

Environmental Scoping Document

Santa Maria River Levee Trail Project

County of Santa Barbara
Public Works Department
Transportation Division

August 6, 2024



**Prepared by
EMC Planning Group on behalf of
the County of Santa Barbara**

Table of Contents

SANTA MARIA RIVER LEVEE TRAIL ENVIRONMENTAL SCOPING DOCUMENT	1
Purpose.....	1
Project Overview	1
EIR Approach and Probable Environmental Effects	3

Figures

Figure 1	Regional Location Map.....	11
Figure 2	Project Site and Surrounding Land Uses.....	13

Santa Maria River Levee Trail Environmental Scoping Document

Purpose

This environmental scoping document describes the proposed Santa Maria River Levee Trail (project). This environmental scoping document provides a preliminary review of the potential environmental impacts associated with the proposed project in accordance with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) (Public Resources Code Section 21000 et seq.). This scoping document, along with comments received in response to the Notice of Preparation (NOP) of an Environmental Impact Report (EIR) for the proposed project, will assist the County of Santa Barbara (County), as the lead agency for the preparation of the EIR, in identifying environmental impacts, mitigation measures, and range of alternatives to be considered in the EIR.

Project Overview

Setting/Project Location

The Santa Maria River Levee System is a 17-mile stone-revetted (i.e., masonry covered) levee located along the south side of the Santa Maria River, stretching from the City of Guadalupe to the west and the City of Santa Maria to the east. The levee was designed to convey peak flows on the Santa Maria River from the confluence of the Cuyama and Sisquoc rivers downstream to State Route 1 near the City of Guadalupe. The original levee project, completed in 1963 by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Los Angeles District, was intended to provide protection for the city of Santa Maria and the surrounding area from seasonal flooding. The levee is currently being maintained by the Santa Barbara County Flood Control and Water Conservation District (Flood Control District), which is a branch of the County of Santa Barbara Public Works Department (County). The Flood Control District owns the Santa Maria River Levee facility in fee (i.e., in absolute ownership) while U.S. Army Corps of Engineers retains jurisdictional authority for projects that may alter/modify the levee.

The project site consists of an approximately 6.7-mile-long segment of the levee that stretches west from North Blosser Road to the State Route 1 bridge, connecting the cities of Santa Maria and Guadalupe. The project site is located entirely within an unincorporated area of the County of Santa Barbara though immediately borders the boundary with the County of San Luis Obispo to the north, the City of Guadalupe to the west, and the City of Santa Maria to the east. The levee is

approximately 16-18 feet wide at the top, graded flat and largely consists of a loose gravel surface. The existing levee path is actively used in certain sections by pedestrians and bicyclists. [Figure 1, Location Map](#), shows the regional setting of the project site.

The project site is surrounded by the Santa Maria River to the north, which forms the boundary of San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara counties; active agricultural operations and fields to the south; State Route 1 and the City of Guadalupe to the west; and the City of Santa Maria-maintained portion of the levee trail connected to the northern limits of the City of Santa Maria. This northern area of Santa Maria is made up largely of residential neighborhoods that border Atlantic Place to the north and North Blosser Road to the west and U.S. Route 101 to the east. The existing levee trail is bisected in the approximate midway point by the north-south oriented Bonita School Road. Bonita School Road is a high-speed (55 MPH) two-lane arterial road that provides critical access between the counties of San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara via a 24-foot wide, 323-foot bridge that spans the entire approximately 0.45-mile-wide riverbed. [Figure 2, Project Site and Surrounding Land Uses](#), presents an aerial photograph of the project site with the proposed levee trail route shown along with surrounding land uses.

Background

On June 2, 2020, the Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors accepted a grant from the California Coastal Conservancy to study the feasibility of developing a trail on the Santa Maria River Levee. At the meeting, the Board directed staff to focus on outreach, particularly to landowners and stakeholders in the agricultural community. In 2021, the County initiated the *Santa Maria River Levee Trail Study* (trail study) to provide a conceptual-level feasibility study that explored the constraints or obstacles to extending the existing trail on the Santa Maria River Levee to the City of Guadalupe. The study was intended as an informational tool rather than a prescriptive set of standards. Further work on the trail was identified as needed along with additional engineering and coordination to take place prior to finalizing a trail design. The goal of the study was to engage with the community and help identify constraints and opportunities associated with the trail. In May 2022, the County Board of Supervisors voted 5-0 to continue work on the proposed trail and allocated funding for additional survey, design, and environmental work related to the trail. A copy of the trail study can be found on the County's website here: <https://www.countyofsb.org/3467/Active-Transportation>.

