### 2.3.11 MARIPOSA COUNTY NOT MATCHING THE STATE GROWTH RATE

**Issue: For some time, Mariposa County’s population growth rate has been slower than the statewide average. Several factors, including continuing economic expansion and the high cost or lack of developable land in and around many thriving urban areas, are creating unprecedented growth pressure and opportunities for development in Mariposa County. Community comments question whether or not Mariposa County should take advantages of these growth opportunities, and if so, how best to do it.**

Over the past five years on an annual basis, Mariposa County averaged a one percent growth rate, a rate significantly less than Nevada, El Dorado, and Placer counties. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Mariposa’s population in 2000 was 17,130. Since 2000, the California Department of Finance (DOF) estimates that Mariposa’s population has increased by 1,086; estimating a January 1, 2006 population of 18,216. Since the 1960s, foothill growth has been spurred by its “related” growth of valley cities such as Sacramento, Modesto, and Fresno. Other foothill counties have experienced jumps in property values, increased population, and changes in the local economy.

The General Plan’s assessment of this issue is that, without undermining Mariposa’s character, the County has limited potential for population growth, in particular, the type of

growth called suburbanization. In order not to undermine the County's character, growth must occur primarily in modest scale developments focused on the three areas already providing some level of infrastructure and services: Coulterville, Lake Don Pedro, and the Town of Mariposa. Under reasonable assumptions, the policies of the Plan reflect a capacity to support a population of approximately 28,000 persons. Modest and small-scale developments are consistent with the County's character and maintain the necessary balance of character, economic development, and housing.

### 2.3.12 MEETING CHANGING POPULATION NEEDS

**Issue: As in the past, people moving to Mariposa County will likely want more and different types of services than those currently available. Can the County welcome these new people and meet their expectations while maintaining the General Plan's integrity?**

The General Plan provides definitions, policies, and programs to balance the County's economy, character, and housing. The Plan's programs are specifically designed to protect and enhance current values and resolve issues of importance, while taking advantage of the opportunities for growth and development that will occur during the life of the General Plan. This defines the manner in which the County meets the changing and diversified needs of existing and future residents.

### 2.3.13 UNDERSTANDABLE REQUIREMENTS AND PREDICTABLE OUTCOMES

**Issue: Developers expressed concern that before submitting a project application they are often not sure of the County's development standards or whether they will be able to achieve desired results on their property. It is imperative that when new development proposals are submitted, the applicant must be aware of the procedural and substantive requirements of the County's planning processes.**

The General Plan establishes parameters that will guide development into the future. These parameters build the "box" within which development must "fit," ensuring the Plan's policies create a fair, efficient, and predictable environment for applicants. Clearly defining County expectations in the General Plan results in understandable development regulations.

### 2.3.14 PRIVATE PROPERTY RIGHTS IN THE GENERAL PLAN

**Issue: Mariposa County has traditionally been a "property rights" county. How can the Plan accomplish its goals and respect this history?**

The entire structure of the General Plan creates a due process. Through this process, a property owner is able to responsibly use property.

The right to hold and use property comes with responsibilities. Mariposa County recognizes and promotes a property owner's right to use the development processes in the General Plan to responsibly achieve the "highest and best use" of his or her land, balanced with the same rights applied to neighboring property owners and other residents and visitors of the County.

Together, the elements of the General Plan define the “highest and best use” of lands as that balance of competing issues.

### 2.3.15 PROVIDING KNOWLEDGE AND SUPPORT TO COUNTY CITIZENS FOR USING THE GENERAL PLAN

**Issue: The General Plan Update changes the way the General Plan works and how citizens and communities can use the Plan. The County must provide convenient access to the General Plan and support its citizens in their efforts to understand and use the Plan.**

The General Plan, combined with the responsibilities of the Planning Agency and the processes of the Planning Commission and the Board of Supervisors, serves as a development constitution.

The responsibility of the Mariposa County Planning Staff is to meet with community members and groups to help citizens understand and effectively use the General Plan. Participation in Planning Commission and Board of Supervisors’ meetings is a means for citizens to affect County government decisions. Together, these provide citizens many opportunities to learn about and understand County policies and procedures and how and why they change from one generation to the next.

The Planning Commission should be a leader in the ongoing effort to inform the public about the General Plan. The Commission must continuously reach out to the Planning Advisory Committees, and the community at large, to ensure increasing understanding of how the General Plan works and how it represents the changing needs of the County. Perhaps most important, this outreach demonstrates how the public can be participants in County decision-making.

### 2.3.16 MARIPOSA COUNTY’S RELATIONSHIP TO THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA AT MERCED

**Issue: The new University of California campus at Merced has the potential to significantly affect the growth and development of the County. How can the General Plan address and use this relationship to its best advantage?**

One of the most challenging aspects of preparing the General Plan is assessing the benefits and impacts of the University of California at Merced campus. UC Merced has opened during the short-term planning period, slow growth through the intermediate term planning period, and achieving full growth with a full-time-equivalent enrollment of over 20,000 students by the end of the long-term planning period. With a projected staff and faculty of over 6,000 and spin-off employment topping 12,000, many families and individuals likely will appreciate the character of Mariposa County and seek housing in the County. The General Plan anticipates approximately five percent of the University-generated area residents will live in Mariposa County.

## 2.3.17 USE OF PUBLIC LANDS

**Issue: The National Park Service, Bureau of Land Management, United States Forest Service, and Merced Irrigation District control over half of the land in Mariposa County and affect the land use and population holding capacity. How can the General Plan help the County protect its interests when dealing with these agencies?**

Of the County's approximately one million acres of land area, 550,000 are in public ownership. These public lands are an integral part of the County's rural character and its economy. The use of these lands affects the County's housing, character, and economy. Thus, Mariposa County is greatly affected by the decisions of public land management agencies. To a lesser, but still important degree, the actions of Mariposa County can affect the management of public lands and their uses. Clearly, there is interdependence between the functioning of these levels of government in Mariposa County and a need to work together to identify and achieve mutual and respective interests.

The General Plan embraces policies intended to establish collaborative working relationships with other agencies responsible for managing land in Mariposa County. The Plan supports responsible protection and multiple use of public lands constrained only by the needs of reasonable stewardship, recognizing the varied missions and management objectives of the different agencies.

## 2.4 OBJECTIVES FOR THE GENERAL PLAN

This General Plan will diversify the County's economy by providing safe, decent housing, while maintaining the rural character. The General Plan was spurred by recognition and a desire for the County to improve its systems for serving its constituency during the development process. In the 1981 General Plan, overall goals for the Plan were identified, but implementation was not as effective as desired. The objective of the General Plan is to meet community needs for all constituencies. Therefore, General Plan goals and policies shall:

- result in programs which coordinate and integrate decision-making, thereby providing a fair, efficient, and predictable permitting process;
- provide the parameters to meet the decision-making needs of project-specific challenges and opportunities; and
- define the growth potential for Mariposa County, its direction and its character.

General Plan implementation measures shall:

- create opportunities for citizen participation in the County decision process;
- ensure project review is based on merits and completed in a timely manner;
- provide project applicants with options and choices;
- identify lands for commerce and industry to accommodate the business sector of the County;

- provide adequate guidance so a property owner or project applicant can find sites, when available, for a proposed project conforming to County requirements; and
- consider the highest and best use as viewed in relation to the values of the community.