

CHAPTER 5

Alternatives

Pursuant to the provisions of CEQA, this chapter describes and evaluates alternatives to the proposed project (which includes the Housing Element Update (HEU), the Stanford Community Plan (SCP) update, and related rezonings), including a “No Project” alternative, and identifies an “environmentally superior” alternative. The primary purpose of this section is to provide decision-makers and the public with a qualitative review of project alternatives that eliminate or substantially reduce any of a project’s adverse environmental impacts while, at the same time, attaining most of the project objectives.

5.1 CEQA Requirements

CEQA requires that an EIR describe and evaluate a range of reasonable alternatives to the proposed project and evaluate the comparative merits of the alternatives (*CEQA Guidelines* Section 15126.6(a), (d)). The “range of alternatives” is governed by the “rule of reason,” which requires the EIR to set forth only those potentially feasible alternatives necessary to foster informed decision-making and public participation (Section 15126.6(a), (f)).

The range of alternatives shall include alternatives that would feasibly attain most of the basic objectives of the project and would avoid or substantially lessen any of the significant effects of the project (*CEQA Guidelines* Section 15126.6(a)-(c)). CEQA generally defines “feasible” to mean an alternative that is capable of being accomplished in a successful manner within a reasonable period of time, taking into account economic, environmental, social, technological, and legal factors. In addition, the following may be taken into consideration when assessing the feasibility of alternatives: site suitability; economic viability; availability of infrastructure; general plan consistency; other plans or regulatory limitations; jurisdictional boundaries; and the ability of the proponent to attain site control (Section 15126.6(f)(1)). The EIR should briefly describe the rationale for selecting the alternatives to be discussed and identify any alternatives that were rejected as infeasible, briefly explaining the reasons (15126.6(c)).

The description or evaluation of alternatives does not need to be exhaustive, and an EIR need not consider alternatives for which the effects cannot be reasonably determined and for which implementation is remote or speculative. An EIR need not describe or evaluate the environmental effects of alternatives in the same level of detail as the proposed project, but must include enough information to allow meaningful evaluation, analysis, and comparison with the proposed project (*CEQA Guidelines* Section 15126.6(d)).

The “no project” alternative must be evaluated. This analysis shall discuss the existing conditions, as well as what could be reasonably expected to occur in the foreseeable future if the project were not approved, based on current plans and consistent with available infrastructure and community services (*CEQA Guidelines* Section 15126.6(e)(2)).

CEQA also requires that an environmentally superior alternative be selected from among the alternatives. The environmentally superior alternative is the alternative with the fewest or least severe adverse environmental impacts. When the “no project” alternative is the environmentally superior alternative, the EIR must also identify an environmentally superior alternative from among the other alternatives (*CEQA Guidelines* Section 15126.6(e)(2)).

5.1.1 Project Objectives

CEQA Guidelines Section 15124(b) requires the description of the project in an EIR to state the objectives sought by the project.

“A clearly written statement of objectives will help the lead agency develop a reasonable range of alternatives to evaluate in the EIR and will aid the decision makers in preparing findings or a statement of overriding considerations, if necessary. The statement of objectives should include the underlying purpose of the project.”

In keeping with this requirement, the County’s project objectives are as follows:

- Update the General Plan’s Housing Element to comply with State-mandated housing requirements and to address the maintenance, preservation, improvement, and development of housing in the County between 2023 and 2031.
- Include an inventory of housing sites in the Housing Element and rezone those sites as necessary to meet the required Regional Housing Needs Allocation and to provide an appropriate buffer for achieving the RHNA.
- To affirmatively further fair housing (AFFH). In particular, to integrate AFFH into the process of site selection, outreach and policy/program development.
- Incentivize the development of housing, particularly affordable housing, suited to special needs and all income levels.
- Amend land use designations in the County’s General Plan as needed to maintain internal consistency between the elements and comply with recent changes in State law.
- Make necessary General Plan amendments and zoning changes in a manner that affirmatively furthers fair housing while preserving the character of Santa Clara County and perpetuating the health, safety and welfare of both existing and future residents.
- Update the SCP policies to, among other things, incentivize the production of adequate and affordable housing, address transportation/circulation issues, establish parameters for future General Use Permit approvals, ensure provision of adequate municipal services; and relocate a potential future public school site.

5.1.2 Elimination and/or Reduction of Identified Significant Impacts

CEQA *Guidelines* § 15126.6(b) states that “Because an EIR must identify ways to mitigate or avoid the significant effects that a project may have on the environment (Public Resources Code Section 21002.1), the discussion of alternatives shall focus on alternatives to the project or its location which are capable of avoiding or substantially lessening any significant effects of the project, even if these alternatives would impede to some degree the attainment of the project objectives, or would be more costly.”

Potentially significant environmental impacts that would result from the proposed project and SCP update project are evaluated in Chapter 4, *Environmental Setting, Impacts, and Mitigation Measures*, of this EIR. With implementation of standard conditions and requirements, as well as mitigation measures identified for each resource area significantly impacted, many of the potentially significant impacts resulting from the proposed project would be reduced to a less-than-significant level. The proposed project impacts listed below would remain significant and unavoidable even after mitigation, and the alternatives evaluated in this EIR have been selected because they are anticipated to reduce and/or eliminate one or more of the listed significant and unavoidable impacts associated with the proposed project.

