



ECOS
 ENVIRONMENTAL
 COUNCIL
 OF SACRAMENTO

Post Office Box 1526 | Sacramento, CA 95812-1526

October 21, 2024

Sacramento County Planning Commission

Justin Raithel, Chair
 Jofil Borja, Vice Chair
 Damon Conklin
 Mariana Corona Sabeniano
 Joseph Devlin

Sent by email to BoardClerk@saccounty.gov

SUBJECT: AGENDA ITEM 3, October 21, 2024 Sacramento County Planning Commission
 Natomas – Upper Westside, PLNP2018-00284 – GP Amendment, Specific Plan, etc.

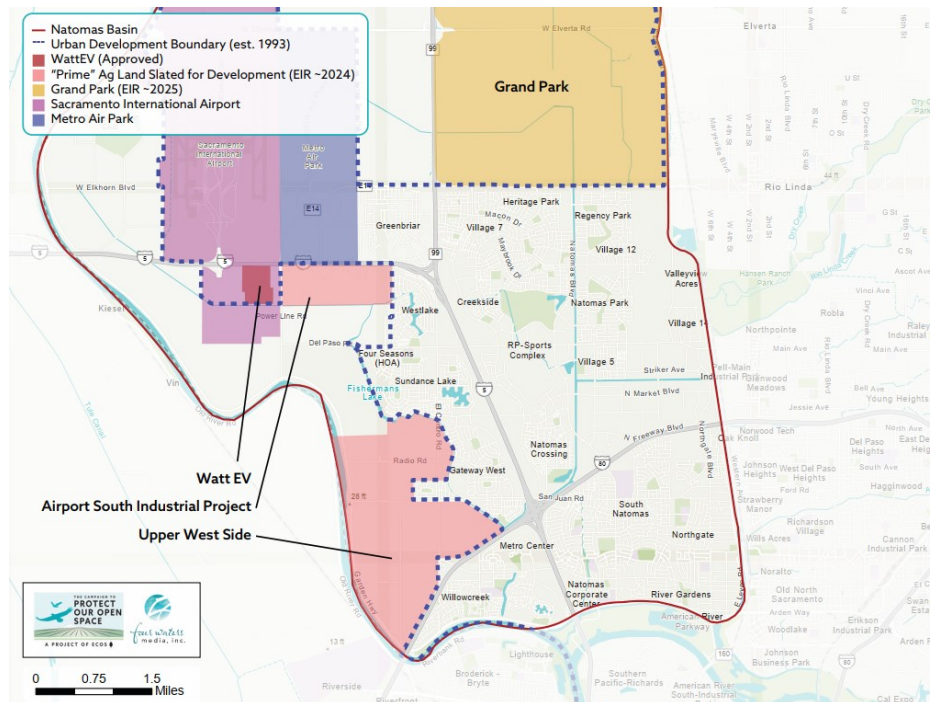
Dear Chair Raithel and Planning Commissioners,

The Environmental Council of Sacramento, which includes a number of Natomas residents, asks you to consider the following issues as you review the Upper Westside project and its Draft Environmental Impact Report.

1) **Consider all of the developments currently being proposed.** Review the Upper Westside in the context of the entire 8,000 acres across three projects now proposed for development in the Natomas Basin in Sacramento County.

The map at right highlights the Upper Westside, Airport South Industrial, and Grand Park projects.

These projects would dramatically decrease open land in Natomas and present impacts to traffic, air quality, flood control, the Natomas Basin Habitat Conservation Plan, and City services -- all of which should be considered together.



2) **Consider what it means to break through the Urban Services Boundary (USB).** This boundary, in place for three decades, is based upon jurisdictional, natural and environmental constraints to urban growth and “is intended to be a permanent growth boundary not subject to modification except under extraordinary circumstances.”¹

All three of the projects would break through the USB. Changes to the USB are to be made only for “extraordinary projects” and yet there is nothing extraordinary about Upper Westside except that it is close to the City of Sacramento. What is extraordinary about the area is the deep, prime agricultural soil from many years of overflow from the Sacramento River.

The USB was drawn in 1993 to protect development from the risk of flood and fire, and to preserve agriculture, ranch, and habitat lands. The image below of Sacramento County shows the urbanized area inside the USB, with areas outside of it in GREEN. With climate change, the USB is a bulwark of sustainability for our region.

