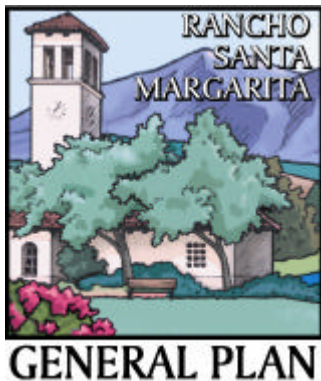


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Introduction to the General Plan

The City of Rancho Santa Margarita is a small urban community located in a unique natural setting. Incorporated on January 1, 2000 with a population of 47,214, Rancho Santa Margarita became the 33rd city in Orange County. Located in the eastern part of the County and along the Santa Ana Mountains, the City provides an oasis from sprawling urbanized development that characterizes much of southern California. The City was planned to offer the best amenities of a small city, while maintaining the natural landscape of the area. These complementary features have resulted in a high quality of life and enjoyment for the members of the community.

Need for General Plan

The Rancho Santa Margarita General Plan represents an important opportunity for the City to chart its future and to retain the natural and aesthetic qualities of the community. The Plan provides the foundation for continued enhancement of Rancho Santa Margarita while also addressing the challenges presented by growth in unincorporated County areas and neighboring cities. The qualities that made Rancho Santa Margarita's master-planned communities desirable prior to incorporation form the basis for the Plan's long-range vision and provide guiding policies for the newly-formed City.

Planning for the future means addressing key issues in the City and responding to the dynamics of population growth, economic development, natural resource preservation, and land use. Successful planning also recognizes the contributions of housing, circulation, public safety, open space and urban design in creating livable communities. To this end, the General Plan serves as a policy guide, balancing these important and inter-related factors to Rancho Santa Margarita's community vision.



Preparation of the City's first General Plan affords an occasion to establish solid policies and programs directed at managing growth, enhancing quality of life and livability, and achieving sustainability in Rancho Santa Margarita. The active role that the community has taken in both pre- and post-incorporation planning is an integral part of this Plan. The Plan promotes the values of the residents and businesses in the community through policies and programs to meet the challenges and opportunities that face the City in the first part of this new century.

Rancho Santa Margarita Planning Area

Rancho Santa Margarita contains approximately 13 square miles of land (or about 8,280 acres) and is located in eastern Orange County about ten miles northeast of the Pacific Ocean, in the foothills of the Santa Ana mountains. Figure I-1 shows the location of Rancho Santa Margarita within the region. The community is divided by the Foothill Transportation Corridor which extends to the north connecting with North County cities such as Yorba Linda and Anaheim, and to the south connecting to San Clemente and offering access to San Diego County. The City is bordered on the west by Mission Viejo, on the east by the Cleveland National Forest, and on the north and south by unincorporated areas.



**Figure I-1
Regional Location**

Figure I-2 depicts the planning area for Rancho Santa Margarita which includes the City, adjacent unincorporated lands, and areas of Mission Viejo, Lake Forest, Chiquita Canyon, and the Cleveland National Forest that relate to long-range planning for the community. Much of the land in the planning area surrounding the City is under jurisdiction of other agencies, or is not identified for urban development in the General Plan. However, maintaining compatibility between future urban development described in the General Plan and adjacent uses is an important aspect of long-range planning.

History of the Community

Where schools, shopping centers and residential neighborhoods now stand, Native Americans once lived. On July 23, 1769, they were visited by a Spanish expedition under Captain Gaspar de Portola, who camped near the site of Tijeras Creek Golf Course in Rancho Santa Margarita.

On July 24, the expedition headed inland to avoid the many streams and swamps in the area. They found a large plateau area and camped that night on its western edge by a canyon, which the Franciscans named San Francisco Solano. This was on the eastern side of Trabuco Creek about three miles downstream from the present site of Trabuco Oaks. While camped here on July 24-25, one of the soldiers lost his *trabuco*, or musket, a most valuable possession to any soldier. To mark this loss, the stream was named Trabuco. The name has been associated with the mesa, the canyon, and the entire area ever since.

The Spaniards founded Mission San Juan Capistrano in 1776, and ruled the region until 1821, when California became part of Mexico. The Mexican governors carved the area around the mission into three large ranchos: Rancho Trabuco, Rancho Mission Viejo, and Rancho Santa Margarita.

James L. Flood and his partner Jerome O'Neill purchased the combined ranchos in 1882. The huge estate was run as a working ranch into the 1920s. In 1940, the ranch was divided, with the Flood family taking the lower portion, in today's San Diego County, with the upper portion retained by the O'Neill family. In 1942, the Navy annexed the Flood family's portion of the ranch for use as Camp Joseph H. Pendleton.

In 1948, the O'Neill family donated 278 acres of canyon bottom land to the County of Orange for park purposes. The O'Neill family donated an additional 120 acres of parkland in 1963, the same year they founded the Mission Viejo Company and drew up plans for a master-planned community of the same name.