Impact AQ-3: Construction and operation of individual development projects following adoption of the project could result in a cumulatively considerable net increase in criteria pollutants for which the region is in nonattainment status under an applicable federal, state, or regional ambient air quality standard. (*Significant and Unavoidable Impact, with Mitigation*)

Impact CR-1: Implementation of the project could cause a substantial adverse change in the significance of an historical resource pursuant to CEQA Guidelines Section 15064.5. (*Significant and Unavoidable Impact, with Mitigation*)

Impact CR-4: Implementation of the project, in combination with other cumulative development, could cause a substantial adverse change in the significance of historical resources pursuant to CEQA Guidelines Section 15064.5. (*Significant and Unavoidable Impact, with Mitigation*)

Impact NOI-1: Construction activities associated with implementation of the proposed project would not result in generation of a substantial temporary increase in ambient noise levels in the vicinity of the project in excess of standards established in the local general plan or noise ordinance, or applicable standards of other agencies. (*Significant and Unavoidable Impact, with Mitigation*)

Impact TRA-2: Implementation of the project would exceed an applicable VMT threshold of significance (*Significant and Unavoidable Impact, with Mitigation*)

Impact TRA-6: Implementation of the project, in combination with cumulative development, would exceed an applicable VMT threshold of significance (*Significant and Unavoidable Impact, with Mitigation*)

5.1.3 Factors in the Selection of Alternatives

The nature and scope of the range of alternatives to be discussed is governed by the “rule of reason.” The CEQA *Guidelines* recommend that an EIR should briefly describe the rationale for selecting the alternatives to be discussed (Section 15126.6[c]). This alternatives analysis considers the following factors:

- The extent to which the alternative would accomplish most of the basic objectives of the proposed project;
- The extent to which the alternative would avoid or lessen the identified significant, or less-than-significant with mitigation, environmental effects of the proposed project;
- The feasibility of the alternative, taking into account site suitability, availability of infrastructure, general plan consistency, and consistency with other applicable plans and regulatory limitations;
- The extent to which an alternative contributes to considering a “reasonable range” of alternatives necessary to permit a reasoned choice; and
- The requirement of the CEQA *Guidelines* to consider a “No-Project” alternative, and to identify an “environmentally superior” alternative in addition to the no-project alternative (Section 15126.6[e]).

5.1.4 Alternatives Considered but Rejected from Further Evaluation

Several alternatives were considered for analysis and determined not to be feasible for the reasons explained in this section. These alternatives were not carried forward for analysis in this EIR.

Off-Site Alternative

The primary objective of the HEU is to ensure the County’s conformance with State law and recent State policy and legislative directives concerning the provision of more housing. There would be no way to meet this objective with an alternative that did not focus on the County itself, and therefore this alternative was not analyzed further.

The primary purpose of the SCP update is to identify housing sites and update various policies applicable to the SCP area. Therefore, no off-site alternatives are appropriate.

Fewer Urban HEU Sites

The first Notice of Preparation (NOP) circulated for the project on August 8, 2022 included housing opportunity sites in the southern portion of the County near the Cities of Morgan Hill and Gilroy. Comments received concerning those sites suggested a potential for significant impacts related to agricultural resources, public services and recreation, and utilities and service systems. In addition, at the time of the first NOP’s circulation, the County was in discussions with its municipal partners concerning identification of other opportunity sites in the more urban portions of the County, notably on unincorporated County islands in the City of San José. Based upon each of these considerations, the County decided to eliminate the Morgan Hill and Gilroy sites

from further consideration, and to add additional sites in the unincorporated urbanized areas of San José. A revised NOP was circulated to reflect this change on March 21, 2023. Ultimately, an HEU comprised of fewer urbanized sites was eliminated from further consideration due to the potential for significant environmental effects, and also in consideration of greater suitability and feasibility of developing housing in more urbanized areas, particularly with respect to development of affordable housing and minimizing VMT (e.g., proximity to job centers, services, and public transit).

More Intensive HEU

Consideration was given to developing an HEU and housing inventory with substantially greater density and a correspondingly greater number of housing units, notwithstanding the fact that the HEU, as proposed, would provide for a quantity of units that is between 181 percent and 272 percent above the County's RHNA. Providing even more units at greater densities could encourage development of more housing, which, in light of the current housing shortage, could be viewed as desirable.

Accordingly, consideration was given to developing an HEU and housing inventory with substantially greater density and a correspondingly greater number of housing units. However, as discussed in Chapter 3, *Project Description*, of this EIR, the proposed project identifies specific sites, densities, new residential units, and strategies appropriate for development of housing (in particular affordable units) necessary to meet the requirements of State-mandated housing requirements as manifested in the RHNA. An HEU and housing inventory alternative that would include sites, densities, and new residential units that would exceed the requirements of State law and the HEU as proposed would result in even greater environmental impacts than those identified for the proposed project increased extent and intensity of new development. Consequently, a more intensive HEU alternative would not meet the CEQA requirement to consider alternatives to the project that would avoid or substantially lessen any significant effects of the project. Based upon these considerations, this alternative was rejected from further consideration and was not carried forward for detailed analysis.

5.1.5 Alternatives to Lessen Identified Significant Effects

As noted in several of the topical sections of Chapter 4 of this EIR, potentially significant and unavoidable effects were identified proposed project in Section 5.1.2, and generally relate to the following categories: 1) air quality; 2) cultural resources; and 3) transportation. CEQA Guidelines Section 15126.6(b) notes that a principal purpose of alternatives is to identify feasible alternatives to a project or its location that are capable of avoiding or substantially lessening the significant effects of a project. To that end, the County contemplated feasible alternatives that could avoid or lessen the effects identified in the three categories listed above.

Air Quality

In Section 4.2 of this EIR, *Air Quality*, Impact AQ-3 found that construction and operation of individual development projects following adoption of the proposed project and SCP update could result in a cumulatively considerable net increase in criteria pollutants for which the region is in nonattainment status, even with prescribed mitigations. This impact is most closely

associated with larger projects and the analysis conservatively found that since the type and extent of larger residential development projects cannot currently be known, the potential impact must be considered significant and unavoidable until those projects are actually proposed and further analysis is conducted to determine if they would, in fact, exceed applicable emissions thresholds.

Developing an alternative that would avoid this impact is not feasible because prescribing mitigation measures or other restrictions that require individual development projects to be smaller in scale would constrain the development of housing and run counter to the goals of the HEU and State law. For instance, if the County were to adopt an alternative that would limit the size of developments to keep them below emissions screening thresholds, such an alternative could have the effect of discouraging developers from pursuing projects since required economies-of-scale might not be possible. This is particularly true for housing projects in the lower income ranges, where the scale of the project can have a direct bearing on the economic feasibility of a given project.

Further, an insistence on smaller projects would also limit the County's ability to effectively meet its RHNA requirements, since it is likely that one or more larger projects would be required to meet the unit goals articulated in the RHNA and the adopted HEU. Adoption of such an alternative would run counter to the requirements of State housing law, in that it would create direct obstacles to realization of the proposed project's intent. Meeting the State-mandated housing requirements to accommodate the project population and housing needs over the 2023-2031 period as manifested in the County's RHNA and applicable State law is the foremost objective of the proposed project.