Project Description

The proposed project consists of a series of to-be-determined design improvements to an existing 6.7-mile-long segment of the south bank of the Santa Maria River Levee that stretches from the eastern terminus of the Tom Urbanske Multi-Purpose Trail in the City of Santa Maria to the western terminus in the City of Guadalupe at Peralta Street (proposed project). An alternative connection under consideration at the Guadalupe access point would extend the trail under the railroad crossing connecting to 12th Street near State Route 1.

Based on the outcome of the 2022 trail study referenced above, the goal of proposed project is to expand and improve public access and provide an alternative east-west active transportation corridor. The trail will provide an alternative to State Route 166, which is heavily used by freight, farming, and commercial vehicles and not a good alternative for bicycles and pedestrians. Extending the levee trail and completing the City's beach route would provide a safe, alternative route for pedestrians and bicyclists from Santa Maria all the way to the beach. The project will consider a crossing at Bonita School Road and a connection point to a new bridge with bicycle and pedestrian facilities to be constructed across the river, better connecting to nearby cities in southern San Luis Obispo County. It would serve to enhance regional connectivity by providing a safe separated route to the Pacific Coast Highway (State Route 1), a popular route used by recreational cyclists traveling throughout California.

The final design details of the trail improvements, including trail surface materials, security lighting and fencing, and other trail user amenities, will be developed in coordination with the County's consultant team, as well as County Public Works staff, the County Agricultural Commissioner's Office, the County Sheriff's Office, the Flood Control District, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. In addition, the County will continue its community engagement efforts on the project. The County seeks to ensure a safe, equitable, and user-friendly trail design that limits conflicts with private property owners and avoids environmental effects to the extent feasible.

EIR Approach and Probable Environmental Effects

CEQA requires the preparation of an EIR to inform the public and decision-makers of the project's potential environmental effects. According to CEQA Guidelines Section 15151, "...[a]n EIR should be prepared with a sufficient degree of analysis to provide decision-makers with information which enables them to make a decision which intelligently takes account of environmental consequences."

CEQA Guidelines Section 15060(d) states that an initial study is not required in cases where preparation of an EIR is determined to be clearly required by the lead agency. Accordingly, an initial study for the proposed project has not been prepared. However, preliminary review of the proposed project identified the following issues for evaluation in the EIR. Additional issues beyond those that are set forth below may also be addressed to the EIR, based on the comments received in response to the NOP for the EIR and draft EIR that will be prepared for the proposed project. The EIR will focus on evaluating the reasonably foreseeable potential environmental impacts of improving the existing levee trail. Potential environmental effects of the project and the scope of analysis that will be undertaken to assess each are briefly discussed below.

Agricultural Resources

Large portions of the adjacent areas immediately south of the proposed levee bike trail are designated as "Unique Farmland" or "Prime Farmland" according to the California Department of

Conservation Santa Barbara County Important Farmland 2018 map. As noted in the County's *Environmental Thresholds and Guidelines Manual*, "adjacent land uses can play an important role in the continuing suitability and productivity of a property for agricultural uses. In general, being surrounded by agricultural or open space is conducive to continued agricultural use, while encroachment of urban uses may be problematic."

In accordance with the County's *Environmental Thresholds and Guidelines Manual*, the EIR will address the County's following thresholds associated with agricultural resources to analyze the proposed project's potential impacts to agricultural resources:

- Will the proposal result in the conversion of prime agricultural land to nonagricultural use, impairment of agricultural land productivity (whether prime or nonprime), or conflict with agricultural preserve programs?
- Will the proposal result in any effect [potentially significant adverse effect] upon any unique or other farmland of State or Local Importance?

In addition, this section of the EIR will address potential project impacts associated with the project's potential to conflict with adjacent parcels under Williamson Act contract. The County's thresholds for determining agricultural resource impacts provide a methodology for evaluating agricultural resources. These guidelines utilize a weighted point system to serve as a preliminary screening tool for determining significance. The tool assists planners in identifying whether a discretionary act would result in the conversion of a parcel which qualifies as viable using the weighting system, from an agricultural use to a non-agricultural use or the substantial disruption of surrounding agricultural operations. A project that would result in the loss or impairment of agricultural resources would create a potentially significant impact. The proposed project will be evaluated utilizing the County's thresholds and guidelines for determining agricultural resource impacts, with a particular focus on impacts to adjacent agricultural uses, and the conclusions of the analysis will be presented in this EIR section.