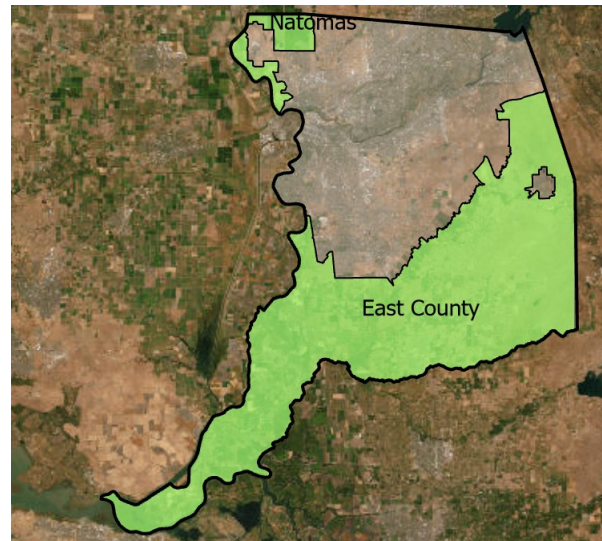
Consider the requirements in Sacramento County’s General Plan Policy LU-127 for projects that propose to break through the USB:

LU-127. The County shall not expand the Urban Service Boundary unless:

- *There is inadequate vacant land within the USB to accommodate the projected 25-year demand for urban uses; and*
- *The proposal calling for such expansion can satisfy the requirements of a master water plan as contained in the Conservation Element; and*
- *The proposal calling for such expansion can satisfy the requirements of the Sacramento County Air Quality Attainment Plan; and*
- *The area of expansion does not incorporate open space areas for which previously secured open space easements would need to be relinquished; and*
- *The area of expansion does not include the development of important natural resource areas, aquifer recharge lands or prime agricultural lands;*
- *The area of expansion does not preclude implementation of a Sacramento County-adopted Habitat Conservation Plan;*

OR

- *The Board approves such expansion by a 4/5ths vote based upon on finding that the expansion would provide extraordinary environmental, social or economic benefits and opportunities to the County.*



Given the impacts of this project on the region and the Natomas community, the Upper Westside project does not meet most of the listed requirements, nor does it merit a finding of extraordinary benefits and opportunities by 4/5ths of the Board of Supervisors.

¹ [Sacramento County General Plan, Land Use Element](#)

3) **Consider what it means to develop on land not within the NBHCP/MAPHCP Permit Acres.** The NBHCP is basin-wide for important biological reasons. The hatched areas on the Natomas Basin Habitat Conservation Plan (NBHCP) below indicate where development is permitted. Land outside of the NBHCP/MAPHCP Permit Acres “is designated for retention as Agricultural Cropland by the Sacramento County General Plan.”²