For each of these reasons, an alternative that would lessen the proposed project's air quality impacts associated with larger projects was not carried forward for further analysis.

Cultural Resources

In Section 4.4 of this EIR, *Cultural Resources*, Impacts CR-1 and CR-4 determined that implementation of the proposed project could result in a significant and unavoidable impact to historic architectural resources (i.e., historic buildings), even with implementation of regulations, policies, and prescribed mitigations aimed to prevent or minimize impacts to historic architectural resources. Furthermore, as time passes, additional sites and buildings may qualify for consideration as historic resources in the future (i.e., existing buildings will become 45 years old or older). If a structure meeting the definition of a historic resource were to be demolished to make way for development of housing, then that impact would be significant. While the prescribed mitigation measures would require identification and documentation of the resource, they would not fully mitigate the impact to a less-than-significant level if that resource were permanently lost. This is a conservative conclusion and is not intended to suggest that such impacts or that the demolition of historic structures are being contemplated. Rather, the conclusion is based on the fact that such impacts cannot be entirely ruled out when considering any and all projects that could arise in the County with implementation of the proposed project, and housing development in general.

As with the previous discussion on significant and unavoidable impacts related to air quality, developing an alternative that would avoid this impact by guaranteeing that no impacts could occur is not feasible. For this topic, the only manner in which a significant impact could be guaranteed to not occur would be to disallow entirely any demolition of any structure that could be deemed historic. An alternative that would forbid any impacts to historic structures could place substantial limitations on the development of housing intended to meet the goals of the HEU. Further, adoption of such an alternative would run counter to the requirements of State housing law, in that it would create direct obstacles to realization of the proposed project's intent. Meeting the State-mandated housing requirements as manifested in the RHNA and applicable State law is the foremost objective of the proposed project.

Accordingly, consideration of an alternative that would impose such a condition was not carried forward for further analysis. Rather, this impact will be dealt with in the manner prescribed in Section 4.4 of this EIR, by requiring structures of eligible age to be assessed for eligibility as historic resources, per federal and State criteria, and for prescribed actions to be taken prior to removal in the event that an affirmative finding is made.

Noise

In Section 4.11 of this EIR, *Noise*, Impact NOI-1 determined that implementation of the project could result in a significant and unavoidable impact related to temporary noise during the construction of the development projects that would be facilitated by the project. This is a function of the fact that the various development sites identified in the HEU and SCP are located in proximity to sensitive noise receptors, such as adjacent existing residences and other urban uses. While mitigation measures were prescribed to limit noise created by heavy equipment during demolition and construction, the analysis determined that a significant and unavoidable impact would still occur, even with implementation of all feasible mitigation.

As with the previous discussion on significant and unavoidable impacts related to air quality, developing an alternative that would avoid this impact is not feasible because prescribing mitigation measures or other restrictions that require individual development projects to not create excessive levels of demolition and construction noise would constrain the development of housing and run counter to the goals of the HEU and State law. The fact is that demolition and construction activities create high levels of noise by their very nature. While mitigations can be implemented to limit the hours of such activities and require noise suppression on heavy equipment, the fact remains that demolishing an existing structure and operating heavy equipment are both noisy operations, and carrying out those activities in an area that is already urbanized will create temporary adverse noise effects to nearby sensitive receptors. While an alternative could be implemented that would require development to occur in areas where sensitive receptors are not present or are more distant from construction activities (i.e., in rural areas), such an alternative would run counter to the overall goal of providing housing to people where they actually need it, such as in areas that are close to employment centers, schools, and urban amenities. In addition, placing housing in rural areas that are further afield from employment centers, schools, and urban amenities would result in longer commuting distances for those residents, and would thus result in more severe impacts to pollutant emissions, greenhouse gas emissions, and VMT.

For each of these reasons, an alternative that would lessen the proposed project's temporary construction noise impacts was not carried forward for further analysis.

Transportation

Potential project impacts related to VMT are addressed in Impacts TRANS-2 and TRANS-6 of this EIR. As discussed in Impact TRANS-2, the EIR's analysis conformed to the Office of Planning and Research's (OPR) recommended VMT threshold of 15 percent below the regional average VMT per capita. Residential VMT is defined as home-based VMT as calculated by the VTA travel demand model. The VTA model estimated the unincorporated County's average residential VMT as 18.56 home-based VMT per capita. Unincorporated Santa Clara County's residential VMT under the Baseline + proposed project scenario was compared against the baseline scenario to determine the proposed project's impact on VMT. The Baseline + proposed project scenario includes in addition to baseline conditions the additional 8,441 HEU housing units and the 24,394 population increase in unincorporated Santa Clara County, compared to the baseline scenario. The model estimated unincorporated Santa Clara County's average residential VMT for the Baseline + proposed project scenario as 17.42 home-based VMT per capita, which is only 6 percent below the Baseline.

The analysis in Impact TRANS-2 determined that the residential VMT per capita for the project as a whole would be significant and unavoidable. In addition to considering VMT impacts associated with the proposed project as a whole, the analysis in Impact TRANS-2 considered the potential impacts associated with individual multifamily development projects allowed by the proposed project assuming that some future development projects may be ministerial, meaning they will not be subject to additional CEQA review. In other cases, the development projects may be exempt from additional VMT analysis under various circumstances that provide screening criteria to exempt residential projects from VMT analysis.¹

The analysis noted that future individual development projects allowed by the proposed project that are subject to additional review and are not exempt from a VMT analysis would be subject to a separate, project-specific VMT analysis. This analysis, which would be based on the specific characteristics of the proposed project and its location, could potentially identify exceedances of the VMT criterion of 15 percent below the regional average VMT per capita, particularly for housing sites that have limited access to transit. For this reason, the impact of the proposed project was conservatively considered potentially significant, requiring mitigation. Accordingly, Mitigation Measure TRANS-2 requires that individual multifamily housing development proposals that are not exempt from VMT impact analysis be required to provide a quantitative VMT analysis. Projects that result in a significant impact would be required to include travel demand management measures and/or physical measures as described in the prescribed mitigation measure (e.g., improving the multimodal transportation network, improving street connectivity) to reduce VMT.

