

# CHAPTER 1 Introduction

## 1.1 LAGUNA NIGUEL GATEWAY VISION

The Laguna Niguel Gateway area is an attractive and desirable transit and pedestrian-oriented urban village where people live, work, shop, are entertained, and recreate. It offers many choices of residential neighborhoods and businesses that are close to one another and contain all of the services needed to enable residents and workers to meet their basic needs. These places are connected by pedestrian and bicycle trails, lessening the need to use the automobile and endure many hours on the road commuting to jobs and services. This saves money that would be spent on gasoline and automobile maintenance, while reducing air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions. The streets are extensively landscaped and contain many amenities that make them wonderful places to walk, sit, and dine at outdoor cafes. This promotes an active and healthy life style, where people spend time outdoors and get to know and socialize with their neighbors.

Many workers in the Gateway’s professional and medical offices and other businesses travel to work by Metrolink. Like residents, this reduces their automobile trips and expensive gasoline purchases. The mix of nearby businesses encourages workers to remain at the end of the workday to join their friends at local health clubs and restaurants, and shop at local businesses. This helps invigorate the local economy and contributes important revenue to support Laguna Niguel’s services.

## 1.2 SPECIFIC PLAN OBJECTIVES

The vision for the Laguna Niguel Gateway area offers an extraordinary opportunity to transform a nondescript district bisected and highly constrained by freeway, rail, and utility infrastructure corridors into a vibrant high-intensity transit and pedestrian-oriented district that distinguishes itself as a primary entry to the City from regional transportation systems. The Laguna Niguel/Mission Viejo Metrolink station, and its planned expansion of service, coupled with two major freeways, provides unparalleled access to the greater Southern California region. The existing low development intensity and disparate mix of uses afford a unique opportunity for intensification driven by markets induced by the commuter rail station. The potential scale of economically driven change affords



Images of the future: Great places to walk and shop, live close to shopping and dining, work, recreate, and visit friends and neighbors



Examples of pedestrian-oriented mixed-use districts and activated streetscapes

Hotel Healdsburg



Typical pedestrian village: buildings located along street frontage, streetscape improvements, and mixed use

the opportunity to create a cohesive pattern of neighborhoods and districts that are prosperous and great places to live, work and shop.

The Laguna Niguel Gateway Specific Plan anticipates this exciting future for the Gateway area and provides a road map of land uses, building and site design, transportation, infrastructure, and streetscape strategies for achieving this future. The following objectives support the vision for the Gateway area and have guided the preparation of this Specific Plan.

### 1.2.1 Land Use

- Provide for the Gateway's transition from its predominately low-intensity and fragmented development pattern into an attractive and desirable transit and pedestrian-oriented urban community containing distinct and quality mixed-use neighborhoods and districts with housing, office, retail, restaurants, personal services, hotels, community facilities, and parks. The mix and choices of use should enable residents and workers to meet their basic needs in the Gateway area without traveling to outside communities.
- Develop land uses and densities that maximize ridership and support public investment in transit facilities, while reducing regional traffic congestion, pollution, and greenhouse gas emissions.
- Develop housing in the Gateway area for a variety of persons and households who choose to live in an active, urban environment.
- Match new housing opportunities with jobs in the Gateway area, enabling residents to live close to where they work.
- Allow for flexibility in the mix of land uses that responds to market conditions as they evolve over the next 20 years and beyond.
- Provide opportunities for the development of uses that complement one another, such as locating retail, restaurants, hotels, and financial services near offices and residences.
- Maintain opportunities within portions of the Gateway area for businesses that support community needs, such as light industrial, commercial services, and automobile sale and service facilities in an attractive environment.
- Develop uses that contribute significant revenues for needed capital improvements and on-going public services for residents and workers in the Laguna Niguel Gateway area.

