5.0 ENVIRONMENTAL SETTING

SUMMARY

This section describes the current environmental conditions in the City of Paso Robles and the Downtown Specific Plan Uptown & Town Centre (Uptown/Town Centre Specific Plan) area. More detailed setting information is included within the impact analysis for each issue area.

5.1 REGIONAL OVERVIEW

The City of Paso Robles is located within San Luis Obispo County, about 25 miles north of the City of San Luis Obispo. The County covers approximately 3,300 square miles, and contains approximately 245,000 residents. The County is topographically diverse, with mountains, rich agricultural valleys, and distinct urban areas, all within close proximity of the Pacific Ocean. The Mediterranean climate of the region and coastal influence produce moderate temperatures year round, with rainfall concentrated in the winter months. The region is subject to various natural hazards, including earthquakes, landslides, and wildfires.

5.2 PHYSICAL SETTING

5.2.1 General Physical Character

The City of Paso Robles is located in the upper Salinas River Valley. The Salinas River flows through the center of the City from south to north. The community is bounded by steep hills and canyons on the west, and open rolling hills to the east. Paso Robles is located in a rich agricultural area, where ranchlands are transitioning to vineyards to support a growing wine industry. Suburban residential development approved by San Luis Obispo County frames the City on the southern and eastern edges, with lower-density residential to the north and west of the City. Agricultural uses both north and south of the City eventually give way to the unincorporated communities of San Miguel and Templeton.

The Paso Robles area is bordered on the south and west by the rugged mountainous ridges of the Santa Lucia Coastal Range, to the east by the low hills of the La Panza and Temblor ranges, and to the north by the low hills and flat-topped mesas of the Diablo Range. The highest elevations in the vicinity are located in the Santa Lucia Coastal Range, where many peaks are 2,000 to 3,400 feet above mean sea level (msl). Substantial ridgelines are distributed throughout the western, southern, and eastern portions of the City.

The development pattern of Paso Robles is different on the east side of the Salinas River than on the west side, although both sides of the river maintain the City's overall small-town character. The older part of

the community lies west of the Salinas River and Highway 101. This area includes many prominent buildings of architectural interest, which are developed along a traditional grid network of streets. The area is centered on an identifiable downtown and within tightly knit surrounding residential neighborhoods.

The eastern portion of the City includes many newer developments, and is primarily residential in character. This area, however, also includes both neighborhood and regional substantial commercial development, and a major industrial area.

5.2.2 Topography

The topography within the City ranges from nearly level to rolling hills and a few steeper escarpments. Several areas in the City—including the developed areas west of Highway 101, the Salinas River basin, and areas north of Highway 46 east—are characterized by relatively flat topography. The elevation of the Salinas River bed drops at a gentle gradient of about 9 feet per mile within the Paso Robles city limits. The width of the river channel in this area varies from 300 to 350 feet. Riverbed elevations at the southern city limits are about 720 feet above msl and at the northern city limits are approximately 682 feet above msl. Topography immediately west of the riverbed is characterized by a gently sloping alluvial terrace rising to the gently rolling hillsides that comprise the area west of the city limits. Most of the Downtown area and other areas west of the Salinas River have an average elevation of approximately 700 feet. In the hills to the west of the City, lands rise to an elevation of 1,300 feet. Land to the east of the Salinas River varies between 800 and 950 feet msl and is characterized by low, undulating hills including relatively flat grassy plateaus, ridges, and steep oak tree-covered canyons and creek basins.

5.2.3 Climate

The area is characterized by a Mediterranean climate with a wet season from October to early April and a dry summer season. In general, the most rainfall occurs in the range of hills and mountains nearest the coast with a decreasing amount farther inland. In Paso Robles, the total annual precipitation is approximately 15 inches. In winter, the average high temperatures (in degrees Fahrenheit) range from the 50s to the 60s, with lows in the 30s. There are typically a number of winter nights when temperatures fall to 10–15 degrees below freezing. In summer, the average daily highs are in the 90s, with some days exceeding 100. Summertime lows are typically in the 60s and 70s.