However, because the effectiveness of the measures included in Mitigation Measure TRANS-2 to reduce an individual project's VMT impact to a less-than-significant level cannot be determined

¹ It is assumed that any screening criteria established to exempt residential projects from VMT analysis would be based on substantial evidence that such criteria are indicative of less-than-significant VMT effects.

until the specific characteristics of the projects are known, Impacts TRANS-2 and TRANS-6 conservatively found that the impact for projects which do not screen out from VMT impact analysis would remain significant and unavoidable, even with mitigation.

In considering an alternative to avoid this impact, consideration was given to an alternative that would concentrate all housing opportunity sites associated with the proposed project to those areas of Santa Clara County that lie within identified low-VMT areas. Generally, these areas are close to quality transit facilities and are developed at relatively high densities. As stated in this EIR's transportation analysis, projects located in a low-VMT area are generally presumed to have a less-than-significant impact to VMT, assuming certain conditions are met. This is done by bringing transit, jobs, and housing together in downtowns, along main streets, and around rail stations. However, doing so would place serious constraints on the sites that the County could select for development of housing. The number of unincorporated "islands" in urban areas where VMT has been identified as low is limited. As would be expected, most low-VMT areas are located in urban cores within incorporated portions of Santa Clara County and are therefore not available for inclusion in the County's HEU. These constraints on site selection would limit the ability of the County to meet its RHNA obligations and provide a suitable buffer. The alternative would therefore not meet the objectives of the proposed project and would run counter to the requirements of State law. Therefore, this alternative was not carried forward for further analysis.

5.2 Description of Alternatives Selected for Analysis

Since no feasible or practical alternatives were identified that would effectively reduce one or more of the proposed projects significant and unavoidable effects, consideration was given to alternatives that might lessen the overall effects of the project, even those found to be less than significant. These deliberations resulted in the selection of one alternative to be carried forward for detailed evaluation and the conclusion that no other alternative was feasible and appropriate for further consideration. The County determined that this alternative, along with the No Project Alternative, represents a reasonable range of alternatives described and analyzed in this EIR. These alternatives are described in further detail and analyzed below.

- Alternative 1: No Project.** This alternative assumes that the proposed project would not occur. The SCP update would not be adopted and the goals and policies within the existing Housing Element would remain unchanged. An update to the SCP would also not occur under this alternative. Finally, the housing opportunity sites inventory strategies proposed as part of the HEU to meet the requirements of State law, such as rezoning, increased densities, and/or updates to the Zoning Ordinance, would not occur under this alternative. However, residential development within the unincorporated County would continue to be directed and governed in the manner that it is currently provided for in the County's General Plan and Zoning Ordinance in their present forms.
- Alternative 2: Lesser Intensity Alternative.** This alternative would only provide sufficient density/units to meet the County's RHNA allocation plus a 30 percent buffer. According to the County's RHNA, at a minimum, it must provide sufficient sites for development of 3,125 residential units between 2023-2031. With a 30 percent buffer (938 residential units), this alternative would provide 4,063 units, or approximately 30 to 50 percent fewer units than the proposed project. An update to the SCP would continue to occur under this alternative.

5.2.1 Alternative 1: No Project Alternative

CEQA requires consideration of the No Project Alternative, which addresses the impacts associated with not moving forward with the project. The purpose of analyzing the No Project Alternative is to allow decision-makers to compare the impacts of the project versus no project. Under the No Project Alternative, the proposed project would not be adopted and the goals and policies within the existing Housing Element would remain unchanged. An update to the SCP would also not occur under this alternative. Finally, the housing opportunity sites inventory strategies proposed as part of the proposed project to comply with the requirements of State law, such as rezoning, increased densities, and/or updates to the Zoning Ordinance, which are assumed to result in the production of approximately 6,198 and 8,441 new housing units, would not occur under this alternative. However, residential development within the County would continue to be directed and governed in the manner that it is currently under the No Project Alternative.

This alternative would not meet any of the objectives of the proposed project as defined above in Section 5.1.1. The No Project Alternative would not update the General Plan's Housing Element to comply with State-mandated housing requirements and to address the maintenance, preservation, improvement, and development of housing in the County between 2023 and 2031; would not include an adequate inventory of housing sites and rezone the sites as necessary to meet the required RHNA and to provide an appropriate buffer; and would not integrate AFFH into the process of site selection, outreach and policy/program development. In addition, development of housing, particularly affordable housing suited to special needs and all income levels, would not be incentivized. Finally, necessary General Plan amendments and zoning changes would not be made in a manner that affirmatively furthers fair housing for both existing and future residents.

5.2.2 Alternative 2: Lesser Intensity Alternative

This alternative would only provide sufficient density/units to meet the County's RHNA allocation plus a 30 percent buffer. According to the County's RHNA, at a minimum, it must provide 3,125 residential units between 2023-2031. With a 30 percent buffer (938 residential units), this alternative would provide a potential of 4,063 units, or approximately 30 to 50 percent fewer units than the proposed project. An update to the SCP would continue to occur under this alternative.

This alternative was selected for analysis because it would result in a lower intensity of development that could lessen some of the project's environmental effects. It would not, however, substantially lessen or eliminate the project's significant and unavoidable effects for the reasons outlined previously and discussed further below. Nevertheless, the alternative was selected for analysis because it could potentially meet the County's RHNA obligations while lessening some of the project's effects.

5.3 Comparative Analysis of the Alternatives

This section presents a discussion of the comparative environmental effects of No Project Alternative (Alternative 1) and the Lesser Intensity Alternative (Alternative 2).

5.3.1 Comparison of Impacts Identified for the Proposed Project and the Alternatives

Alternative 1: No Project Alternative

Under the No Project Alternative, the proposed project would not be adopted and the goals and policies within the existing Housing Element would remain unchanged and the SCP would not be updated. Finally, housing opportunity sites identified as part of the HEU to meet the requirements of State law, such as rezoning to allow increased densities, would not occur under this alternative. However, this alternative would not preclude additional development in the County under existing land use and zoning regulations. As previously explained, the purpose of the HEU is to fulfill the County's RHNA requirements to meet the forecasted population growth and associated housing demand for the 2023-2031 period. Thus, it is assumed that this population growth and associated housing demand would still occur under the No Project Alternative.