Air Quality

The project site is located in the South Central Coast Air Basin (air basin). The Santa Barbara County Air Pollution Control District (air district) has jurisdictional authority within the air basin. The air district provides direction for air quality analysis. In January 2022, the air district released a limited update to its Scope and Content of Air Quality Sections in Environmental Documents, which provides guidance for assessing and mitigating air quality impacts of development projects. This document will be the primary guidance used in the air quality analysis. The proposed project would generate criteria air pollutant emissions during construction. Operational impacts are not anticipated. This section of the EIR will address whether the project would conflict with or obstruct implementation of the applicable air quality standards, result in a cumulatively considerable net

increase of any criteria pollutant for which the project region is nonattainment, and create air pollutant concentrations that could create risk for public health.

The California Emissions Estimator Model (CalEEMod) will be used to calculate construction-related criteria air pollutant and greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, from diesel and gasoline powered equipment, paving, and other activities based on project specific information. The model assumptions and methodology will be incorporated into the EIR and the modeled results will be presented in appendices of the final document.

Emissions from construction activities represent temporary impacts that are typically short in duration, depending on the size, phasing, and type of project. Air quality impacts can nevertheless be acute during construction periods, resulting in significant localized impacts to air quality. Although the air district currently does not have quantitative thresholds of significance for short-term emissions in place, CEQA requires that short-term impacts, such as exhaust emissions from construction equipment and fugitive dust generation during grading, be discussed in the environmental document. CalEEMod results will be used to quantify construction emissions for informational purposes.

Biological Resources

Based on a preliminary review of aerial photographs, the proposed trail will predominantly be confined to the existing gravel-topped Santa Maria River Levee. Where the trail starts in Santa Maria and ends in Guadalupe, the proposed trail corridor may impact areas of annual grassland and channelized drainages identified in the *National Wetlands Inventory* (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2023). Given their inclusion in the inventory, it is possible that the channelized drainages fall under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the Flood Control District, Regional Water Quality Control Board and/or the California Department of Fish and Wildlife.

According to the *California Natural Diversity Database* (California Department of Fish and Wildlife 2023), there are a number of special-status species with the potential to occur within the project area, including:

- Blushing layia (*Layia erubescens*);
- La Graciosa thistle (*Cirsium scariosum* var. *loncholepis*);
- Nipomo Mesa ceanothus (*Ceanothus impressus* var. *nipomensis*);
- Monarch - California overwintering population (*Danaus plexippus plexippus*);
- California red-legged frog (*Rana draytonii*);
- Western spadefoot (*Spea hammondi*);
- Coast horned lizard (*Phrynosoma blainvillii*);

- Northern California legless lizard (*Anniella pulchra*);
- Western pond turtle (*Emys marmorata*);
- Swainson's hawk (*Buteo swainsoni*);
- San Joaquin kit fox (*Vulpes macrotis mutica*);
- Roosting bats; and
- Nesting birds.

This evaluation will assess potential habitat present for special-status species in the area and recommend mitigation measures for the protection of biological resources. If suitable habitat is identified, recommendations may also include the need for additional specific or protocol-level surveys to be conducted during an appropriate time of year.

Cultural Resources – Archaeological, Historic, and Tribal Cultural Resources

According to the County's general plan (Conservation Element), the Santa Maria River Levee is not included in the list of "historic sites" in Santa Barbara County. The levee is also not listed on the County's "Historic Landmarks" inventory nor as a "Place of Historic Merit." According to the *City of Santa Maria General Plan* (amended 2001) "Resources Management Element," the Santa Maria Valley is not a major archaeological or paleontological resource area, as only a few sites have been recorded or discovered in the area. The Resources Management Element in the City's general plan (Figure RME-5) delineates High or Moderate, Low, and Negligible archaeological sensitivity areas within the city; the project site is designated as "Archaeological Sensitivity Area 3 – Negligible Sensitivity."

