

INTRODUCTION



The City of Rancho Santa Margarita is a small urban community located in a unique and beautiful natural setting. Incorporated on January 1, 2000, Rancho Santa Margarita became the 33rd city in Orange County. Now, Rancho Santa Margarita has approximately 48,516 residents and is the 23rd largest 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 members of the community.





NEED FOR GENERAL PLAN

The Rancho Santa Margarita General Plan provides the foundation for continued enhancement while also addressing the challenges presented by potential 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 City today and in the future.

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 ensure Rancho Santa Margarita's community vision continues to be realized.

Preparation of the City's General Plan Update affords an occasion to reinforce 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 providing their valuable input 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 today and in the decades to come.

RANCHO SANTA MARGARITA PLANNING AREA

Rancho Santa Margarita contains approximately 13 square miles of land (or about 8,280 acres), 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 (SR-241) which extends to the north connecting with North County cities such as Yorba Linda and Anaheim, terminates at the edge of Rancho Santa Margarita's southern boundary. 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.

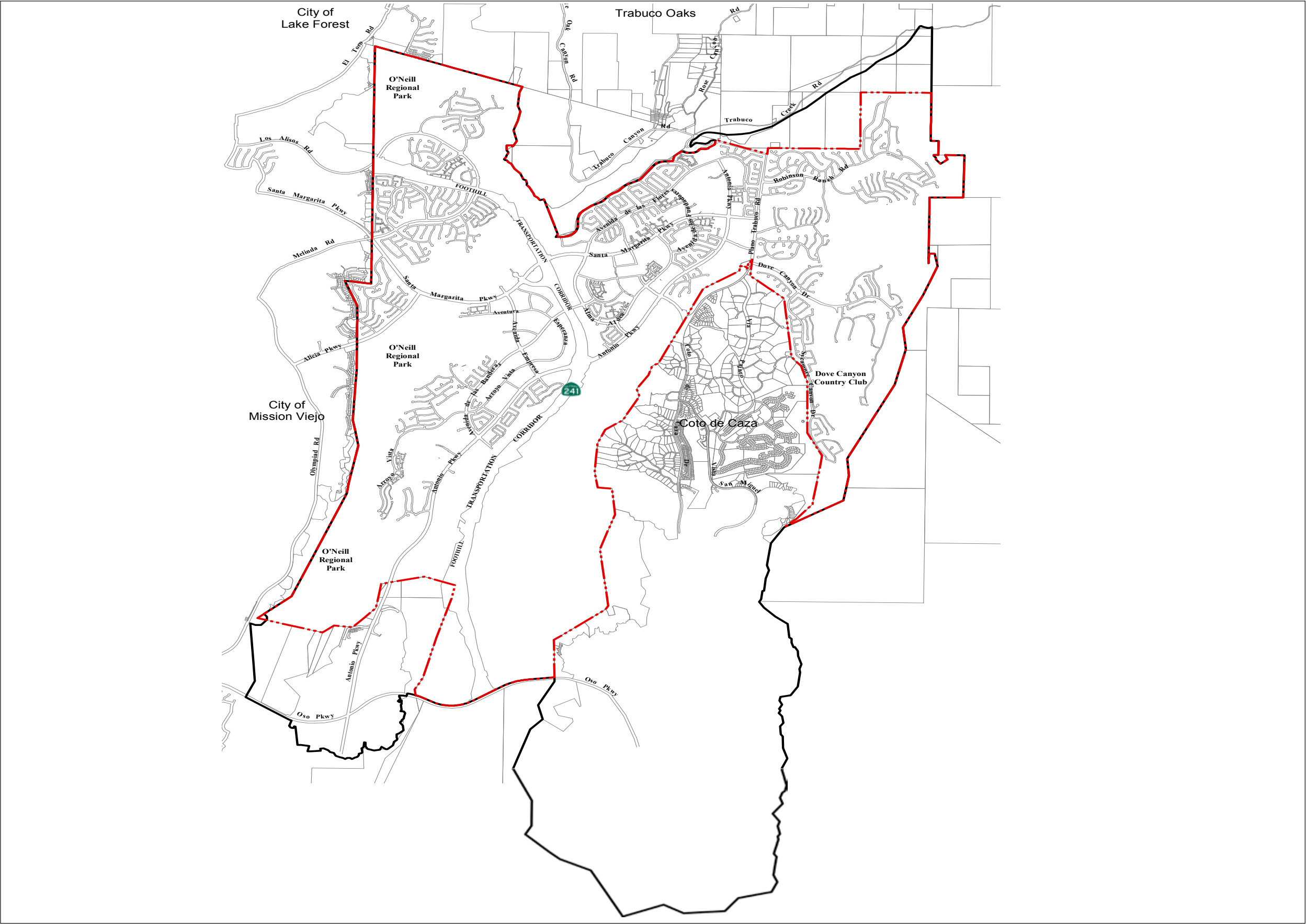
Figure I-2 depicts the planning area for Rancho Santa Margarita and the City's Sphere of Influence (SOI). Maintaining compatibility between future urban development in the SOI and Rancho Santa Margarita as described in the General Plan is an important aspect of long-range planning.