Impacts

Aesthetics

The No Project Alternative would result in less than significant impacts related to aesthetics, as compared to the less than significant impacts associated with the proposed project. Under the No Project Alternative, residential development in the unincorporated portions of Santa Clara County could still take place, but at a lesser intensity at particular locations than that allowed under the proposed project. The County's existing land use and zoning designations would remain as they are currently, as would the County's development standards. While development would still occur, it would conform to existing land use designations and zoning requirements. This is not to say that the No Project Alternative could not result in changes to the visual environment. However, the overall visual effect of development could potentially be less than the proposed project, since densities could be less and the buildings potentially less prominent.

Air Quality

The No Project Alternative would likely result in lesser impacts to air quality, but would likely remain significant and unavoidable, the same as the proposed project. Under the No Project Alternative, residential development in unincorporated portions of Santa Clara County could still take place, but at a lesser intensity at particular locations than that provided for under the proposed project. This lesser-intensity development could emit fewer emissions, although larger projects could still potentially surpass applicable regulatory criteria, and therefore it cannot be stated with certainty that the potential impact would not remain unavoidably adverse. In addition, just because expanded residential development opportunities would not be provided for in unincorporated portions of Santa Clara County, this doesn't mean that the forecasted population growth and associated residential development would not occur elsewhere in Santa Clara County, such as in more distant rural areas, cities, or neighboring counties, such as in Alameda, San Mateo, and San Benito Counties, to meet the demand for housing for the many people who work in Santa Clara County. Some of this demand could be met by developing housing in areas that are far removed from the unincorporated urban areas of Santa Clara County in proximity to places of employment, transit, and services, thus increasing commute distances, VMT, and associated air

quality emissions, though it is not possible to speculate as to the ultimate effect since providing housing elsewhere would be outside of the County's control. However, it could be reasonably assumed that VMT under the No Project Alternative could be greater than the proposed project, and thus so would the associated pollutant emissions.

Biological Resources

The No Project Alternative would result in less-than-significant impacts to biological resources, similar to the proposed project. Under the No Project Alternative, residential development in unincorporated portions of Santa Clara County could still take place, but at a lesser intensity than that provided for under the proposed project. Regardless, potential impacts to biological resources would be subject to the same standards and regulatory requirements as the proposed project, and the impacts of the No Project Alternative would therefore be similar to the proposed project.

Cultural

The No Project Alternative would result in the same significant and unavoidable impacts to cultural resources as the proposed project. Under the No Project Alternative, residential development in unincorporated portions of Santa Clara County could still take place, but at a lesser intensity than that provided for under the proposed project. However, since the location and extent of that development is not currently known, there is no guarantee that individual projects proposed under the existing Housing Element would not adversely affect cultural resources during development, particularly historic buildings. Such an effect and loss of those resources could be significant and unavoidable, like the proposed project.

Energy

The No Project Alternative would result in less-than-significant impacts to energy, similar to the proposed project. Under the No Project Alternative, residential development in unincorporated portions of Santa Clara County could still take place, but at a lesser intensity than that provided for under the proposed project. Regardless, any development would still be held to the same energy standards, regardless of which alternative is adopted, and the impact would be less than significant, like the project.

Geology and Paleontological Resources

The No Project Alternative would result in less-than-significant impacts to geology and paleontological resources, similar to the proposed project. Under the No Project Alternative, residential development in unincorporated portions of Santa Clara County could still take place, but at a lesser intensity than that provided for under the proposed project. Regardless, potential impacts related to geology and paleontological resources would be subject to the same standards and regulatory requirements as the proposed project, and the impacts of the No Project Alternative would therefore be similar to that of the proposed project.

Greenhouse Gas Emissions

The No Project Alternative would result in less-than-significant effects to greenhouse gas emissions, similar to the proposed project. Under the No Project Alternative, residential development in unincorporated portions of Santa Clara County could still take place, but at a lesser intensity than that provided for under the proposed project. This lesser-intensity development could emit fewer greenhouse emissions than the proposed project. However, just because expanded residential development would not be provided for in unincorporated portions of Santa Clara County, this doesn't mean that residential development might not occur elsewhere in Santa Clara County, such as in more distant rural areas, cities, or in neighboring counties, such as in Alameda, San Mateo, and San Benito Counties, to meet the demand for housing for the many people who work in Santa Clara County. Some of this demand could be met by developing housing in areas that are far removed from the urban unincorporated portions of the County, thus increasing commute distances, VMT, and associated GHG emissions. Therefore, it could be reasonably assumed that VMT under the No Project Alternative could be greater than the proposed project, and thus so would the associated GHG emissions.

Hazards and Hazardous Materials

The No Project Alternative would result in less-than-significant impacts to hazards and hazardous materials, similar to the proposed project. Under the No Project Alternative, residential development in unincorporated portions of the County could still take place, but at a lesser intensity than that provided for under the proposed project. Regardless, potential impacts related to hazards and hazardous materials would be subject to the same standards and regulatory requirements as the proposed project, and the impacts of the No Project Alternative would therefore be similar to that of the proposed project.

Hydrology and Water Quality

The No Project Alternative would result in less-than-significant impacts to hydrology and water quality, similar to the proposed project. Under the No Project Alternative, residential development in unincorporated portions of the County could still take place, but at a lesser intensity than that provided for under the proposed project. Regardless, potential impacts related to hydrology and water quality would be subject to the same standards and regulatory requirements as the proposed project, and the impacts of the No Project Alternative would therefore be similar to that of the proposed project.

Land Use and Planning

The No Project Alternative would result in significant and unavoidable impacts related to land use and planning, as compared to the less-than-significant impacts associated with the proposed project. Under the No Project Alternative, residential development in unincorporated portions of the County could still take place, but at a lesser intensity than that provided for under the proposed project. Under the No Project Alternative, the proposed project would not be adopted and the goals and policies within the County's existing Housing Element would remain unchanged. The land use and zoning designations currently in place would continue under the land use decisions and development parameters that currently exist in unincorporated Santa Clara

County. However, this alternative would not provide housing to fulfill the requirements of State law or to meet the County's RHNA requirements, which would be a significant and unavoidable impact, as compared to the less-than-significant impacts associated with the proposed project.