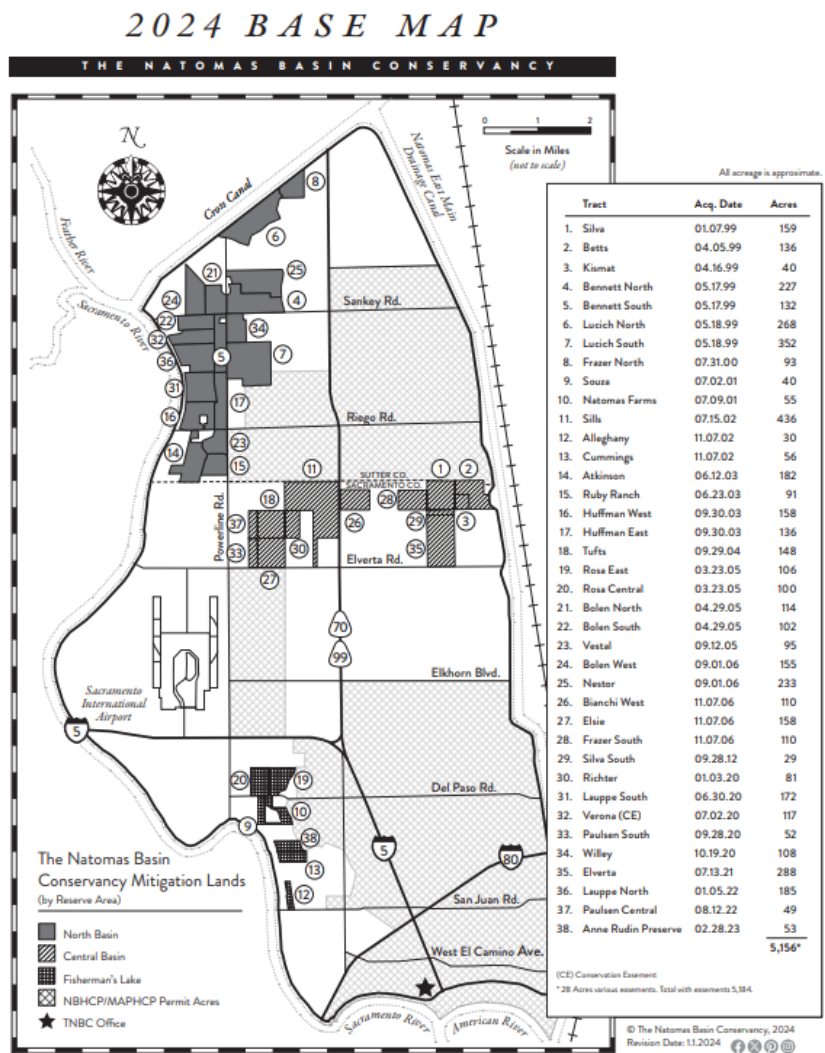
The Upper Westside project (Airport South Industrial and Grand Park as well) is proposed for areas outside of the NBHCP/MAPHCP Permit Acres. It would replace wildlife-supportive agriculture with concrete, vehicles and houses, severely impacting the resident wildlife in the Basin. The protection of resident wildlife in the Basin was promised when the City signed a contract with the federal government and approved the Natomas Basin Habitat Conservation Plan. Sacramento Area Flood Control Agency (SAFCA) also agreed to protect resident wildlife. The Upper Westside project cannot mitigate for its impacts to resident wildlife as the Natomas Basin is finite – the harm to the Basin’s wildlife conservation efforts will be irreparable.

The Natomas Basin is a deep flood basin. Much of the interior of the Basin is lower than the elevation of the Sacramento and American Rivers, particularly during annual high-water flows in winter and spring.

The Natomas levees were designed for a 200-year storm, as it was understood at the time of design in the late 1990s. Climate change is creating a moving target for flood protection, we no longer can accurately estimate size and frequency of floods.

In a crisis, flood mitigation requires everything to work perfectly – pumps, electricity, detention basins, canals, river levels, and people. Hurricane Helene just provided an example of what happens when systems are overwhelmed by water.

Development in the Natomas Basin should be consistent with the NBHCP.



² https://natomasbasin.org/wp-content/uploads/natomas-basin-habitat-conservation-plan/5nbhcland_use2006_a11y.pdf, pg III-13

- 4) **Consider how Upper Westside is inconsistent with the goals of the Blueprint.** On November 4, 2020, SACOG commented on the Notice of Preparation of the Upper Westside DEIR, stating “implementation of the Blueprint vision depends greatly on the efforts of cities and counties through local plans and projects. . . [and] the Upper Westside project and the project area itself are not anticipated for development in either the MTP/SCS or the Blueprint.”³

This is still true today. SACOG’s selected land use scenario for the 2025 MTP/SCS, dated April 2024, does not include the Upper Westside, or Airport South Industrial, or Grand Park – it includes no buildout in the coming decades, as shown in the excerpt at right.

SACOG went on to say “The Upper Westside project . . . raises important policy questions for the region’s implementation of the Blueprint. For example, the capacity for growth in existing entitled lands far exceeds expected demand

over the next twenty years: collectively, the region’s jurisdictions have entitled, or are in the process of entitling **2.5 times the region’s projected need for the next 20 years**. More than half of that capacity—387,000 units—is in greenfield areas that are on the edge of existing development.”⁴ This means there is far more entitled acreage for new homes than the market will bear. Upper Westside is not needed.

- 5) **Consider how Upper Westside is inconsistent with General Plans.** The project proposes a change to Sacramento County’s General Plan from agricultural to residential/commercial uses. While the project would be in Sacramento County, it would likely be served with utilities and services by the City of Sacramento, and, in future, could be fully annexed into the City.
- 6) **Consider the project’s effect on our Air Quality Plan.** The proposed project would worsen the Sacramento regions ability to meet state and federal air quality standards by interfering with implementation of our Air Quality Plan. The Upper Westside DEIR makes clear that the project’s air quality impacts are significant and unavoidable. Failure to honor our Air Quality Plan could result in our area losing access to federal transportation funds.

