MEMO

DATE: January 5, 2005

TO: Energy and Environment Committee (EEC)

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SUBJECT: Regional Comprehensive Plan Open Space and Habitat Chapter

SUMMARY

The Regional Comprehensive Plan Task Force, at its October 24 meeting, discussed the approach and scope for the planned Open Space and Habitat Chapter. The Task Force members and other meeting participants identified potential outcomes and regional goals that could be specified within the chapter, and form a focus for staff activities. This report includes comments from the Task Force.

BACKGROUND

The Regional Comprehensive Plan (RCP) is intended to serve as a useful tool to implement policies of the Regional Council. The approach for the overall development of the plan calls for a special emphasis on the Open Space and Habitat Chapter for the following reasons:

- The region's adopted 2% Strategy calls for increased urban development and growth in key strategic areas, while broadly supporting sustainability concepts and environmental protection. The region needs a well-articulated open space protection strategy to balance its urbanization strategy.
- There has been substantial planning work done within the region on open space and habitat issues, particularly at the county level, but little coordination among counties, at the regional scale, or between the region and the State.
- The State Resource Agencies has expressed an interest in pursuing with SCAG a coordinated open space and habitat planning process.
- Establishing a reliable, workable open space protection system is key to establishing alternative environmental review procedures under State law.

As such, the RCP Task Force held an extended discussion on potential goals and outcomes for the RCP Open Space and Habitat Chapter. The results of that discussion are recorded in the attached revised scope and approach for the chapter.

Given concurrence from the EEC, SCAG staff will proceed to develop a draft chapter. Specific activities to be pursued are described in detail in the attachment. Particularly of note are the following:

- The formation of a working group
- The retention of a consultant to develop, in consultation with the appropriate agencies, a comprehensive open space protection system

- Collaboration with State agencies on an iterative planning process
- Review of existing County level open space and habitat plans in response to SAFETEA-LU requirements for expanded consultation.

Attachment: Chapter Scope and Approach

This draft Open Space and Habitat chapter approach, as presented, is preliminary and has not been subject to formal approval of the SCAG Regional Council or any Committee. The draft is based on the discussions of the RCP Task Force and is being made available at this time for information and for suggestions.

Preliminary Draft Scope and Approach for the Regional Comprehensive Plan: Open Space and Habitat Chapter

Develop a vision for open space preservation for Southern California

Action: Develop regional level analyses with a consistent look and uniform procedures and mitigation. This would provide a template that could be easily implemented at the local level.

Activities:

1. Consult with agencies, stakeholders and the task force, to create an open space vision for the region.
2. Incorporate SCAG's Growth Vision/2% Strategy to help create a regional open space vision.
3. Consider options for reclaiming previously developed lands to be used as open space/park land.

Outcomes

a. The chapter will include quantifiable measures, such as a number of acres that should be preserved, and identify specific areas for preservation.
b. The regional vision will serve as a catalyst to subsequent work.

Identify suggested amount and type of parkland within urban settings

Action: The Open Space and Habitat chapter will attempt to develop measures of parkland and access appropriate for Southern California and delineate action steps to increase access to parks and open space for all Southern California residents. The discussion will include both small urban parks (e.g., pocket parks) and large regional parks.

Activities:

4. Meet with stakeholders to ascertain park needs at the regional level and develop ways to consider both large regional parks and small urban "pocket parks."
5. Include a discussion of agricultural lands and their importance to the region including an examination of urban agricultural lands (i.e., community gardens, create a 2% food strategy (i.e., 2% of food is grown locally))
6. The chapter will include a discussion of urban agriculture and benefits such as alleviating effects of urban heat islands, incorporating information from other RCP chapters as appropriate including water, energy, air quality and solid and hazardous waste.

Outcomes:

a. Through consultation with stakeholders, staff will develop "parks to people" ratios based on SCAG's Growth Vision/2% Strategy

Identify measures to mitigate habitat impacts of transportation projects

Action: The Open Space and Habitat chapter will examine wildlife crossings at the regional level, building on the work done in Ventura County and state conservancies, and apply the knowledge gained at a regional scale. This analysis will include identification of important and restricted wildlife corridors to preserve habitat connectivity.

Activities:

7. Explore impacts to fisheries, marine life and waterways.
8. Incorporate regional wildlife corridors analysis into the open space chapter.
9. Include a discussion of the benefits of parks/open space/natural areas on air quality and water quality.

Outcomes:

a. Develop habitat goals, including no net reduction due to development in species populations, and explore the potential to repopulate species.
b. Identify key wildlife corridors for the region.

<u>Identify financial mechanisms to accrue funding for open space protection</u>

Action: A consultant is expected to be retained for tasks including (but not limited to) securing open space resources, forming a pool of funding for mitigation of impacts of new development, and providing discretionary incentive funding to cities and counties for adopting policies supportive of a regional growth strategy developing infrastructure. The financial element will also include a discussion of the overall costs of operations and maintenance of parks and open space areas.

Activities:

10. Explore cumulative impacts due to the loss of open space for the region such as degradation of air, water quality and public health benefits.
11. Attempt to ascertain the actual value of open space/natural areas by evaluating "hidden" costs associated with development of open space.
12. Explore alternative funding mechanisms for open space protection and preservation.
13. Explore ways to tap into readily available funds for mitigation.

Outcomes:

a. With the help of a consultant, staff will attempt to find more effective tools and monetary incentives to achieve open space goals.
b. As a result, there will be better understanding of the cumulative impacts and "real" cost of loss of open space and natural areas.

<u>Analyze existing state plans for open space, habitat, and parks. Recommend for future planning efforts based on consistency with the region's desired outcomes</u>

Action: The California Resources Agency has agreed, in concept, to collaborate on the chapter. Evaluation at the regional level will enable communities to see what has been done elsewhere. In addition, this process will be

proactive rather than reactive (relying on the endangered species acts) and will facilitate broad community participation. This will help develop an iterative process whereby regional priorities influence other plans and vice versa.

Activities:

14. Coordinate with the Resources Agency staff to ensure compliance with the Endangered Species Act.
15. Comply with the new requirements of SAFETEA-LU which require expanded consultation and evaluation of currently available plans.

Outcomes:

a. Through the consultation process SCAG will help establish consistent coordinated open space planning throughout the region.

<u>Develop open space and habitat planning tools and best practices to be implemented at the local level</u>

Action: Recognizing the benefits of parks are experienced at the local level, the open space and habitat chapter will include a "toolkit" for local governments who want to increase park space within their jurisdictions.

Activities:

16. Distinguish between parks (typically in developed areas) and natural areas (typically in non-developed areas).
17. Provide technical assistance to local agencies for linking parklands.
18. Share best practices uncovered during the process to educate local agencies on available tools.
19. Build on work that has been done already, including by the Rivers and Mountains Conservancy

Outcomes:

a. SCAG will develop specific guidance on achieving open space goals with optional implementation.