5.3 SPECIFIC PLAN AREA

5.3.1 Uptown

Uptown is relatively built out with few vacant parcels. The blocks east of Spring Street are residential in use with a mix of single-family detached houses and multi-family buildings that vary significantly in scale, character, and architectural quality. Spring Street is primarily commercial in character and is lined by retail/commercial and hospitality uses with some multi-family uses along its northern end. Buildings along Spring Street are generally larger in scale and nondescript in character. The southeastern portion of Uptown south of 28th Street is occupied by large-footprint industrial buildings, several with large service and storage yards. The Oak Park Housing campus occupies Uptown's eastern side between 28th Street and 34th Street.

The Oak Park Housing project is a historic barrack campus built in 1941. It is bounded by 34th Street to the north, Park Street to the west, 28th Street to the south, and the railroad tracks to the east. Oak Park is accessed via 30th and 32nd Streets. Pine Street is Oak Park's central spine and is terminated by cul-de-sacs just south of 34th Street and just north of 28th Street. Oak Park is comprised of one- and two-story buildings arranged around shared green spaces that are peppered with large oak trees.

Open space is located in the Oak Park Housing and in Uptown's two schools—Georgia Brown Elementary School and Flamson Middle School. During non-school hours, the school fields are heavily used for recreational activities, with the Georgia Brown Elementary School playground serving as a community civic space.

Uptown's street network is incomplete, with many missing segments and many missing sidewalks on the segments that are present. Pine Street and Park Street run south of 24th Street and north of 28th Street. Pine Street, within the Oak Park Housing development, is terminated by cul-de-sacs just south of 34th Street and just north of 28th Street. There are no automobile or pedestrian crossings of the railroad tracks in Uptown other than the vehicular crossing at 24th Street; pedestrian crossings, particularly along Spring Street, are poorly marked or missing.

5.3.2 Midtown

The Midtown neighborhood is settled entirely with one- and two-story buildings, the majority of which are single-family detached houses, many of which are historic. Spring Street is lined by a hodgepodge of commercial buildings flanked or surrounded by parking lots.

Open space is limited to Bauer Speck Elementary School, although Pioneer Park is accessible via 21st Street.

Pioneer Park occupies the area bounded by Gregory Avenue, Riverside Avenue, 19th Street, and Highway 101. Pioneer Park is currently comprised of a disparate set of civic uses, which includes a softball field, a skateboard park, and three historical organizations: the Pioneer Museum, the Pioneer Day Committee, and the Jeanesville Oil Pump Museum. The historical organizations are collections-based institutions in need of expansion and improvement. The playing field and skateboard park are isolated from the residential neighborhoods that they serve, which are located on the west side of the railroad tracks; therefore, the field and park are not being used to their fullest potential.

The historical street grid in these neighborhoods is substantially intact. It connects across the railroad tracks to Riverside Avenue at 16th, 21st, and 24th Streets, with access to Highway 101 in both the southbound and northbound directions at 24th Street. Pedestrian access across the 24th Street railroad bridge is nonexistent, and in many blocks throughout these neighborhoods sidewalks are missing or in need of improvement.

5.3.3 Downtown

The building fabric in the Downtown area ranges from one to three stories in height, and most are zero-setback buildings with retail ground floors. There are relatively few unbuilt parcels within Downtown, most of which are occupied by parking lots.

City Park is the only public open space in Downtown. Occupying two city blocks, it is a civic park that accommodates informal activities such as picnicking, playing, and strolling, as well as organized events such as farmers' markets and festivals. Park amenities include a small playground, a restroom building, several picnic tables, horseshoe pits, a barbecue area, and a gazebo.

The simple rectilinear street grid of the Downtown is intact, and currently connects across the railroad tracks to Riverside Avenue at 10th, 12th, and 13th Streets. Thirteenth Street cuts through Downtown, carrying substantial volumes of through traffic, thus creating a barrier between the portions of Downtown to its north and south.