## 1.2.2 Community Design

- Build quality residential neighborhoods, office and retail districts that are desirable in the marketplace and hold their value over time.
- Locate buildings to create an intimate “village” environment that encourages walking. Establish zoning and design guidelines for ground floor uses and facades, streets, sidewalks, landscaping, lighting, and signage that facilitate pedestrian use.
- Establish design standards for buildings and streets that create a unified and desirable street character, with parking located behind or below structures.
- Allow for diversity of architectural design within the framework of unified building setbacks from the street, building scale and mass, and building heights.
- Create an enhanced identity for the area through a comprehensive signage and way-finding program.
- Capitalize on and improve the Oso Creek corridor as an aesthetic and recreational amenity for the Gateway area.
- Establish an urban design framework that distinguishes the Gateway area as a symbolic and functional entry to Laguna Niguel.

## 1.2.3 Mobility

- Promote and support the completion of necessary and identified roadway infrastructure improvements to accommodate existing and anticipated development in the Gateway area.
- Improve access to the City and Gateway area from Interstate 5 (I-5) and the San Joaquin Hills Transportation Corridor (SR-73) through improvements to Crown Valley Parkway.
- Promote and support the completion of multi-use trails, sidewalks, and pathways to provide connectivity within the Gateway area and to the City’s trail system to maximize non-motorized mobility.
- Maximize the use of transit by residents and workers through the placement and density of land uses, and the creation of safe and attractive pedestrian and bike routes to the Metrolink station.
- Consider breaking-up internal “superblocks” into a smaller grid of streets that promotes pedestrian activity.



Metrolink train



Multi-use trail along Oso Creek (walking, bicycling, and equestrian)

- Limit and phase development based on the ability to maintain an acceptable level of service on Crown Valley Parkway, Forbes Road, Cabot Road, and other roadways within the Gateway area.
- Support opportunities for the improvement to the I-5/Crown Valley Parkway and I-5/Avery Parkway interchanges.
- Support regional efforts to provide alternative access to I-5.

#### 1.2.4 Streetscapes and Parklands



Improvements along San Luis Obispo Creek (downtown)

- Provide for an attractive street scene with enhanced landscaping and pedestrian amenities.
- Develop an areawide greenways network and parklands to unify and provide recreational amenities for residents and workers in the Gateway area.
- Develop the Oso Creek corridor as a linear greenway for pedestrians, bicyclists, and equestrians, with amenities such as a bridge to provide access across Crown Valley Parkway and across the creek, benches and tables, interpretive signage, and native landscape.
- Consider “softening” the Oso Creek flood control channel with native landscapes that enhance its visual character while maintaining its integrity as a flood control facility.
- Promote the development of small, urban-scaled parklands, plazas, and public spaces providing recreational opportunities for residents and workers.
- Promote the joint use of Galivan Basin for active and passive recreational uses during dry seasons, while maintaining its integrity and safety as a major flood control facility and natural habitats.

### 1.3 SPECIFIC PLAN ORGANIZATION

The Laguna Niguel Gateway Specific Plan is organized in the following Chapters:

- Chapter 1 Introduction
- Chapter 2 Background Information and Key Issues
- Chapter 3 Policies and Development Plans
- Chapter 4 Allowable Uses, Development Standards, and Guidelines

- Chapter 5 Public Realm Improvements
- Chapter 6 Plan Implementation

## 1.4 LOCATION AND ACCESS

The project site is located within the City of Laguna Niguel in south Orange County, California (Figure 1-1 [Regional Context]) and located approximately 50 miles south of downtown Los Angeles and 65 miles north of downtown San Diego. The 315-acre Specific Plan area is located in the northeastern corner of the City (Figure 1-2 [Location Map]) with direct access available from Interstate 5 (I-5) via Crown Valley Parkway and Avery Parkway. Indirect access is available from the San Joaquin Hills Transportation Corridor (SR-73), a toll road, via an interchange at Greenfield Drive near Crown Valley Parkway. The I-5 forms the eastern boundary and the SR-73 generally forms the western boundary of the Specific Plan area.