Noise and Vibration

The No Project Alternative would result in less-than-significant impacts to noise and vibration, similar to the proposed project. Under the No Project Alternative, residential development in unincorporated portions of the County could still take place, but at a lesser intensity than that provided for under the proposed project. Regardless, potential impacts related to noise and vibration would be subject to the same standards and regulatory requirements as the proposed project, and the impacts of the No Project Alternative would therefore be similar to that of the proposed project.

Population and Housing

The No Project Alternative would result in a significant-and-unavoidable impact to population and housing, greater than the proposed project. Under the No Project Alternative, the proposed project would not be adopted and the goals and policies within the County's existing Housing Element would remain unchanged. Resulting population growth would be less and would be consistent with the County's current General Plan and zoning, thus constituting "planned" growth. However, this alternative would not provide housing to fulfill the requirements of State law or to meet the County's RHNA requirements, which would be a significant and unavoidable impact, as compared to the less-than-significant impacts associated with the proposed project.

Public Services and Recreation

The No Project Alternative would result in less-than-significant impacts to public services and recreation, similar to the proposed project. Under the No Project Alternative, residential development in unincorporated portions of Santa Clara County could still take place, but at a lesser intensity than that provided for under the proposed project. Regardless, potential impacts related to public services and recreation would be subject to the same standards and regulatory requirements as the proposed project, and the impacts of the No Project Alternative would therefore be similar to that of the proposed project.

Transportation

The No Project Alternative would result in the same significant and unavoidable (with mitigation) impacts identified with the proposed project. Under the No Project Alternative, residential development in unincorporated portions of the County could still take place, but at a lesser intensity than that provided for under the proposed project. Under the No Project Alternative, per capita VMT would vary depending on the location and type of new development, and each project would require separate environmental analysis. A general assumption could be made that total VMT would be less than the proposed project since there would be less development. However, just because expanded residential development would not be provided for in unincorporated portions of Santa Clara County, this doesn't mean that residential development might not occur elsewhere in Santa Clara County, such as in more distant rural areas, cities, or in

neighboring counties, such as in the Counties of Alameda, San Mateo, San Benito, and even further afield to meet the demand for housing for the many people who work in Santa Clara County. Some of this demand could be met by developing housing in areas that are far removed from the urban unincorporated areas of Santa Clara County, thus increasing commute distances and VMT. Therefore, it could be reasonably assumed that VMT under the No Project Alternative could be greater than the proposed project, and thus the effect could be more severe.

Tribal Cultural Resources

The No Project Alternative would result in less-than-significant impacts to tribal cultural resources, similar to the proposed project. Under the No Project Alternative, residential development in unincorporated portions of Santa Clara County could still take place, but at a lesser intensity than that provided for under the proposed project. Regardless, potential impacts to tribal cultural resources would be subject to the same tribal consultation and regulatory requirements as the proposed project, and the impacts of the No Project Alternative would therefore be similar to that of the proposed project.

Utilities and Service Systems

The No Project Alternative would result in less-than-significant impacts to utilities and service systems, similar to the proposed project. Under the No Project Alternative, residential development in unincorporated portions of Santa Clara County could still take place, but at a lesser intensity than that provided for under the proposed project. Regardless, potential impacts related to utilities and service systems would be subject to the same standards and regulatory requirements as the proposed project, and the impacts of the No Project Alternative would therefore be similar to that of the proposed project.

Alternative 2: Lesser Intensity Alternative

This alternative would only provide sufficient density/units to meet the County's RHNA allocation plus a 30 percent buffer. According to the County's RHNA, at a minimum, it must provide 3,125 residential units between 2023-2031. With a 30 percent buffer (938 residential units), this alternative would provide 4,063 units, or approximately 30 to 50 percent fewer units than the proposed project.

Impacts

Aesthetics

The Lesser Intensity Alternative would result in lesser impacts to aesthetics, but would remain less than significant, the same as the proposed project. Under the Lesser Intensity Alternative, residential development would still occur on the housing opportunity sites, but at a lesser intensity than that provided for under the proposed project. It thus follows that development would be less dense and therefore less prominent as it could be developed with buildings that are lower in height. Therefore, impacts would still be less than significant, but marginally less than the proposed project.

Air Quality

The Lesser Intensity Alternative would likely result in lesser impacts to air quality, but would likely remain significant and unavoidable, the same as the proposed project. Under the Lesser Intensity Alternative, residential development would still occur on the housing opportunity sites, but at a lesser intensity than that provided for under the proposed project, and that this lesser-intensity development would emit fewer direct emissions. However, demand for housing in Santa Clara County would still exist, and thus less housing under this alternative could result in additional residential development occurring elsewhere in the County, such as in rural unincorporated areas, cities, or in neighboring counties, such as in Alameda, San Mateo, and San Benito Counties, to meet the demand for housing for the many people who work in Santa Clara County. Some of this demand could be met by developing housing in areas that are far removed from the urban unincorporated areas of Santa Clara County, thus increasing commute distances, VMT, and associated air quality emissions. Thus, it could be reasonably assumed that VMT under the Lesser Intensity Alternative could be greater than the proposed project, and thus associated air quality emissions.

Biological Resources

The Lesser Intensity Alternative would result in less-than-significant impacts to biological resources, similar to the proposed project. Under the Lesser Intensity Alternative, residential development would still occur on the housing opportunity sites, but at a lesser intensity than that provided for under the proposed project. The impacts related to biological resources would be subject to the same standards and regulatory requirements as the proposed project, and thus the Less Intensity Alternative would therefore be similar to that of the proposed project.

Cultural

The Lesser Intensity Alternative would result in the same significant and unavoidable impacts to cultural resources as the proposed project. Under the Lesser Intensity Alternative, residential development would still occur on the housing opportunity sites, but at a lesser intensity than that provided for under the proposed project. However, development under this alternative could still adversely affect cultural resources during development, particularly historic buildings. Such an effect and loss of those resources would be significant and unavoidable, similar to the proposed project.

