Chapter 3 Environmental Setting

This chapter provides a "description of the physical environmental conditions in the vicinity of the project" (CEQA Guidelines, Section 15125[a]), pursuant to provisions of California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) and the CEQA Guidelines. The environmental setting provides the baseline physical conditions from which the lead agency will determine the significance of environmental impacts resulting from the French Hotel Project (Project).

3.1 Regional Environmental Setting

3.1.1 Regional Location

The Project Site is in the historic downtown area of the City along Camino Capistrano, near the City's commercial, civic, and visitor-serving uses. Regionally, the City of San Juan Capistrano is in southern Orange County and is bordered by the Cities of Dana Point to the south, Laguna Niguel and Aliso Viejo to the north, Laguna Hills and Mission Viejo to the northeast, and unincorporated Orange County to the east and west. Interstate (I-5) traverses the City in a north–south direction and provides regional access to the Project Site.

3.1.2 Regional Planning Considerations

3.1.2.1 Southern California Association of Governments Regional Transportation Plan/Sustainable Communities Strategy

The Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG) is a council of governments representing six counties—Imperial, Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, and Ventura Counties—191 cities, and more than 19 million residents. SCAG is the nation's largest metropolitan planning organization, with jurisdiction over 38,000 square miles. SCAG is a regional planning agency and a forum for addressing regional issues concerning transportation, the economy, community development, and the environment. SCAG is also the regional clearinghouse for projects requiring environmental documentation under federal and state law. In this role, SCAG reviews proposed development and infrastructure projects to analyze their impacts on regional planning programs.

The 2024–2050 Regional Transportation Plan/Sustainable Communities Strategy (RTP/SCS), "Connect SoCal," was adopted in April 2024. Connect SoCal embodies a collective vision for the region's future and was developed with input from local governments, county transportation commissions, Tribal governments, non-profit organizations, businesses, and local stakeholders in the member counties. Connect SoCal is a long-range visioning plan that balances future mobility and housing needs with economic, environmental and public health goals. It builds upon and expands land use and transportation strategies established over several planning cycles to increase mobility options and achieve a more sustainable growth pattern. It charts a path toward a more mobile, sustainable, and prosperous region by making connections between transportation

networks, between planning strategies, and between the people whose collaboration can improve the quality of life for residents of Southern California. To achieve the plan's vision, elements are organized in the pillars of Mobility, Communities, Environment, and Economy. Connect SoCal allocates $751 billion for transportation projects, including over 2,000 transportation projects through 2050, such as highway and street improvements, bicycle and pedestrian pathways, railroad grade separations, new transit hubs, and replacement bridges. In addition, Connect SoCal is supported by a combination of transportation and land use strategies that outline how the region can achieve California's greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions reduction goals and federal Clean Air Act requirements. Connect SoCal also strives to achieve broader regional objectives, such as the preservation of natural lands, improvement of public health, increased roadway safety, improvement of access to jobs and educational resources, support for the region's vital goods movement industries, and more efficient use of resources.

The SCS outlines a development pattern for the region, which, when integrated with the transportation network and other transportation measures and policies, would reduce GHG emissions from transportation (excluding goods movement). The SCS is meant to provide growth strategies that will achieve the regional GHG emissions reduction targets identified by the California Air Resources Board (CARB). However, the SCS does not require that local general plans, specific plans, or zoning be consistent with the SCS; instead, it provides incentives to governments and developers for consistency.

3.1.2.2 South Coast Air Basin Air Quality Management Plan

The Project Site is in the South Coast Air Basin, which is managed by the South Coast Air Quality Management District. Pollutants emitted into the ambient air by stationary and mobile sources are regulated by federal and state law and standards are detailed in the South Coast Air Basin Air Quality Management Plan. Air pollutants for which ambient air quality standards have been developed are known as criteria air pollutants—ozone (O_3), carbon monoxide (CO), volatile organic compounds (VOCs), nitrogen oxides (NO_x), sulfur dioxide (SO_2), coarse inhalable particulate matter (PM_{10}), fine inhalable particulate matter ($PM_{2.5}$), and lead. VOC and NO_x are criteria air pollutant precursors and go on to form secondary criteria air pollutants, such as O_3, through chemical and photochemical reactions in the atmosphere. Air basins are classified as attainment/non-attainment areas for particular pollutants depending on whether they meet ambient air quality standards for that pollutant. The South Coast Air Basin is designated non-attainment for O_3, $PM_{2.5}$, PM_{10}, and lead (Los Angeles County only) under the California and National Ambient Air Quality Standards and non-attainment for nitrogen dioxide (NO_2) under the California Ambient Air Quality Standards.

3.1.2.3 2022 Scoping Plan for Achieving Carbon Neutrality

Assembly Bill (AB) 32 requires CARB to reduce statewide GHG emissions to 1990 levels by 2020. As part of this legislation, CARB was required to prepare a "Scoping Plan" that demonstrates

how the State of California will achieve this goal. The first Scoping Plan was adopted in 2011 and describes local governments as "essential partners" in meeting the statewide goal, recommending a GHG emissions reduction level 15 percent below 2005–2008 levels (depending on when a full emissions inventory was available) by 2020.

As directed by AB 32, CARB adopted the first Climate Change Scoping Plan (Scoping Plan) in December 2008, in accordance with California Health and Safety Code, Section 38561. The Scoping Plan included measures to address GHG emissions reduction strategies related to energy efficiency, water use, and recycling and solid waste, among other measures. The Scoping Plan was updated in 2014, 2017, and most recently in 2022.

