

COUNTY OF MONTEREY

HOUSING AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

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From: The Planning Commission Ad Hoc Committee
To: Monterey County Planning Commission & Interested Public
Subj: Big Sur Land Use Plan/ Local Coastal Plan Update (BSLUP)

Dear Planning Commissioners:

After two public workshops on the Big Sur Land Use Plan update in 2021, the Planning Commission appointed an ad hoc committee to frame a comprehensive recommended draft for a full review as soon as possible considering all the public input that had been received including:

- Input from the Planning Commission workshops and staff reports and research,
- The extensive and specific proposals prepared by the Big Sur and South Coast Land Use Advisory Committees (LUACs) over the course of many years of inclusive public workshops,
- Comments from public agencies including the California Coastal Commission, and
- Comments from private individuals and groups.

We have been working diligently since 2021 and this report is intended to explain where we are with that task and what we recommend going forward.

While our draft document is not complete, we are now at a point where focused public input would be helpful in understanding how well our proposed framework functions and how best to address several specific remaining issues. We are sending this draft document out now to allow both the Planning Commission and the public ample time to review the draft. It is our sincere hope that the upcoming public workshop will provide the information and broad perspective we need to complete our recommendations successfully. At the conclusion of the workshop on December 13th, pending inclusion on the final agenda for that date, we plan to reconvene, review what we have learned, and incorporate changes as needed before returning to the Planning Commission with a recommended draft document.

Framework

The existing Big Sur Land Use Plan (BSLUP) was adopted and certified by the California Coastal Commission in 1986 after a public process that lasted over 10 years. The BSLUP continues to this day to be held up as the “gold standard” for such a plan and has had only a very few minor and technical amendments since that time. Simply put, the current Plan by all measures has generally worked much as it was intended to do. It strives to protect private property rights, provide the greatest possible access for the public, protect the natural environment, and promote physical and economic viability for the resident community through several specific, innovative, and interrelated provisions. By all

accounts, the BSLUP balances sometimes competing interests reasonably successfully. This in turn suggests that changes to the current plan should not be made unnecessarily or lightly.

Comments from the California Coastal Commission

(<https://monterey.legistar.com/View.ashx?M=F&ID=9578107&GUID=E8565721-E9B3-4FF6-B135-9C7B165DB5B0>) as well as the public comments received in 2021 make these same points. For this

reason, one of our first decisions was that we would recommend the fewest changes possible to the existing Plan. Only changes we believe are needed to address conditions that have changed, or areas the existing Plan simply didn't consider, or to clarify existing provisions that have been found in practice to be unclear or ineffective are recommended here. This draft is intended as an update, not a rewrite.

Another factor we considered throughout this draft is that it is not clear when or how the 1982 Monterey County General Plan or Coastal Implementation Plan will be updated. Because of this, this draft recommends including additional detail about intended outcomes to some provisions so that the BSLUP can operate as intended now and as these updates may occur in the future.

Fundamental Principle

The BSLUP is also the certified Local Coastal Plan for this area. At its foundation is the innovative principle that the primary coastal resource that must be protected by all parties is the spectacular wild and scenic natural landscape many millions experience every year as they drive scenic Highway 1. Because of the strong universal protections for the Critical Viewshed in the Plan, public access to Big Sur's iconic spectacular wild and scenic views is available to the widest possible variety of people at the lowest possible cost. Any development that interjects a built element into the expanse of unspoiled wild landscape, blocks views, or alters the natural landforms within the Critical Viewshed significantly impacts the primary overall experience for everyone. This principle is unique in our Monterey County land use plans and its importance cannot be overstated. Where interests compete, the Critical Viewshed protections must be considered at the highest level.

Additionally, protecting the ability of Highway 1 to safely and enjoyably accommodate the driving public is essential to this public access. The available capacity of Highway 1 must be a primary consideration in any land use decision as it was in the creation of the current Plan. A number of the changes we suggest throughout this draft are intended to clarify these fundamental considerations and connections and provide better guidance about what they mean in practice.

The other major areas where changes are proposed are:

Fire

Fire has always been an issue for Big Sur however the nature and frequency of fires is changing and intensifying. One of the difficult areas where priorities compete in Big Sur is in the management of protected natural resources like Environmentally Sensitive Habitat Areas or ESHA, the Critical Viewshed, and fire fuel management particularly around structures, infrastructure, and developed enclaves. This draft attempts to address this balancing act to clear regulatory confusion and not only allow but encourage the creation of defensible space within the constraints of State and Federal regulations while protecting these other resources at the same time.

Housing

Big Sur has residential community that, besides being of incalculable worth to its residents, is extremely valuable to the wider public. This community was and is subject to severe development limitations as part of the overall efforts to preserve this area. A number of assumptions based on research at the time resulted in severe limitations to development. These limitations over time including changes in use have added extraordinary pressure to Big Sur's already limited housing stock. Currently a majority of people working in Big Sur commute long distances from outside the area. Lack of housing also results in the loss of community members who provide critical services such as volunteer fire fighters or medical personnel at the Big Sur Health Center. Besides all the many issues associated with the shortage of housing overall, a commuting workforce adds to the traffic on Highway 1 and reduces access to the traveling public. Many of the new and changed sections in this draft are intended to encourage and provide additional opportunities for housing our local workforce while preserving all the existing residential housing possible for the use of residents.