FIGURE 1-1 Regional Context

The Laguna Niguel/Mission Viejo Metrolink station, constructed in 2002, provides commuter rail service to the Specific Plan area and surrounding communities. The Metrolink station is located within the Gateway area at the south end of Forbes Road, with additional access from Camino Capistrano.

Local access to the Gateway area is from: Crown Valley Parkway, traversing east/west through the project area at its midpoint; Avery Parkway and Paseo de Colinas at the southern end of the project area where they connect with Camino Capistrano; and Cabot Road, traversing north/south through the western edge of the project area.

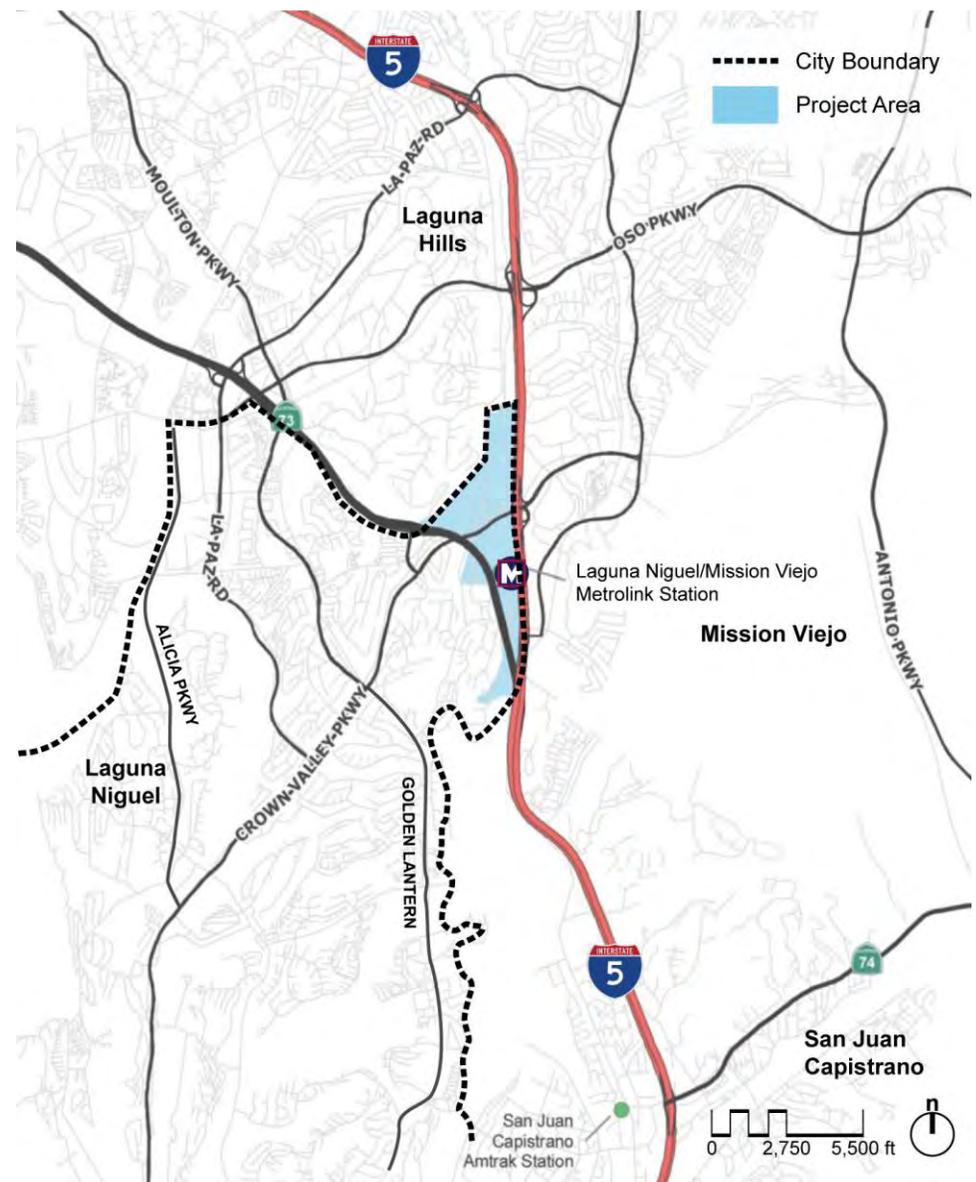


FIGURE 1-2 Location Map

## **1.5 PURPOSE AND AUTHORITY OF THE SPECIFIC PLAN**

The Laguna Niguel Gateway Specific Plan provides for the orderly and efficient development and revitalization of the Gateway area consistent with the goals, policies, and implementation programs of the City of Laguna Niguel General Plan. This Specific Plan contains policies, maps, development standards, and design guidelines that apply specifically to properties within the Gateway area that implement and expand the policies for the area established by the City's General Plan. It updates and replaces the Laguna Niguel Gateway Specific Plan adopted by City Council Resolution No. 99-547 on May 18, 1999, and Ordinance No. 99-111 on June 1, 1999.

This Specific Plan has been prepared and established under the authority granted to the City of Laguna Niguel by California Government Code, Title 7, Division 3, Article 8, Sections 65450 et seq. The State of California encourages cities to adopt Specific Plans either by resolution to establish a policy document, or by ordinance to establish a regulatory document. The Laguna Niguel Gateway Specific Plan is intended to be both a policy and regulatory document. The updated Laguna Niguel Gateway Specific Plan is subject to Planning Commission review and City Council adoption by resolution and ordinance.