The most recent update to the Scoping Plan was adopted by CARB in December 2022 (2022 Scoping Plan). The 2022 Scoping Plan assesses progress toward the statutory 2030 target of at least 40 percent below 1990 emissions and identifies a path to achieving carbon neutrality by 2045, consistent with AB 1279 targets described above. The 2022 Scoping Plan identifies reductions for each GHG emissions sector (e.g., the transportation, industry, electricity generation, agriculture, commercial and residential, and waste sectors) to achieve these goals. For each of these sectors, the 2022 Scoping Plan also describes strategies for GHG emissions reductions (CARB 2022).

3.1.2.4 Senate Bill 743

Senate Bill 743 (Steinberg, 2013), which was codified in California Public Resources Code, Section 21099, required changes to the guidelines implementing CEQA Guidelines regarding the analysis of transportation impacts. As one appellate court explained, "during the last 10 years, the Legislature has charted a course of long-term sustainability based on denser infill development, reduced reliance on individual vehicles and improved mass transit, all with the goal of reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Section 21099 is part of that strategy . . ." (Covina Residents for Responsible Development v. City of Covina [2018] 21 Cal.App.5th 712, 729). Pursuant to California Public Resources Code, Section 21099, the criteria for determining the significance of transportation impacts must "promote the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, the development of multimodal transportation networks, and a diversity of land uses" (California Public Resources Code, Section 21099[b][1]; refer to adopted CEQA Guidelines, Section 15064.3[b] [Criteria for Analyzing Transportation Impacts]). To that end, in developing the criteria, the Governor's Office of Land Use and Climate Innovation has proposed and the California Natural Resources Agency has certified and adopted changes to the CEQA Guidelines that identify vehicle miles traveled (VMT) as the most appropriate metric to evaluate a project's transportation impacts. With the California Natural Resources Agency's certification and adoption of the changes to the CEQA Guidelines, automobile delay, as measured by "level of service" and other similar metrics, generally no longer constitutes a significant environmental effect under CEQA (California Public Resources Code, Section 21099[b][3]).

The City of San Juan Capistrano's VMT Screening Criteria Flowchart establishes a step-by-step screening process used to determine whether a proposed project may be presumed to result in a less than significant transportation impact under CEQA without requiring detailed VMT modeling. The screening process is intended to streamline transportation analysis for projects that are consistent with Senate Bill 743 objectives promoting infill development, multimodal transportation, reduced vehicle dependence, and efficient land use patterns.

Under the City's screening methodology, a project is evaluated against five screening criteria. If a project satisfies one or more of the applicable screening criteria, the project may qualify for a presumptive less than significant VMT impact determination.

The City's five screening criteria are summarized as follows:

- **Weekday Daily Trip Assessment.** Projects generating fewer than 500 net new weekday daily vehicle trips may qualify for screening because small projects are generally not expected to result in substantial increases in regional VMT.
- **Transit Assessment.** Projects located within 0.5 mile of a major transit stop or high-quality transit corridor may qualify for screening because proximity to transit is associated with reduced automobile dependence and lower VMT generation.
- **Local-Serving Retail Assessment.** Local-serving retail projects may qualify for screening where trips are primarily redistributed from existing nearby retail destinations rather than generating substantial new regional vehicle travel demand.
- **Locally Serving Public Facility Assessment.** Public facilities serving local community needs may qualify for screening because they generally accommodate existing demand in the community rather than creating substantial new vehicle travel.
- **Affordable Housing Assessment.** Affordable housing projects may qualify for screening because such projects are typically associated with lower household VMT generation rates and support state housing and sustainability objectives.

Projects that do not satisfy any applicable screening criterion may require preparation of a detailed VMT analysis to evaluate consistency with the City's adopted VMT thresholds of significance under CEQA.

3.2 Local Environmental Setting

3.2.1 Project Location

Almquist Development + Investment, the Project Applicant, is requesting approval to rehabilitate and develop a hotel and ancillary uses on a 1.68-acre property at 31861–31871 Camino Capistrano in the City of San Juan Capistrano, Orange County (Assessor's Parcel Numbers 121-150-28, 121-150-29, and 121-150-30) (Project Site).

3.2.2 Existing Conditions

Refer to the Existing Conditions sections in Sections 4.1, Aesthetics, through 4.11, Tribal Cultural Resources, for existing conditions pertaining to each environmental issue area.

3.2.3 Current Zoning

Section 9-3.101 of the San Juan Capistrano Municipal Code establishes the zoning districts for each parcel throughout the City. The Project Site is zoned as Town Center (TC) in the San Juan Capistrano Municipal Code.

The Zoning Code is intended to guide the development of the City in an orderly manner, implement the policies of the General Plan to encourage the most appropriate use of land; to conserve and stabilize the value of property; to provide adequate open spaces for light and air, and to prevent and permit adequate control of fires; to prevent undue concentration of population; to lessen congestion on streets; to facilitate adequate provision for community facilities and utilities, including transportation, water supply, sewage disposal, schools, parks and other public requirements which tend to promote the health, safety and public welfare; all in accordance with a comprehensive plan for the orderly development of the City and its environs.

3.2.4 Public Services and Utilities

Public services and utilities on the Project Site are listed below:

- Police – Orange County Sheriff's Department
- Fire – Orange County Fire Authority
- Public Schools – Capistrano Unified School District
- Library – Orange County Public Library
- Water and Wastewater Systems – Santa Margarita Water District (SMWD)
- Wastewater Treatment – South Orange County Wastewater Authority
- Drainage System – City of San Juan Capistrano
- Solid Waste Collection – CR&R Incorporated
- Electricity and Natural Gas – San Diego Gas & Electric