Highway Capacity/Visitor Activities and Accommodation

The current BSLUP is a build-out plan. It attempts to quantify the total amount of development that could be allowed in Big Sur without compromising the wild and scenic character of the area or the community that supports it. The Plan bases the potential buildout on research about conditions at the time of adoption in 1986 and assumptions about future development pressures and their effects on the area.

During the Ad Hoc committee's work, we have been fortunate to have had significant staff support to help us understand both the history and current conditions, and we have also received very helpful information from local groups, businesses, and residents, including individuals that participated in the creation of the existing Plan. Through this process we have learned that some of the original assumptions were fairly accurate while some were not. Edits we propose in this draft reflect our attempts to address changing conditions while preserving the original vision and intent of the BSLUP. Technical details of this research will be available in the upcoming staff report for the December 13th workshop.

A good general example of this is the consideration of hotel rooms/lodging unit caps contained in Table 1, a section of the original Plan that is not entirely clear. In our view, Table 1 is intended to do several things. It quantifies the total projected allowable development that will maintain the Highway 1 experience for the traveling public. And, it preserves the residential community that is an essential component of the Big Sur experience. The numbers included in Table 1 reflect data collected in the years before the BSLUP was certified and specific assumptions about the future. The data is helpful, and understanding the assumptions is vital.

One set of assumptions was that buildout could occur in various ways depending on how landowners choose to use their property within the limits of physical provisions such as slope, viewshed, and environmental preservation. These uses would be balanced to stay within the overall limits by specifying tradeoffs between allowable uses, each of which was assumed to have specific associated impacts.

Research at that time (1977) calculated that Highway 1 could carry a maximum of 1.7 million vehicle trips per year before the traffic would significantly reduce the driving experience. Of those annual

trips, 15% (255,000) were preserved for 'destination uses' which includes everything that brings people to Big Sur itself (camping, hiking, restaurants, hotels, art galleries, shops, events, deliveries and so on). The remainder of this capacity was to be reserved for the travelling public.

Today, the current best estimate of traffic on Highway 1 is between 5-6 million vehicles per year, far surpassing the maximums considered in Table 1. Traffic conditions in some places can significantly detract from the driving experience. In order to preserve the Plan's fundamental principle of public access, we suggest in this draft that any proposed development going forward should allow uses that would not increase the destination traffic. These might be things like upgrades to existing facilities (particularly those that reduce the need for highway trips like onsite restaurants serving hotel guests), the addition of businesses that serve both travelers and residents locally, and of course housing that is affordable for the people who work in Big Sur. Any development that would increase highway trips should be discouraged.

Table 1 also makes assumptions about how people in different situations use Highway 1. The 1977 traffic studies assume that each residence will contribute 1.5 daily trips to the highway. Another priority use intended to supply affordable destination access was 'rustic camping' (which is not limited in Table 1) where minimal development would be required and campers would contribute very few highway trips as they bring what they need, remain onsite, and enjoy their natural surroundings. Other uses, like developed camping areas and RV camping are assumed to result in more highway use as guests drive to and from attractions like hiking sites, shops, galleries, restaurants and so on. Hotel rooms are assumed to contribute 'destination' trips to the highway insofar as they serve those not traveling through the area and are accordingly limited in Table 1 to a number believed to be adequate to support the expected highway travelers.

There has been extensive research and correspondence about the status of these limits today because unfortunately the original base numbers were not clearly given, and new units have not been carefully tracked. In summary, this draft approaches this issue by focusing on the current lack of available highway capacity rather than a specific cap number. We look forward to a discussion of this approach at the upcoming workshop.

The ad hoc committee also tried to define new and emerging uses and consider where they fit since these uses directly impact the current development caps. In some cases, this is easy. Short term vacation rental of residential property seems clearly likely to result in significantly more than the 1.5 daily trips assumed for residences which is part of the reason this draft proposes that they should not be allowed in the Big Sur Land Use Plan Area. Some are harder, as in determining whether upscale 'glamping' options generate highway trips more similar to rustic camping or hotel rooms. We hope to hear more on these issues at the workshop and plan to refine Table 1 accordingly.

The staff report, which will be attached to the final Planning Commission agenda, will provide details about the proposed changes the ad hoc committee has incorporated into the draft, the work leading up to those changes, and the proposed process going forward. The staff report will also highlight other provisions we propose to include or change because they address specific concerns and/or are required by new laws or regulations.

We are very pleased to have reached the point where we are ready for public review and input. We look forward to hearing from our colleagues and the public, and to move forward with this critical and long-awaited Big Sur Land Use Plan update.

In closing, we would like to thank County staff for providing the extensive professional support, administration of this process, and the technical expertise needed for the ad hoc to make informed recommendations. We could not have gotten to this point without them. We also thank the California Coastal Commission for their dedication and clarity about how best to protect coastal resources in this specific area for the benefit of the larger public. And last but definitely not least, we thank the dedicated and thoughtful individual and group members of the public for their input, particularly the Big Sur and South Coast Land Use Advisory Committees for their decades long efforts to update the Plan, and for their ongoing commitment to preserve this unique area for future generations to experience regardless of the challenges we face.

It is an honor to be a part of this work.

Sincerely,

Martha Diehl

Katharine Daniels

Commissioner Martha Diehl and Commissioner Kate Daniels