5.3.4 South of Downtown

West of Spring Street, South of Downtown is comprised primarily of one- and two-story multifamily detached houses. Spring Street is lined with larger footprint commercial, retail, and hospitality buildings,

most fronted with parking lots. East of Spring Street, South of Downtown is relatively underdeveloped, with substantial portions either vacant or used for parking.

The only public open space in South of Downtown is Robbins Field, a single-use baseball and softball field used for Adult League practices and Little League games and practices. Amenities include lights, bleachers, an announcing booth, and restrooms.

Most of South of Downtown respects the historical street grid. The only exception is the four-block post office block bounded by Fourth, Spring, Sixth, and Pine Streets. Fourth Street passes beneath the railroad tracks providing access to Riverside Avenue and the on- and off-ramps to southbound Highway 101. Other than the Fourth Street railroad underpass, there are no other pedestrian or vehicular connections between South of Downtown and Riverside Avenue.

5.3.5 Riverside Corridor

The Riverside Corridor is currently occupied by a variety of building types and uses, including large-footprint industrial buildings at its north end and at the Paso Robles Event Center, motels just north of Highway 46, smaller-scale commercial and industrial buildings south of Pioneer Park, and some surviving single-family houses near Pioneer Park. Most of the buildings are unremarkable in historic value, with the notable exception of the Farmers' Alliance Building.

The Paso Robles Event Center's 40-acre site is bounded by 24th Street to the north, the railroad tracks to the west, Gregory Avenue to the south, and Highway 101 to the east. The north side of the site is occupied by the Equestrian Center, which features an indoor arena and associated support buildings. The central portion of the site houses various exhibition halls and the Main Grandstand. The southern portion of the site is occupied by the Fort Frontier stage and open fields. Entrance gates are located at the Riverside Avenue, at the corner of Gregory and Riverside Avenues, and along 24th Street, yet the buildings generally present their “back” to those streets. The Event Center offers a full calendar of year-round events, exhibitions, shows, conventions, sporting events, a wide variety of equestrian and rodeo events, as well as the Mid-State Fair. Currently, most events occur on weekends, but the Event Center would like to expand the calendar to weekdays as well.

Aside from the Event Center, which is substantially fenced and secured, Pioneer Park and its softball field and skateboard park are the only major public open spaces within the Riverside Avenue Corridor. Pioneer Park also houses the Pioneer Museum, the Jeanesville Oil Pump, and the Pioneer Day Committee buggy and vehicle barns. Pioneer Park is isolated from the residential neighborhoods to the west by the railroad tracks.

South of the Paso Robles Event Center, the street structure is the historical, rectilinear block structure. North of 24th Street the blocks are very large and irregular, with essentially no interconnected network. There is no frontage road along the freeway, so east-west streets generally dead end at Riverside Avenue or the freeway.

5.3.6 Salinas River

One of Paso Robles' most important natural resources is the Salinas River. Flows in the Salinas River are largely intermittent. Although substantial subsurface flows occur throughout the year, the River is virtually dry throughout the summer and early autumn months. Peak flows occur during the October to April rainy season and are largely controlled by the Santa Margarita Lake and Dam, located approximately 20 miles upstream from the City.

Several areas in the City, including the developed areas west of Highway 101, the Salinas River basin, and areas north of Highway 46 east, are characterized by relatively flat topography. The elevation of the Salinas River bed drops at a gentle gradient of about 9 feet per mile within the Paso Robles city limits. The width of the river channel in this area varies from 300 to 350 feet. Riverbed elevations at the southern city limits are about 720 feet above msl and at the northern city limits are approximately 682 feet above msl. Topography immediately west of the riverbed is characterized by a gently sloping alluvial terrace rising to the gently rolling hillsides that comprise the area west of the city limits. Most of the Downtown area and other areas west of the Salinas River have an average elevation of approximately 700 feet.

The river supports dense native riparian vegetation in sections that have not been disturbed by urban or agricultural activities. Sandbars and mudflats separate active channels during periods when the water level is low.