However, it is generally recognized that sensitive archaeological and/or tribal cultural resources are often found along streams and other waterways. In addition, the County's general plan notes that "as very little is known at present of the archaeology of the northwestern portion of the County, every effort should be made to ensure the protection of sites in this area." Therefore, if undiscovered historic resources or unique archaeological resources are located within the project site, they could be adversely affected by the proposed project. The potential for the project to impact cultural resources will be assessed and mitigation measures proposed as necessary.

Additionally, as previously noted, the Santa Maria River Levee System was constructed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in 1963. Previous repairs and alterations to the system were undertaken before the system was 50 years old (generally considered the threshold for considering whether a built resource is potentially historical under CEQA) and it appears no historical evaluation of the levee system has been previously prepared. The proposed project has the potential to physical alter the existing levee system; therefore, in order to determine if there will be adverse effects/significant

impacts on a historical resource as defined under CEQA Guidelines Section 15064.5, a historical evaluation of the levee system will be completed by a qualified architectural historian. The evaluation will also determine if the levee system is eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places, the California Register of Historical Resources, and Santa Barbara County Historic Landmarks or Places of Historic Merit list. The results of the historical evaluation will be reported in the draft EIR.

The County's AB 52 tribal consultation process will also be reviewed. If consultation is requested and conducted, the results will be identified along with conclusions about whether the proposed project cause an adverse change on the significance of a tribal cultural resource.

Geologic Constraints

The proposed project would involve minimal amounts of resurfacing and ancillary user improvements on top of an existing levee facility along the south bank of the Santa Maria River. Based on the "Seismic Safety and Safety Element" (updated May 2023) of the *Santa Barbara County Comprehensive Plan*, no Areas of Special Geologic Interest occur in the project area nor is the project site located in an area with a "High" problem rating as shown on the "Santa Maria-Orcutt Study Area Seismic-Tectonic Map" (Santa Barbara County 2023, page 94-95). However, the site is noted as having potentially high susceptibility to liquefaction and is in a seismically active area more generally according to the California Geologic Survey. In accordance with the County's *Environmental Thresholds and Guidelines Manual* (Geologic Constraints Guidelines), this section of the EIR will address whether the proposed project would result in potentially significant impacts due to substantially increased erosion, landslides, soil creep, mudslides and unstable slopes. In addition, this section of the EIR will address whether proposed project would result in exposure of people or structures to major geologic hazards upon implementation of the project.

Greenhouse Gas Emissions

The proposed project will be a source of construction-related greenhouse gas emissions (GHG) emissions whose impact must be evaluated. The following tasks will be completed to assess construction-related GHG effects: briefly summarize the existing climate change setting; briefly summarize applicable existing climate change policy and regulatory setting; present County-proposed measures or features of the project that could reduce energy demand and GHG emissions, if any; and reference the CalEEMod results to identify the projected total GHG emissions volume. Mitigation measures will be identified as needed.

Noise

The proposed project would not result in any operational noise; however, construction-related traffic and on-site construction work would create noise. This section will address the noise sources from the proposed project and whether noise level increases could adversely affect noise sensitive

receptors. The proposed uses are not expected to be sources of significant point source noise generation. Analysis of noise impacts will be conducted in the context of related County general plan policies and analysis conducted in the general plan EIR.

Groundwater and Storm Water Quality

This section of the EIR will address whether the proposed project would violate any water quality standards or waste discharge requirements or otherwise substantially degrade surface or ground water quality. This section will also address erosion and flood control.

The proposed project would result in an impact associated with surface and storm water quality if it would substantially alter the existing drainage pattern of the site or area, in a manner which would:

i) substantially increase the rate or amount of surface runoff in a manner which would result in flooding on- or offsite; ii) would exceed the capacity of existing or planned stormwater drainage systems or provide substantial additional sources of polluted runoff; or iii) impede or redirect flood flows.

Visual Aesthetics

This section of the EIR will address the potential for the proposed project to alter scenic vistas, scenic resources, and visual resource conditions in the project vicinity. The County's Open Space Element notes that "the Santa Maria River flood plain is designated as open space for public health and safety" (Santa Barbara County 2009, page 69) but the project site is not otherwise specifically noted as having high scenic value according to the County's "Scenic Values" map (Santa Barbara County 2009, page 27). According to the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) State Scenic Highway System Map, the project site is immediately west (approximately 1.2 miles) of an eligible state scenic highway U.S. Highway 101. It is noted that the segment of State Route 1 immediately east of the western terminus of the proposed levee trail (through the City of Guadalupe) is neither an eligible or officially designated state scenic highway. This section of the EIR will provide any recommendations for mitigating any potentially significant impacts associated with visual aesthetics.