By the 1960s, a rural cluster of homes had been present in Trabuco Canyon for decades. The area's first tract developed homes didn't arrive until late in the decade in what would become Coto de Caza, which started out as a hunting and fishing resort. The area remained fairly remote until 1986, when the first homes in the new master-planned community of Rancho Santa Margarita were sold. The economic boom of the 1980s also fueled home construction in nearby Dove Canyon, Robinson Ranch, Wagon Wheel and a handful of smaller developments. The area became better linked to the rest of the county in 1992, when extensions of Oso, Antonio and Alicia Parkways were completed.

In 1989, the people of the community of Rancho Santa Margarita established a Community Civic Association (CCA) for the purpose of providing a political voice for the community. The CCA, later known as the Rancho Margarita Civic Association (and still later as the Civic Council), briefly explored self-governance, but it was in 1995 that the RSM Cityhood Committee, a separate community organization, began the official drive for cityhood. Rancho Santa Margarita was planned to be an "Urban Village", offering the best of two worlds: all of the elements and advantages of a small city plus the quality of life of a small village.

In November 1999, area voters opted to incorporate the Rancho Santa Margarita Planned Community and the neighboring Robinson Ranch, Dove Canyon, Rancho Cielo, Trabuco Highlands and Walden Communities. The newly formed City of Rancho Santa

Margarita incorporated on January 1, 2000, and became the 33rd city in the County of Orange.

***Vision for the Future
of Rancho Santa
Margarita***

Building upon the City's history, and upon the vision statement for the original Rancho Santa Margarita Planned Community, the *Vision for the Future* provides the foundation for the General Plan, the sustaining basis for its goals, policies, and programs, and an expression of what the community wants to maintain or become:

Rancho Santa Margarita is a small city with the soul of a village. The City is instilled with traditions that honor the heritage of our land. A mix of land uses and a balance of jobs and housing provide a planned community oasis in which people live, work, shop, and play. Community events and public gathering places promote a family-oriented community and encourage community spirit and participation. The City maintains a safe environment through a variety of community programs, law enforcement, and fire protection services. Quality educational programs and facilities are promoted through cooperation between the City and the school districts.

As the community looks toward the future, Rancho Santa Margarita will strive to ensure its small town village character is protected and enhanced by well-designed and well-maintained neighborhoods that complement the natural environment. The quality of environmental, open space, scenic resources and our watershed shall be preserved to enhance the community's distinct setting and natural beauty. Other amenities such as Lake Santa Margarita, parks, pools, community centers, and pedestrian/bicycle trails will also be protected and well-maintained to meet the needs of the community.



As the community matures, residential, commercial, and industrial areas will be revitalized to enhance quality of life and encourage economic development. Because most facilities in Rancho Santa Margarita are owned and maintained by private organizations, the City will collaborate with public and private organizations, such as public service agencies, Homeowner Associations, and community foundations, to improve and maintain public services and facilities. The City will also maintain the transportation system to ensure safe and convenient access is provided to serve local and inter-community needs. These factors will continue to attract businesses that are beneficial to and thrive in the community.

***Purpose of the
General Plan***

California law requires each city to adopt a comprehensive, long-term General Plan to guide the physical development of the incorporated area and land outside municipal boundaries that bears a relationship to its planning activities. In essence, a city's General Plan serves as the blueprint for future growth and development. As a blueprint for the future, the plan must contain policies and programs designed to provide decision makers with a solid basis for decisions related to land use and development.

According to State law, the General Plan is the primary document the City utilizes to regulate land use. Consequently, the Zoning Ordinance, Specific Plans, and individual public and private development proposals must be consistent with the Plan goals, policies, and standards.

The Rancho Santa Margarita General Plan addresses many issues that are directly related to and influence land use decisions. In addition to land use, State law requires the Plan to address circulation, housing, conservation of natural resources, preservation of open space, the noise environment, and protection of public safety (Section 65302 of the California Government Code). These issues are discussed in the General Plan to the extent that they apply to Rancho Santa Margarita. The Plan also addresses economic development, a topic of special interest.

The Economic Development Element is an integral component of the General Plan and is essential to achieving the community's vision for the future. The Economic Development Element addresses actions the City can take to provide a balance between employment opportunities and housing, attract and retain businesses that are beneficial to the community; and maintain fiscal strength and

stability. The strategies and programs contained within the Element outline a course toward continued fiscal stability for the City.

***Organization and
Use of the General
Plan***

The City of Rancho Santa Margarita General Plan contains goals, policies, and plans that are intended to guide land use and development decisions in the future. The General Plan consists of a Land Use Policy Map and the following seven elements, or chapters, which together fulfill the State requirements for a General Plan:

- ? Land Use Element
- ? Economic Development Element (optional)
- ? Circulation Element
- ? Housing Element
- ? Conservation/Open Space Element (combined Elements)
- ? Safety Element
- ? Noise Element

In addition to the State-mandated elements, provisions of Orange County’s Measure M require cities to prepare a Growth Management Element, addressing timely provision of capital facilities and public services associated with new development.