Attachment A									
2025 Blueprint (MTP/SCS) Discussion Scenario									
April 2024									
Jurisdiction/Community Type	Baseyear and Buildout				Spring 24 Discussion Scenario				
	Existing Conditions (2020)		Potential Buildout		2020 - 2035		2020 - 2050		
	Jobs	Housing Units	Jobs	Housing Units	Jobs	Housing Units	Jobs	Housing Units	
Sacramento City									
Potential Developing Communities (not yet under construction)									
<i>Panhandle</i>									
	-	-	-	1,620	-	595	130	1,295	
<i>Airport South Industrial Project</i>									
	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Sacramento County Unincorporated									
Potential Developing Communities (not yet under construction)									
<i>Cordova Hills</i>									
	-	-	3,190	8,000	320	350	600	1,500	
<i>Glenborough at Easton</i>									
	-	-	1,800	3,239	-	-	80	300	
<i>South Mather</i>									
	-	-	940	3,522	-	400	730	1,805	
<i>Aerojet</i>									
	1,600	-	40,180	-					
<i>Elverta</i>									
	10	50	200	5,627					
<i>Grand Park</i>									
	20	10	3,010	23,892					
<i>Jackson Township</i>									
	10	30	900	5,690					
<i>Jackson West</i>									
	1,240	110	11,210	16,484					
<i>Newbridge</i>									
	110	10	450	3,075					
<i>Upper Westside</i>									
	430	60	3,820	9,356					
<i>New Induced Growth Areas</i>									
	200	500	-	-					

³ MTP/SCS or Blueprint - <https://www.sacog.org/planning/blueprint>

⁴ James Corless, SACOG Ex Dir., November 4, 2020 letter to County Environmental Planning, Notice of Preparation of DEIR for Upper West Side Specific Plan (PLNP2018- 00284, p. 6)

7) Consider the other areas available for development. Open land inside the Urban Services Boundary (USB) is available for housing, both in the City of Sacramento and unincorporated Sacramento County – land that is not in a deep flood basin or on prime farmland. In addition, there is enormous capacity for infill development in existing communities, especially around transit stations. Building in communities with existing public infrastructure and services can limit costs to local jurisdictions for maintenance and operations, and it can lower the combined housing-transportation costs to households. While the Upper Westside project proposes the City of Sacramento extend its utilities and services to the project, the City’s new 2040 General Plan strongly emphasizes infill development to provide needed housing.

8) Consider the land uses being proposed. We need more housing, but it does not need to be located in the Natomas Basin; and the Upper Westside project does not address our most critical housing need -- for low income households.

The project proposes three million square feet of commercial space. For comparison, the Westfield Galleria shopping mall in Roseville is 1.3 million square feet. If this commercial space is built, will it take the life out of the 100,000 square-foot shopping mall at West El Camino and Truxel Road?

The proposed site is on the urban edge, bounded by the Sacramento River. For an educational campus, this means difficult access by automobile, and certainly by public transit.

9) Consider the traffic impacts. The project proposes 9,000 residences and three million square feet of commercial space, plus the schools. The project will be almost entirely auto-centric. Thousands of auto-trips each day will significantly impact El Centro Road and West El Camino (whose width varies from 2 lanes to 6 lanes between I-80 and Northgate Blvd), as well as Garden Highway and San Juan Road (neither of which can be widened.)

Traffic will increase throughout South Natomas. The six-lane West El Camino overpass of I-80 and El Centro Road, at the primary gateway to the project, will be especially congested. This junction and the gateway itself, intended to be a “smart growth street”, will be bumper to bumper.

10) Consider impacts on biological resources. The Upper Westside Specific Plan (UWSP), if approved, would harm the viability of the NBHCP conservation strategy and impair NBC’s ability to protect wildlife in its preserve system. The UWSP conflicts with the NBHCP’s intent to conserve wildlife in the Basin and fails to comply with the NBHCP’s proviso that additional development outside of the NBHCP/MAPHCP Permit Acres be mitigated by amending the NBHCP or writing/obtaining approval of a new HCP to cover the project’s impacts.

The NBHCP/MAPHCP Permit Acres are not built out so the impact on wildlife of full buildout is yet to be determined. At this time, key species are showing signs of serious decline, so, now is not the time to remove habitat. Instead NBC should respond with strategic and tactical remedial actions and additional resources.

