



Sonoma County Planning Commission STAFF REPORT

FILE: PLP18-0039

DATE: June 16, 2022

TIME: At or after 1:05 p.m.

STAFF: Doug Bush, Project Planner

Beth Thompson, De Novo Planning Group

Title:

Public hearing to receive comments on the Springs Specific Plan Draft Environmental Impact Report

Recommended Action:

Hold a public hearing to receive public comment on the Draft Environmental Impact Report (DEIR) for the proposed Springs Specific Plan

Summary:

The Springs Specific Plan area is defined as the approximately 180 acre area in the southeastern portion of Sonoma County that is located within the proposed Springs Specific Plan boundary. The Springs is an unincorporated community located in central Sonoma Valley immediately north of the City of Sonoma. The Springs includes portions of the unincorporated communities of Agua Caliente, Fetters Hot Springs, and Boyes Hot Springs, as well as portions of the Donald Street and Verano Avenue neighborhood north of the City of Sonoma. The Plan area is bounded by Agua Caliente Road at the north and Verano Avenue at the south and is bisected by the Highway 12 commercial corridor.

The 'L'-shaped Plan area has several distinct settings: the 1.6 mile stretch of mixed use along the Highway 12 corridor that forms the vertical stroke of the 'L', the residential neighborhoods just east and west of the highway, and the residential area that forms the base of the 'L' to the east along Donald and Verano Streets. Agua Caliente Creek crosses the Plan area south of Encinas Lane. In 2016, the Springs population was estimated to be 1,803 people.

The Plan area currently includes the following uses, as identified by the Sonoma County Assessor's office: 78.5 acres of single-family residential, 21.6 acres of multi-family residential (including duplexes through fourplexes), 15.74 acres of commercial, 2.77 acres of office, 1.47 acres of industrial, 3.35 acres of mixed use, and 3.59 acres of public uses and 15.6 acres of vacant land.

The overall purpose of the Springs Specific Plan is to identify the community's vision for the future growth, development, and community resources within the Specific Plan area in a manner consistent with the quality of life desired by residents and businesses. The Springs Specific Plan is a long-term plan to re-imagine the Hwy 12 corridor as a diverse public space with a community plaza and safety improvements for walking and biking. The project provides increased opportunities for housing, as well as recreational, commercial and office space to serve the area. The plan proposes rezoning of properties within the plan area to effectuate the objectives of the



plan, and proposes design guidelines. The plan also identifies potential funding mechanisms and measures to implement the plan

For a complete project description for the Springs Specific Plan, see Section 2.0-1 of the DEIR. For an executive summary of the DEIR, see Section ES-1 of the DEIR (Attachment 1).

Hearing Purpose:

The purpose of this hearing is to receive public comments on the adequacy of the Draft Environmental Impact Report (DEIR) and the analysis of potential impacts and associated mitigation measures contained therein. After this hearing, additional comments from the public and stakeholder agencies will be accepted in writing until 5:00pm on July 19, 2022. After this hearing and the close of the public comment period, staff will prepare written responses to all comments received at this hearing and also to the written comments received during the comment period. These responses will be included in the Final EIR. If new significant impacts are identified that are not considered in the Draft EIR, recirculation of a revised environmental document may be required. After preparation of the Final EIR, a second hearing will be scheduled for the Planning Commission to consider certification of the Final EIR and a recommendation to the Board of Supervisors regarding adoption of the Plan.

Discussion:

Background:

In 2015, Sonoma County began a community-driven land-use planning process for this portion of the Sonoma Valley. Located immediately north of the City of Sonoma, the Springs Plan Area includes parts of the unincorporated communities of Aqua Caliente, Fetters Hot Springs, and Boyes Hot Springs. Covering approximately 178 acres, the plan area is bounded by Aqua Caliente Road at the north and Verano Avenue at the south and is bisected by the Highway 12 commercial corridor.

In 2016, the Springs population was estimated to be 1,803. The Plan area currently includes around 15.6 acres of vacant land, 78.5 acres of land used for single-family residential use, 21.6 acres used for multi-family residential use, 15.74 acres of commercial, 2.77 acres of office, 1.47 acres of industrial, 3.35 acres of mixed use, and 3.59 acres of public use. Historically, the area was included in the Springs Redevelopment Plan but this was eliminated with the statewide dissolution of redevelopment agencies in 2012. Much of the project area is subject to Highway 12 Design Guidelines which were originally adopted in 1994, and these guidelines would be replaced in the plan area by the proposed project. As the design guidelines have aged, and the redevelopment plan has been eliminated, the Springs Specific Plan process has provided a renewed opportunity for community input on land use in the area.