Cumulative Impacts and Alternatives

The cumulative effects of the proposed project, combined with other relevant plans and programs, will be analyzed in this section of the EIR.

Alternatives

The EIR will include analysis of a reasonable range of project alternatives, which could feasibly attain most of the basic project objectives, but would avoid or substantially lessen any of the significant project effects.

Other CEQA Considerations

Consistent with CEQA Guidelines Section 15126 this section of the EIR will summarize significant unavoidable environmental effects and describe the reasons that the proposed project is being proposed notwithstanding any significant unavoidable impacts. Additionally, this section will describe significant irreversible environmental changes and growth inducing impacts.

Effects found not to be significant also will be summarized and likely will include topical areas that are determined not to be affected by the implementation of the proposed project.

Based on a preliminary understanding of the proposed project, County staff assume the following environmental topics will result in no impact or a less-than-significant impact. The EIR will briefly address these topics and present justification for a less-than-significant or no impact determination.

Land Use and Planning

The project would not divide an established community. The EIR will include a thorough analysis of the County's general plan policies applicable to the project area. This section will include an analysis of the proposed project's consistency with environmental goals and policies in these regulations. The policy analysis, presented in table format, will focus on visual aesthetics, agricultural resources, biological resources, cultural resources, noise, surface and storm water quality, and transportation. However, it will also address other applicable environmental policies.

Mineral Resources

The County general plan notes that river channels, including the Santa Maria River channel, likely include sand and gravel deposits (Conservation Element, page 161). County Land Use and Development Code (LUDC) Section 35.82.160, "Reclamation and Surface Mining Permits," provides regulations for surface mining operations in the county, in compliance with the California Surface Mining and Reclamation Act (SMARA). The project site is an existing levee facility along the Santa Maria River and is not permitted for mineral resource extraction. The majority of mineral resource sites in the county, particularly sand and gravel operations, coincide with areas designated for open space including a portion of the Guadalupe Dunes area to the west, which has had sand mining operations occur in the past. While the Santa Maria River channel may contain sand and gravel deposits, the proposed project does substantially not encroach into the river channel. Therefore, implementation of the proposed project would not disrupt substantial mining operations and the proposed project would have no impact related to mineral resources.

Population and Housing

The project would not affect population or housing as the project is not population generating. Therefore, this topic will not be addressed further in the EIR.

Public Services

This section will address fire protection, police protection, school, and other public facility; however, it is anticipated that there would be no impacts or that the impacts would not be significant.

Public Safety

The County's public safety environmental thresholds apply to risks stemming from oil and gas well facilities, gas and hazardous liquids pipelines, and other associated oil and gas facilities. The proposed project is a bike trail and does not involve any oil and gas facility or pipeline. However, issues associated with the trail design, accessibility, and overall public safety will be a key focus of the County's project objectives and will be addressed throughout the EIR.