NBC’s monitoring studies show Giant Garter Snake (GGS) has not been found at Fisherman’s Lake since 2017. This key indicator of species protection performance shows that the range of this federally endangered species has been reduced by development despite significant effort by NBC to build robust GGS preserves. This problem must be corrected before any more development outside of the NBHCP/MAPHCP Permit Acres is considered. The UWSP would have direct and indirect impacts on the Fisherman’s Lake preserve area and NBC and SAFCA mitigation properties included in and adjacent to the UWSP. The proposed mitigation is deferred, speculative, out of basin, and inadequate.

The UWSP removes 2,000 acres of essential habitat in the Swainson's Hawk zone, a key part of the NBHCP conservation strategy. Yet the Draft Environmental Impact Report does not mention the NBHCP's requirement for development projects proposed for land outside of the NBHCP/MAPHCP Permit Acres to obtain 2081 permits from the CA Department of Fish and Wildlife. Swainson's Hawk monitoring by the NBC has shown huge swings in nesting productivity, indicating a population under stress and unstable. The NBHCP is designed to support the Basin population of Swainson's Hawks through the various natural stresses in the environment. But this guarantee is only with the availability of at least 13,000 acres of foraging habitat, focused in the Swainson's Hawk Zone, maintained in the Basin in perpetuity per the 2003 NBHCP. UWSP proposes to mitigate for these impacts somewhere out of Basin. The project will result in the reduction of the range of the Swainson's Hawk and severely compromise its sustainability in the Natomas Basin.

11) Consider impacts on ground conditions. Development of the region would likely cause subsidence of the project area and exacerbate risks for natural hazards like flooding.

With 3 million square feet of commercial use, the weight load of construction may increase subsidence. The land proposed for the Upper Westside development, with its particular soil type, flood plain status, and proximity to the Hunting Creek-Berryessa fault system, has experienced "moderate to high land subsidence in the past." (DEIR, 11-15) Considering the area consists largely of expansive soils that shrink and expand dynamically, additional subsidence should be expected. In addition to the structural hazards that progressive subsidence poses, further depression of the already low-lying land would increase the intensity and range of flooding in and surrounding the area.

Project designs for Upper Westside should factor in the subsidence and flooding that the buildings will cause; should evaluate the buildings' contribution to regional subsidence and flooding and ensure that existing structures in the surrounding areas will not be compromised as a result of new construction-related subsidence.

While safe, code-compliant designs can mitigate the subsidence and flood risks to the buildings, the required structural and seismic measures may alter the land itself, and they may be costly. How costly would development of California Building Code- and County-compliant structures be, compared to development in other already approved greenfield plots within the USB?

12) "It's housing – what's not to like?!"

The capacity for growth in existing entitled lands far exceeds expected demand over the next twenty years according to SACOG. "Collectively, the region's jurisdictions have entitled, or are in the process of entitling **2.5 times the region's projected need for the next 20 years**. More than half of that capacity—387,000 units—is in greenfield areas that are on the edge of existing development."⁵

This means there is far more entitled acreage for new homes than the market will bear. Upper Westside is not needed.

⁵ James Corless, SACOG Ex Dir., November 4, 2020 letter to County Environmental Planning, Notice of Preparation of DEIR for Upper West Side Specific Plan (PLNP2018- 00284, p. 6)

Conclusion:

The Upper Westside conflicts with land use planning actions of regional significance including:

- Blueprint – the Sacramento region’s smart growth plan concept that then-Senator Darrell Steinberg applied statewide in 2008 through SB375;
- Urban Services Boundary (USB) -- a Sacramento County construct, but which now in light of climate change has regional significance) [See the Powerpoint on why the USB was delineated as it was](#) – the forces that shaped it;
- Natomas Basin Habitat Conservation Plan – to protect twenty-two threatened species.

Each of these actions was hard won, painstakingly agreed to, and in place for decades. These land use actions are our legacy; they represent our core values. They are sustainability bulwarks against climate change. Don’t toss them aside.

Today, Sacramento County staff recommends that you end the DEIR process and “direct staff to prepare the FEIR.”

If you do this, you will turn your back on our planning legacy. Instead, we ask that you direct staff to reject the project and stop the process.

Sincerely,

Heather Fargo

Heather Fargo, Chair
ECOS Natomas Team



Susan Herre AIA AICP
President of the Board of Directors