The Rancho Santa Margarita elements sometimes deviate from the State- and County-mandated elements in non-substantive ways. For example, public utilities are included in the State requirements for the Circulation Element, but are addressed in the Land Use Element of the Rancho Santa Margarita General Plan. The City addresses the Measure M requirement for a Growth Management Element through policies and programs in the Land Use Element, and Rancho Santa Margarita has also included a non-mandatory element, Economic Development, in the General Plan.

Supporting Documentation

Several supporting documents were produced during the development of the General Plan, including the General Plan Program Environmental Impact Report (Program EIR). Other technical reports used in preparing the Plan include traffic/circulation, fiscal impact and market conditions, geologic hazards, and biological resources.

Plan Organization and Use

The General Plan is comprised of this Introduction and seven elements. Each element is complete in itself, but is an integral part of the General Plan. The General Plan is accompanied by an Implementation Plan and Glossary (Appendices A and B). The

elements and the Implementation Plan will help the City achieve its vision for the future. Each of the seven General Plan elements is organized according to the following format: 1) Introduction; 2) Issues, Goals and Policies; and 3) Plan.

The *Introduction* of each element describes the focus and the purpose of the element. The Introduction identifies other plans and programs outside of the General Plan that may be used to achieve specific General Plan goals. The relationship of the element to other General Plan elements is also specified in the Introduction.

The *Issues, Goals and Policies* section of each element contains a description of identified planning issues, goals, and policies related to the element topic. The issues, goals, and policies are based on input received from the community, members of the Planning Commission and City Council, City staff, and other public agencies.

The *issues* represent the needs, concerns or desires addressed by the General Plan. The *goals* are overall statements of community desires and consist of broad statements of purpose or direction. The *policies* serve as guides to the City Council, Planning Commission, other City commissions and boards, and City staff in reviewing development proposals and making other decisions that affect the future growth and development of Rancho Santa Margarita.

Each element also contains a *Plan* section. The Plan section offers an overview of the City's course of action to implement the identified goals and policies. For example, the Land Use Element contains a "Land Use Plan" indicating the types and intensities of land use permitted in the City. The Circulation Element contains a "Circulation Plan" describing the overall circulation system required to meet the future needs of Rancho Santa Margarita. Wherever possible, the Plan contains illustrative maps, diagrams, and tables.

Following the elements is the *Implementation Plan* (Appendix A) which identifies specific actions to achieve the goals, policies, and plans identified in each General Plan element. The Implementation Plan is reviewed and updated periodically to update specific actions, schedules, responsible parties, and measures to ensure that General Plan goals, policies, and plans are implemented. The *Glossary* is also an appendix of the General Plan (Appendix B) and provides a set of definitions for technical terms used in the Plan.

The organization of the General Plan allows users to turn to the section that interests them and quickly obtain a perspective of City policies on the subject. However, General Plan users should realize that the policies in the various elements are interrelated and should

be examined comprehensively. Policies are presented as written statements, tables, diagrams, and maps. All of these policy components must be considered together when making planning decisions.

***Community
Participation in the
General Plan
Program***



Public participation played an important role in the Rancho Santa Margarita General Plan program. Because the General Plan reflects community goals, citizen input was essential in identifying issues and formulating goals. Public participation in the General Plan preparation process occurred through the following methods:

- ? Three *Community Workshops* involving City staff, consultants, and the public. Community members were invited to the Workshops to discuss their visions for the future of Rancho Santa Margarita, to review land use, circulation, and housing alternatives and policies, and to comment on a preliminary draft of this General Plan.
- ? The City utilized its *Website* to provide current information on the General Plan update program. Summaries of the public meetings and information on program progress were posted on the website.
- ? A *Newsletter* summarizing the Draft General Plan was prepared and distributed to provide residents with a brief description of the proposed General Plan and its contents.
- ? Nonprofit housing and community service agencies, utilities and public service providers were *consulted* to provide information regarding current services and service needs within the community. Parties consulted included KISCO, Habitat for Humanity, Fair Housing Council of Orange County, Orange County Housing Authority, and operators of assisted affordable housing units.
- ? The public was able to address decision makers regarding the General Plan at five *Joint Planning Commission/City Council Workshops*. These workshops were conducted to: review the vision for the future and confirm major issues; review draft goals and policies; review land use, circulation, and housing alternatives; review economic development strategies; and review the preliminary Draft General Plan prior to public hearings.
- ? The Draft General Plan and Draft Environmental Impact Report were circulated for public review and comment before the General Plan Public Hearings held by the Planning

Commission and City Council prior to adoption of the General Plan.

Direction to the Future

The General Plan provides the long-range direction for achieving the future Rancho Santa Margarita has identified for itself. This direction allows the City to take advantage of opportunities to achieve its goals. The policies and plans in the elements and the Implementation Program provide guidance for addressing changing conditions and specific actions to optimize community potential. The direction established by the General Plan represents a combination of community values and actions designed to achieve the vision for the future.