Transportation

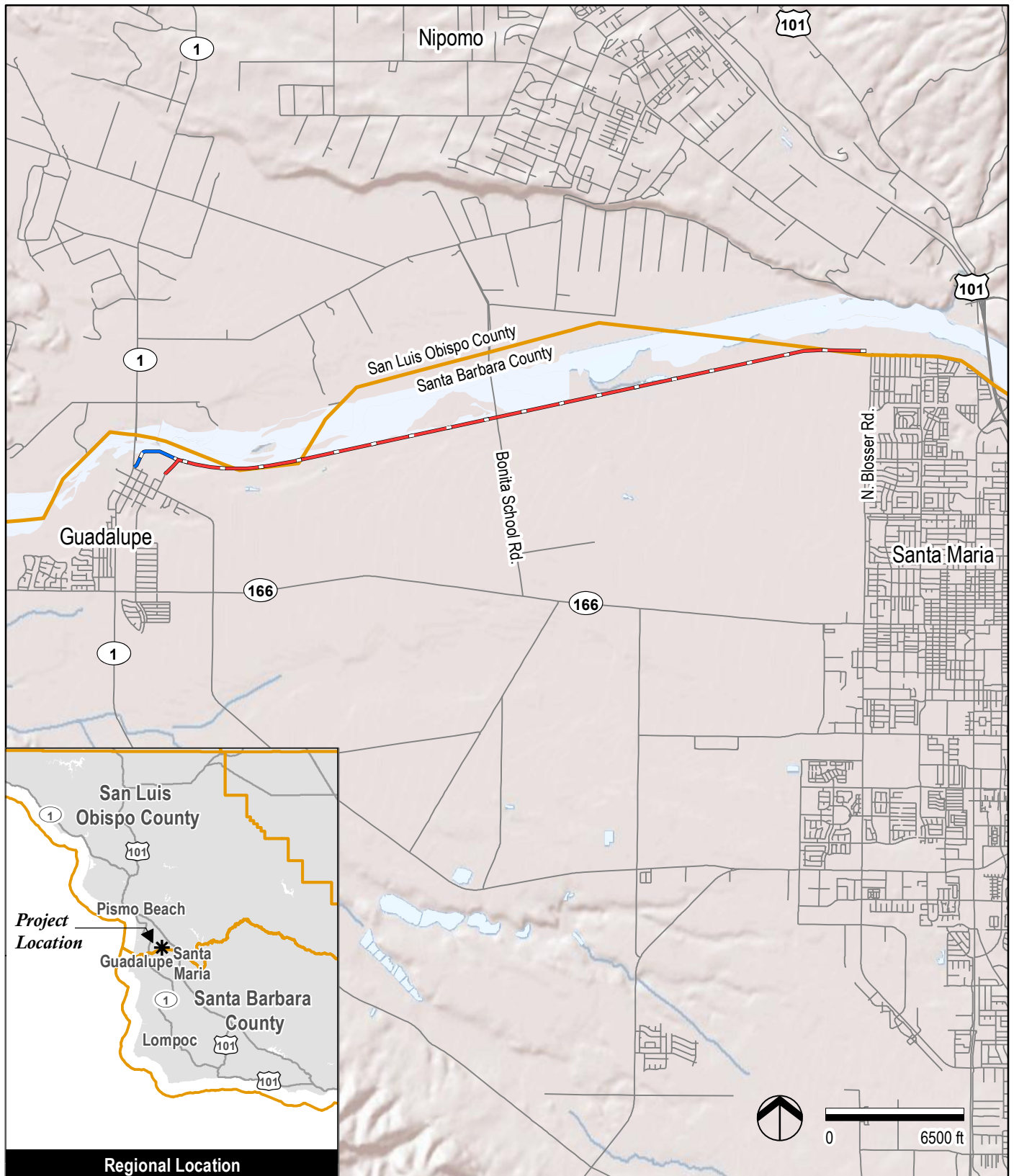
The proposed project would not result in operational transportation impacts. However, construction of the project would result in traffic and therefore, vehicle miles traveled during construction will be reported, but primarily for use in the air quality, greenhouse gas emissions, and energy sections of the EIR. Construction-related trip generation data will be obtained from the County to ascertain potential environmental effects.

Utilities and Service Systems

The project is a construction project and would not result in long-term impacts on water systems, wastewater systems, solid waste facilities, storm water drainage facilities, telecommunication facility, or power facilities.

Wildfire

The project site is located within a "Local Responsibility Area" according to the California Department of Fire and Forestry Protection (CAL FIRE) and is not located within "Very High" or "High" Fire Hazard Severity Zone. Therefore, this issue would not be addressed further in the EIR.



- Santa Maria Levee Trail Proposed Route
- Potential Alternative Connection to the City of Guadalupe

Source: ESRI 2024, Santa Barbara County Fire 2020

Figure 1

Regional Location Map

Santa Maria River Levee Trail
Notice of Preparation

This side intentionally left blank.