Energy

The Lesser Intensity Alternative would result in less-than-significant impacts to energy, similar to the proposed project. Under the Lesser Intensity Alternative, residential development would still occur on the housing opportunity sites, but at a lesser intensity than that provided for under the proposed project would be held to the same energy standards, regardless of which alternative is adopted, and the impact would be less than significant.

Geology and Paleontological Resources

The Lesser Intensity Alternative would result in less-than-significant impacts to geology and paleontological resources, similar to the proposed project. Under the Lesser Intensity Alternative, residential development would still occur on the housing opportunity sites, but at a

lesser intensity than that provided for under the proposed project. Impacts related to geology and paleontological resources would be subject to the same standards and regulatory requirements as the proposed project, and thus the Less Intensity Alternative would therefore be similar to that of the proposed project.

Greenhouse Gas Emissions

The Lesser Intensity Alternative would result in less-than-significant effects to greenhouse gas emissions, similar to the proposed project. Under the Lesser Intensity Alternative, residential development would still occur on the housing opportunity sites, but at a lesser intensity than that provided for under the proposed project. The lesser-intensity development would emit fewer direct GHG emissions. However, demand for housing in Santa Clara County would remain, and thus less housing under this alternative could result in additional residential development occurring elsewhere in Santa Clara County, such as in rural unincorporated areas, cities, or in neighboring counties, such as in Alameda, San Mateo, and San Benito Counties, to meet the demand for housing for the many people who work in Santa Clara County. Some of this demand could be met by developing housing in areas that are far removed from unincorporated portions of Santa Clara County, thus increasing commute distances, VMT, and associated GHG emissions. Thus, it could be reasonably assumed that VMT under the Lesser Intensity Alternative could be greater than the proposed project, and thus so could the associated GHG emissions.

Hazards and Hazardous Materials

The Lesser Intensity Alternative would result in less-than-significant impacts to hazards and hazardous materials, similar to the proposed project. Under the Lesser Intensity Alternative, residential development would still occur on the housing opportunity sites, but at a lesser intensity than that provided for under the proposed project. The lesser-intensive alternative's impacts related to hazards and hazardous materials would be subject to the same standards and regulatory requirements as the proposed project, and thus the impacts of the Less Intensity Alternative would therefore be similar to that of the proposed project.

Hydrology and Water Quality

The Lesser Intensity Alternative would result in less-than-significant impacts to hydrology and water quality, similar to the proposed project. Under the Lesser Intensity Alternative, residential development would still occur on the housing opportunity sites, but at a lesser intensity than that provided for under the proposed project. Impacts related to hydrology and water quality would be subject to the same standards and regulatory requirements as the proposed project, and the impacts of the Lesser Intensity Alternative would therefore be similar to that of the proposed project.

Land Use and Planning

The Lesser Intensity Alternative would result in less-than-significant impacts to land use and planning, the same as the proposed project. Potential impacts related to land use and planning under this alternative and the proposed project are less than significant because each would

amend the County's General Plan polices and zoning standards as needed to ensure consistency with County policies and standards, and the impacts under each would therefore be similar.

Noise and Vibration

The Lesser Intensity Alternative would result in less-than-significant impacts to noise and vibration, the same as the proposed project. Under the Lesser Intensity Alternative, residential development would still occur on the housing opportunity sites, but at a lesser intensity than that provided for under the proposed project. Noise generated during construction and operation of the housing projects could be marginally less than the project. Regardless, potential impacts related to noise and vibration would be subject to the same standards and regulatory requirements as the proposed project, and the impacts of the Lesser Intensity Alternative would therefore be similar to that of the proposed project.

Population and Housing

The Lesser Intensity Alternative would result in less-than-significant impacts to population and housing, the same as the proposed project. The population growth and housing demand forecast by ABAG for Santa Clara County and the Bay Area Region over the 2023-2031 period would occur regardless of the proposed project.. However, the alternative would not provide for the same level of housing as the proposed project, and the provision of housing in the Bay Area to address the ongoing housing shortage is a stated policy in the plans of the Association of Bay Area Governments and the California Department of Housing and Community Development, as well as the expressed intent of recent changes to State law. While this alternative could still meet the County's RHNA obligations, it would do so less effectively than the project as proposed.

Public Services and Recreation

The Lesser Intensity Alternative would result in less-than-significant impacts to public services and recreation, similar to the proposed project. Under the Lesser Intensity Alternative, residential development would still occur on the housing opportunity sites, but at a lesser intensity than that provided for under the proposed project. The demands on public service and recreation facilities would be marginally less than the project. Regardless, potential impacts related to public services and recreation would be subject to the same standards and regulatory requirements as the proposed project, and the impacts of the Lesser Intensity Alternative would therefore be similar to that of the proposed HEU.

Transportation and Traffic

The Lesser Intensity Alternative would result in the same significant and unavoidable (with mitigation) impacts identified with the proposed project. Under the Lesser Intensity Alternative, residential development would still occur on the housing opportunity sites, but at a lesser intensity than that provided for under the proposed project. The lesser-intensity development would result in fewer vehicle trips. However, demand for housing in the County would not disappear, and thus less housing under this alternative could result in additional residential development occurring elsewhere in Santa Clara County, such as the rural unincorporated areas, cities, or in neighboring counties, such as in Alameda, San Mateo, and San Benito Counties, to

meet the demand for housing for the many people who work in Santa Clara County. Some of this demand could be met by developing housing in areas that are far removed from unincorporated portions of the County, thus increasing commute distances and VMT. Thus, it could be reasonably assumed that VMT under the Lesser Intensity Alternative could be greater than the proposed project.

Tribal Cultural Resources

The Lesser Intensity Alternative would result in less-than-significant impacts to tribal cultural resources, similar to the proposed project. Under the Lesser Intensity Alternative, residential development would still occur on the housing opportunity sites, but at a lesser intensity than that provided for under the proposed project. The impacts to tribal cultural resources would be subject to the same tribal consultation and regulatory requirements as the proposed project, and the impacts of the Lesser Intensity Alternative would therefore be similar to that of the proposed project.