Like the Springs Redevelopment Plan that preceded it, the Specific Plan would support the community’s vision of the Highway 12 corridor as a community-oriented “main street.” New zoning would support a mix of residential and neighborhood oriented commercial uses, with opportunities for more than 700 housing units. The plan would improve community safety by supporting continued improvements to sidewalks, bike lanes and crosswalks for safer and more convenient walking, bicycling and public transit options. A community plaza location was identified in response to broad public interest in improved public gathering spaces, and the Plan identifies locations for better connections with local parks. The Plan would also support the community’s vibrant design and diverse character through the introduction of new design guidelines.

Project Objectives:



The Springs Specific Plan is based around community-centered objectives that resulted from over 20 public meetings and outreach events held from 2016 to 2019 (Attachment 2). These objectives include:

1. Recognize and promote the Springs commercial corridor as a mixed-use “downtown” serving the larger Springs community. The Springs Specific Plan encompasses the primary commercial district that serves as the “downtown” area of the larger Springs community. New commercial development along the Highway 12 corridor will increase the variety of retail shops and neighborhood services. New mixed-used development will help meet the housing needs of the community while providing pedestrian-oriented retail and restaurants. Wider sidewalks enhanced with pedestrian- and bike-friendly features will make it easier and more pleasant for residents to access local stores and services.
2. Develop a centrally-located community plaza. Provide a central gathering place where farmers markets, concerts, and other community events can take place to enhance the vitality of the Springs area. The Community Plaza should be designed to reflect the multi-cultural character of the community.
3. Celebrate the unique, multi-cultural identity of the springs. Recognize that the Springs is a diverse multi-cultural community with significant historic resources and character. Ensure that new development respects the area’s treasured past.
4. Increase affordable, workforce, and mixed use housing, and create new infill opportunities for higher density housing, while also expanding the variety of housing choices on vacant parcels in the Plan area.
5. Improve the pedestrian, bicycle, and transit network. Provide bicycle, pedestrian, and transit facilities through the Springs that are safe, well lit, shaded, comfortable, well connected, and accessible. This improved multimodal network will provide greater incentive for people to choose non-vehicular travel for their daily trips to reduce Vehicle Miles Traveled and support local climate goals. The Springs mobility network should recognize that non-vehicular travel is the primary travel mode for some residents.
6. Ensure an adequate parking supply. Provide parking garages and/or surface parking lots adjacent to Highway 12, particularly in areas where there are existing parking shortages and near the area planned for the community plaza.
7. Address community safety. Create a safe environment for residents and employees by providing attractive, well-lit, and well-maintained public and community facilities that encourage regular use.
8. Create and connect to more parks and open space. Create new public and semi-public spaces, such as plazas, pocket parks, parklets, and green space, to create a desirable system of parks and community gathering areas.
9. Regional Planning. Assist the County in meeting its Regional Housing Needs Allocation by designating and zoning sites for higher densities and maintain consistency with the Priority Development Area designation by the Association of Bay Area Governments.

Summary of Draft EIR and Significant Effects:

The Draft EIR addresses environmental impacts associated with the proposed Springs Specific Plan Project that are known to the County of Sonoma, were raised during the Notice of Preparation process, or identified during



preparation of the Draft EIR. The Draft EIR discusses significant and potentially significant impacts in terms of several environmental categories including aesthetics, greenhouses gases, noise, transportation/circulation, and vehicle miles traveled, and considers cumulative impacts as well. These impacts are summarized in the Executive Summary of the DEIR, which includes a table outlining the level of potential impacts, and where further discussion can be found in the document (Attachment 1).

Alternatives:

An EIR is required to describe a reasonable range of alternatives to the project or to the location of the project which would reduce or avoid significant impacts, and which could feasibly attain most of the basic objectives of the Project. The alternatives analyzed in this EIR include the following, which are discussed in greater detail in Section 5 of the DEIR:

Alternative 1 - No Project Alternative. Alternative 1, the No Project Alternative, assumes that the Plan area maintains the existing General Plan land use designations and the existing zoning.

Alternative 2. This alternative was designed to accommodate less growth than the Project, and reduce the Project’s contribution to significant impacts that could occur with project implementation.