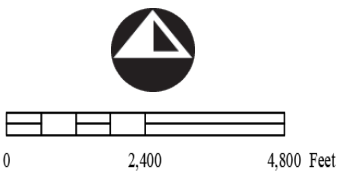
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LEGEND

- City Boundary
- Sphere of Influence



Source: Orange County Local Agency Formation Commission, 2013.



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HISTORY OF THE COMMUNITY

Where schools, shopping centers and residential neighborhoods now stand, Native Americans once lived. On July 23, 1769, Native Americans 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, 1769 the expedition headed inland to avoid the many streams and swamps in the area. They found a large plateau 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 24th and 25th, 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 operated as a ranch into the 1920s. In 1940, the ranch was divided, with the Flood family taking the lower portion (now San Diego County), and the upper portion retained by the O'Neill family. In 1942, the Navy annexed the Flood family's land 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 did not arrive until late in the decade in what would become Coto De Caza. The area remained 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 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 community of Rancho Santa Margarita established a Community Civic Association (CCA) to provide a political voice for residents. The CCA, later known as the Rancho Margarita Civic Association (and eventually as the Civic Council), briefly explored self-governance. In 1995, 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: the 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 Orange County.



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 is 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, Homeowners' 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.



HISTORY OF THE GENERAL PLAN

The City of Rancho Santa Margarita adopted its first General Plan in 2002. The General Plan Update was initiated in 2016 with the goal and intent to:

- 1) Uphold and honor the Rancho Santa Margarita Master Plan;
- 2) Prepare Rancho Santa Margarita for the next 20 years;
- 3) Update the General Plan to ensure it meets new State requirements;





- 4) Maintain a balance of land uses to ensure compatibility now and in the decades to come; and
- 5) Maintain and support high quality-of-life, community satisfaction and safety.

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. 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.

Per State law, the General Plan is the primary document the City utilizes to regulate land use. Consequently, the Zoning Code, Specific Plans, and individual public and private development proposals must be consistent with the Plan's 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.

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:

- Circulation Element
- Conservation/Open Space Element (combined Elements)
- Economic Development Element (optional)
- Housing Element
- Land Use Element
- Noise Element
- Safety 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 City addresses the Measure M requirement for a Growth Management Element in the Land Use Element.



The Rancho Santa Margarita General Plan elements sometimes deviate from the State 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, and Rancho Santa Margarita has also included a non-mandatory element, Economic Development, in the General Plan.

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 attract and retain businesses that are beneficial to the community, and maintain fiscal strength and stability. The strategies and programs contained within the Economic Development Element outline a course toward continued fiscal stability for the City.

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 an Existing Conditions Report comprised of: air quality, biological resources, cultural resources, noise measurements, and traffic/circulation data, and a Market Retail Analysis and Laborshed Analysis.

Plan Organization and Use

The General Plan is comprised of this Introduction and seven elements. Each element stands alone, but is an integral part of the General Plan. The General Plan is accompanied by an Implementation Plan (under separate cover) and Glossary (Appendix A). 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 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 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.

The Implementation Plan 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 address specific actions, schedules, responsible parties, and measures to ensure that General Plan goals, policies, and plans are implemented. The Glossary is an appendix of the General Plan (Appendix A) 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 an overview 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.

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:

Roadshows and Focus Group Meetings. As part of the outreach for the General Plan Update, several roadshow and focus group meetings were conducted. These meetings provided an opportunity for focused outreach to specific groups and organizations. The purpose of the meetings was to provide a forum for attendees to provide input specific to their area of interest or expertise. Each meeting began with an overview presentation of the General Plan Update process.

Attendees then engaged in an open discussion guided by questions specific to the group or topical area. The following organizations and groups participated:



- Chamber of Commerce
- Community Associations of Rancho (CAR)
- Bell Tower Foundation
- Orange County Sheriff's Department
- Age Well
- Boys and Girls Club

Summer Concert Series. During the 2016 Summer Concert Series, the City of Rancho Santa Margarita hosted a General Plan Update community outreach booth to inform the community that the City was initiating an update to the General Plan. Staff interacted with the community about the General Plan Update, answered any questions, and encouraged initial input and feedback about the community's values and priorities. Community members were asked to write down their favorite thing about Rancho Santa Margarita. They were also asked to identify what they valued about Rancho Santa Margarita; if there was anything that they would like to see improved; and to provide any additional comments or ideas.



General Plan Update Webpage. The City of Rancho Santa Margarita website included a page dedicated to the General Plan Update to provide information on the General Plan Update program. The webpage included an overview of the General Plan and update process, summaries of feedback obtained as part of outreach events and meetings, and draft documents for public review.

Rancho Santa Margarita e-Newsletter. The City's e-Newsletter was used periodically throughout the General Plan Update program to inform the community of the General Plan Update, provide an overview of outreach events, and inform the community on how they could receive more information about the General Plan Update on the City's website.

Planning Commission Meetings. Opportunities to address decision-makers regarding the General Plan were provided at Planning Commission meetings. Draft goals and policies and land use designations were reviewed and discussed as part of the update process.





Draft General Plan Documents. The Draft General Plan was made available for public review and comment prior to public hearings. Upon completion, the Draft EIR will also be made available for public review, providing an additional opportunity for input prior to public hearings.

DIRECTION TO THE FUTURE

The General Plan provides the long-range direction for achieving the future that 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.