Utilities and Service Systems

The Lesser Intensity Alternative would result in less-than-significant impacts to utilities and service systems, similar to the proposed project. Under the Lesser Intensity Alternative, residential development would still occur on the housing opportunity sites, but at a lesser intensity than that provided for under the proposed project. The demands on utilities and service systems would be marginally less than the proposed project. Regardless, potential impacts related to utilities and service systems would be subject to the same standards and regulatory requirements as the proposed project, and the impacts of the Lesser Intensity Alternative would therefore be similar to that of the proposed project.

5.3.2 Overall Comparison of the Alternatives

The analysis of the alternatives is summarized in **Table 5-1**. Overall, this table shows that one alternative performs better or worse than the other in reducing or avoiding the proposed project impacts.

5.4 Environmentally Superior Alternative

Based on the evaluation described in this section, both the No Project Alternative and the Lesser Intensity Alternative would be environmentally superior alternatives with the fewest environmental impacts, though both alternatives could result in the development of housing that is further spread out and thus could contribute to greater impacts related to air quality, GHG emissions, and VMT. Regardless, the No Project Alternative would not meet any of the basic objectives of the project, nor is it legally feasible to adopt and implement.

CEQA requires that a second alternative be identified when the “No Project” alternative is the environmentally superior alternative (CEQA *Guidelines*, Section 15126.6(e)). Therefore, the Lesser Intensity Alternative would be the Environmentally Superior Alternative for the purpose of this analysis.

**TABLE 5-1
ALTERNATIVE IMPACT SUMMARY AND COMPARISON**

Impact	Proposed Project	Alternative 1: No Project	Alternative 2: Lesser Intensity Alternative
Aesthetics	Less than Significant	Less than Significant ↓	Less than Significant ↓
Air Quality	Significant and Unavoidable	Significant and Unavoidable ↑/↓	Significant and Unavoidable ↑
Biological Resources	Less than Significant	Less than Significant ↓	Less than Significant ↑/↓
Cultural Resources	Significant and Unavoidable	Significant and Unavoidable ↑/↓	Significant and Unavoidable ↑/↓
Energy	Less than Significant	Less than Significant ↓	Less than Significant ↑/↓
Geology & Paleontological Resources	Less than Significant	Less than Significant ↓	Less than Significant ↑/↓
Greenhouse Gas Emissions	Less than Significant	Significant and Unavoidable ↑	Less than Significant ↑
Hazards and Hazardous Materials	Less than Significant	Less than Significant ↓	Less than Significant ↑/↓
Hydrology and Water Quality	Less than Significant	Less than Significant ↓	Less than Significant ↑/↓
Land Use and Planning	Less than Significant	Significant and Unavoidable ↑	Less than Significant ↑/↓
Noise	Less than Significant	Less than Significant ↓	Less than Significant ↓
Population and Housing	Less than Significant	Significant and Unavoidable ↑	Less than Significant ↑
Public Services and Recreation	Less than Significant	Less than Significant ↓	Less than Significant ↓
Transportation	Significant and Unavoidable	Significant and Unavoidable ↑/↓	Significant and Unavoidable ↑
Tribal Cultural Resources	Less than Significant	Less than Significant ↓	Less than Significant ↑/↓
Utilities and Service Systems	Less than Significant	Less than Significant ↓	Less than Significant ↓

NOTES:

↓ - The impact is less than the proposed project.

↑ - The impact is greater than the proposed project.

↑/↓ - The impact is about the same as the proposed project.

Under the Lesser Intensity Alternative, the following significant and unavoidable impacts would remain:

Impact AQ-3: Construction and operation of individual development projects following adoption of the project could result in a cumulatively considerable net increase in criteria pollutants for which the region is in nonattainment status under an applicable federal, state, or regional ambient air quality standard. *(Significant and Unavoidable Impact, with Mitigation)*

Impact CR-1: Implementation of the project could cause a substantial adverse change in the significance of an historical resource pursuant to CEQA Guidelines Section 15064.5. *(Significant and Unavoidable Impact, with Mitigation)*

Impact CR-4: Implementation of the project, in combination with other cumulative development, could cause a substantial adverse change in the significance of historical resources pursuant to CEQA Guidelines Section 15064.5. *(Significant and Unavoidable Impact, with Mitigation)*

Impact NOI-1: Construction activities associated with implementation of the proposed project would not result in generation of a substantial temporary increase in ambient noise levels in the vicinity of the project in excess of standards established in the local general plan or noise ordinance, or applicable standards of other agencies. *(Significant and Unavoidable Impact, with Mitigation)*

Impact TRA-2: Implementation of the project would exceed an applicable VMT threshold of significance *(Significant and Unavoidable Impact, with Mitigation)*

Impact TRA-6: Implementation of the project, in combination with cumulative development, would exceed an applicable VMT threshold of significance *(Significant and Unavoidable Impact, with Mitigation)*

Even though the Lesser Intensity Alternative would still result in the same significant-and-unavoidable impacts associated with the proposed project, it would lessen the overall intensity of development, and would therefore have a marginally lesser impact for several issues identified in the preceding discussions and summarized in Table 5-1, while still meeting the basic objectives of the proposed project. Issues where impacts would be marginally less under this alternative include aesthetics, noise, public services and recreation, and utilities and service systems. However, several impacts would likely be worsened, including air quality, greenhouse gas emissions, and VMT. This is because the lesser level of housing developed under the alternative could incentivize the development of housing in areas that are further afield from the employment centers of Santa Clara County, thus requiring workers to undertake longer commutes to get to their places of work. For this reason, it can be reasonably assumed that VMT under the Lesser Intensity Alternative could be greater than the proposed project related to air quality and greenhouse gas emissions impacts. In addition, the alternative would provide for less housing in Santa Clara County. Even though the County's RHNA obligations might be met, it would do so less effectively than the project as proposed.

In summary, while the Lesser Intensity Alternative would potentially reduce impacts for several issues (aesthetics, noise, public services and recreation, and utilities and service systems), impacts

in other areas could potentially increase, including air quality, greenhouse gas emissions, population and housing, and VMT. While it cannot be stated with certainty the degree to which these effects could be worsened, the overall effect around these issues could be greater than the project as currently proposed.