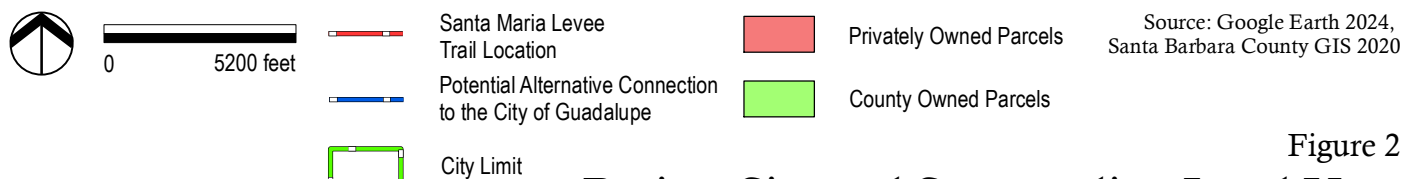
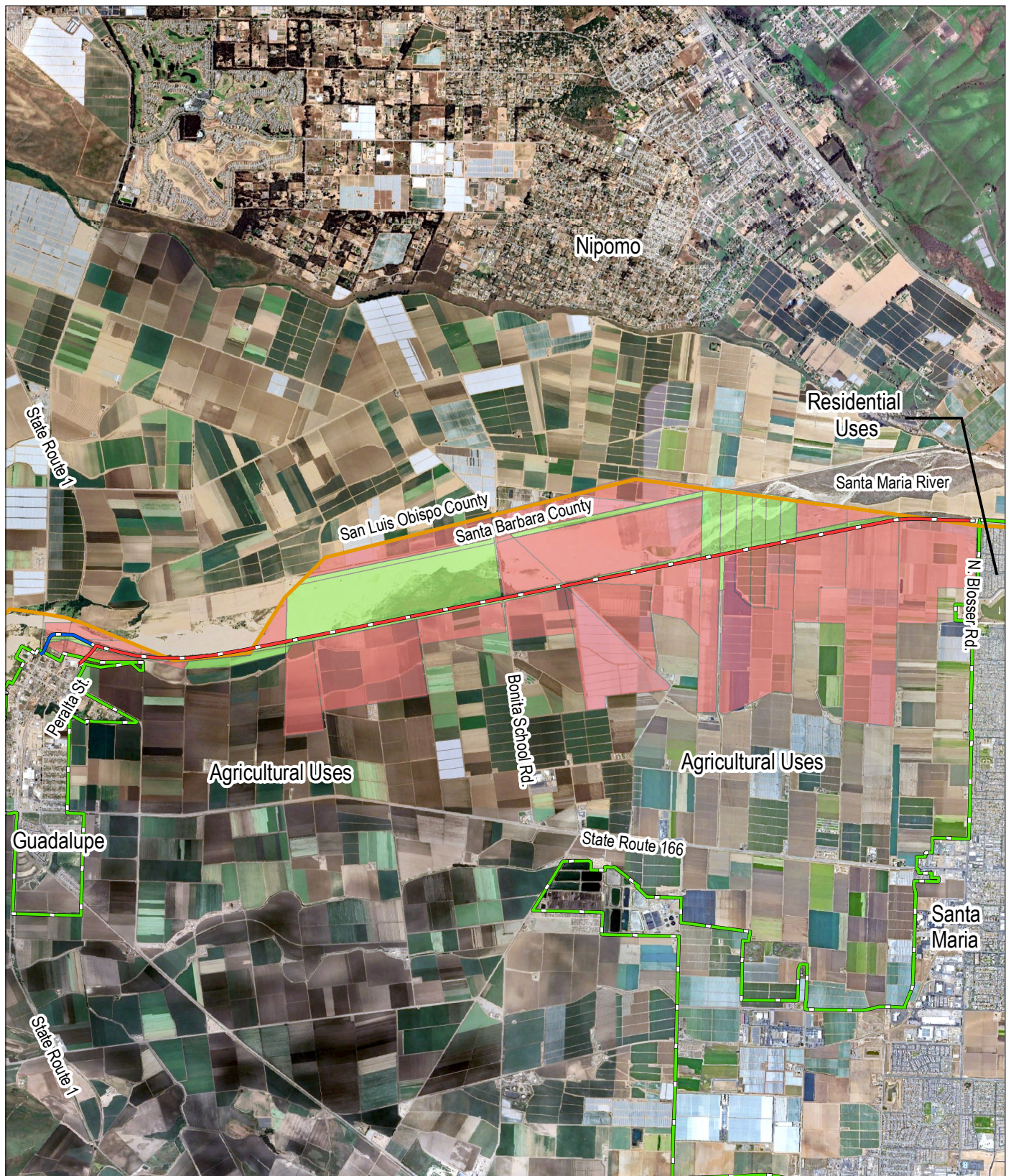


Figure 2

Project Site and Surrounding Land Uses

Santa Maria River Levee Trail
Notice of Preparation

This side intentionally left blank.