- Reduce densities in the Donald/Verano neighborhood to reflect predominantly Low Density Residential zoning with one area designated for Medium Density Residential (R2 12);
- Replace the Recreation district located north of Old Maple Avenue with High Density Residential zoning (R3 15), removing the potential for a hotel;
- Reduce the High Density Residential zoning north of Old Maple Avenue from R3 16 to R3 15;
- Reduce the High Density Residential zoning (R3 12) to Medium Density Residential zoning (R2 12) on the east side of Highway 12 from Agua Caliente Road to the parcels south of Sunnyside Avenue and on the parcel located south of Vailetti Drive at the western edge of the Plan area;
- Revise development standards to reduce allowed development densities and intensities for the Mixed Use district to 15 dwelling units per acre for the residential component and a maximum floor area ratio of 1.6 for the non-residential component; and
- Reduce the allowed floor area ratio for the Recreation district to 0.25.

Alternative 3. This alternative would take all steps identified in Alternative 2 but would reduce residential and non-residential development potential to an even greater extent by further reducing densities in the Donald Street area to include predominantly Low Density Residential Zoning (R1 2 through R1 6).

Environmental Review Process Overview:

The California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) is intended to achieve several objectives:

- Inform the public and local decision makers about the potential environmental impacts of proposed projects – including policy projects like the Springs Specific Plan that don’t necessarily involve construction;
- Identify ways that environmental damage can be avoided or reduced;
- Prevent significant, avoidable environmental damage by requiring changes in projects, either by adoption of project alternatives or through the use of mitigating actions; and finally



- Disclose to the public why a project was approved, if it would cause unavoidable significant impacts.

An EIR is required when the County determines that a project would have one or more significant impacts on the environment. The EIR process involves the following steps:

- Notice of Preparation (NOP) (Posted June 27, 2018). When the County has identified that an EIR will be prepared, a NOP is sent to notify responsible agencies, organizations and public. The purpose of the NOP is to invite guidance on what the scope and content of the EIR should be. Comments received in response to the NOP are considered in preparing the DEIR. The NOP for the Springs Specific Plan was posted on June 27, 2018.
- Scoping (Meeting held July 10, 2018). One of the first steps in preparing an EIR is determining the range of issues that are relevant to the proposed project, and identifying feasible alternatives or mitigation measures that would avoid potentially significant environmental effects. Scoping is done in consultation with responsible agencies, and the public, and includes public noticing and a public meeting. Comments received during the project scoping session are included in Appendix A of the Draft EIR.
- Notice of Completion (Published on May 18, 2022). When the DEIR is ready to be published, the County files a Notice of Completion (NOC) with the State and begins a public review period that typically extends for at least 45 days. For the Springs Specific Plan, this review period has been extended to 60 days to allow for additional review. When the NOC has been filed, public notice may be published in a public newspaper and provided to any parties who have requested project updates.
- Draft Environmental Impact Report (Released on May 18, 2022). In addition to a description of the project and environmental setting the DEIR evaluates the potential environmental effects from adoption and implementation of the Project in different environmental categories (e.g. air quality, wildfire, visual impacts), determines whether the Project is expected to have no impact, a less than significant impact, or potentially significant impacts. In each category, any impact that would be significant or potentially significant, includes proposed mitigation measures. The document also contains an analysis of project alternatives (modified versions of the project that would still accomplish the project goals), identification of significant and unavoidable impacts, how the project could affect population growth and how the project might interact with other projects in the area.

Next Steps:

Following the end of the public review period for the DEIR on July 19, a Final EIR will be prepared. The Final EIR will respond to comments received during the public review period and to oral comments received at this public meeting. The Planning Commission and Board of Supervisors will then review and consider the Final EIR at publically noticed public hearings. If the County finds that the Final EIR shows a good faith effort at full disclosure of environmental information and contains enough analysis to allow for an informed decision-making process, the County may take action to approve, approve with modifications, or reject the project, and certify the EIR. If the project is approved, a Mitigation Monitoring Program is also adopted to ensure that measures identified in the EIR are carried out during project implementation.

Date	Project Milestone
May 18, 2022	60 day public comment period begins on the DEIR



- June 16, 2022 Planning Commission hearing on DEIR (No vote)
- July 19, 2022 Close public comment period on DEIR, 60 days after the release
- October, 2022 Planning Commission
- January, 2023 Board of Supervisors hearings on final EIR and Specific Plan

Attachments:

1. DEIR Executive Summary
2. 2016-2019 Project Outreach Summary

Additional Materials:

1. Draft Springs Specific Plan and Draft Environmental Impact Report
 - a. Available for download at <https://permitsonoma.org/longrangeplans/proposedlong-rangeplans/springspecificplan/projectdocuments>
 - b. Available to review in person at Permit Sonoma, 2550 Ventura Ave in Santa Rosa and at the Sonoma Valley Regional Library at 755 W Napa St in Sonoma.

