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## Open Space Issues in Morro Bay's General Plan

The Morro Bay Open Space Alliance (MBOSA) is a non-profit, volunteer organization whose mission is the protection of open space through education and action. This paper represents MBOSA's position on some open space issues that are being raised in the Morro Bay General Plan update.

City staff, consultants with Michael Baker International (MBI), and the General Plan Advisory Committee (GPAC) have discussed Planning Area, Sphere of Influence (SOI), and annexation as policy tools for the management of parcels on or near the boundaries of the city. MBI has identified 4 "Study Areas" of potential interest to Morro Bay, including Study Area 1, which includes much of the property owned by Chevron. Chevron is actively seeking adjustments to some parcel lot lines to prepare them for sale, and is currently marketing others.

The parcels in question include areas in the city's viewshed; areas that contain Environmentally Sensitive Habitats; undeveloped land zoned for agriculture (mostly grazing); buffer zones between Morro Bay city and neighboring developed areas like Cayucos; and some actively managed prime agricultural parcels. All of these parcels are currently governed by land use plans and zoning ordinances of San Luis Obispo County, and many of them are within the Coastal Zone.

MBOSA's general objective for these parcels is clear: land use and zoning should recognize that the highest and best use for them is for open space, with development limited to facilitating passive human use consistent with habitat preservation. Agricultural uses, including grazing, may be appropriate in this framework. However, the intention in the city's proposal to change the land use of Study Areas 2, 3 and 4 to "open space/recreation" is preferred.

Specifically, MBOSA recommends that the city should use the policy tools it has to maintain open space in these parcels. The question is which policy tools and which uses of them can best achieve this goal. MBOSA recommends:

1. Seek to extend the city's Sphere of Influence only for parcels in the viewshed above North Morro Bay (Chevron parcels 33, 34, 36, 38, 40, and 41). Include provisions in the Memorandum of Agreement with LAFCO to maintain the current agricultural zoning of these parcels. According to MBI baseline assessment, landslide hazard in this area is high to very high, so development should be minimized.
2. Include the remaining Study Area parcels in the Planning Area with a suggested land use designation of "open space/recreation" as proposed, which leaves them under county management at this time.



3. Work with the County, Coastal Commission, the conservation community, and Cayucos CSD to ensure that the open space separator between Morro Bay and Cayucos is maintained, with no substantial residential, commercial, or industrial land uses permitted.

## **Toro Creek Valley**

Representatives of Chevron have made presentations to at least two meetings of the GPAC regarding over 3,000 plus acres owned by Chevron in and around the Toro Creek Valley. The company has stated that it intends to sell these parcels (and has already sold at least 3 of them) and that it does not intend to act as a developer itself.

Chevron has encouraged the city of Morro Bay and GPAC to consider using the SOI or annexation to incorporate parts of this area within the scope of the city's formal responsibility. However, at least two factors make this questionable.

1. Annexation is currently not feasible for most of these properties, as it would imply a service provision that the city cannot afford—no potential new revenues would exceed the costs. It should be dropped from consideration.
2. Extending the SOI implies under LAFCO policies (including state-level statutes), that the city is committed to a development plan within a 20-year timeframe as incorporated in a Memorandum of Agreement. Extending Morro Bay's SOI to include Chevron parcels beyond those in the viewshed implies service support (as stated above) that would not benefit the city, but would encourage development pressure.

## **Development**

The MBOSA recognizes that carefully planned development will and should occur to meet human needs. This would include infill housing development in the city as well as potential recreational development (e.g., trails, bike paths, picnic areas, or campgrounds) in the open space surrounding the city.

Any General Plan going forward must include land use designations and tools to allow city residents to retain the sense of place so many of them cherish. As the Vision and Values exercise shows, residents value the natural setting of Morro Bay very highly. Development in these areas should be designed to improve the experience of open space. The General Plan is the appropriate place to stipulate this kind of development.