Chapters 1, 2, 3, 5, and 6 establish policies for the Gateway Specific Plan area and are adopted by Resolution. Chapter 4 establishes regulatory development standards and guidelines and is adopted by Ordinance. All future uses, development plans, subdivisions, and other entitlements for properties located within the boundaries of the Gateway Specific Plan area shall be consistent with the regulations set forth in Chapter 4 of this Specific Plan and, where not addressed herein, with all other applicable regulations of the City of Laguna Niguel Municipal Code. The decision-makers shall consider consistency with the adopted policies, plans, maps and other provisions of Chapters 1, 2, 3, 5, and 6 as part of the qualitative findings necessary to approve future uses, development plans, subdivisions, and other entitlements.

All regulations, conditions, and programs contained herein shall be deemed separate, distinct, and independent provisions of the Laguna Niguel Gateway Specific Plan. In the event that any such provision is held invalid or unconstitutional by a state or federal court of competent jurisdiction, the validity of all remaining provisions of this Specific Plan shall not be affected.

## 1.6 RELATIONSHIP TO THE LAGUNA NIGUEL GENERAL PLAN

The City of Laguna Niguel General Plan Land Use Element divides the entire City into 14 separate areas called Community Profile Areas. The Laguna Niguel Gateway Specific Plan is included entirely within Community Profile Area 4 and encompasses approximately 315 acres. At present, the profile area contains a mix of office, retail and service commercial, light industrial and auto related sales and service uses. The Laguna Niguel Gateway Specific Plan defines the overall vision, goals, policies, land use regulations, development standards, and design guidelines for the Gateway area. These regulate land use and urban form, mobility (circulation), infrastructure, streetscape, and architectural design. By statute, they must be consistent with the goals, policies, and implementation programs of the City of Laguna Niguel General Plan.



Laguna Niguel Gateway today

The Laguna Niguel General Plan Land Use Element was amended concurrent with adoption of the updated Gateway Specific Plan to provide such consistency. Particularly, the statistical summaries were revised to reflect the existing and the proposed amount of residential and non-residential land uses, the maximum densities for individual projects, and the land use designations, as identified in Chapter 4 (Allowable Uses, Development Standards, and Guidelines).

## 1.7 RELATIONSHIP TO PREVIOUS PLANS

The genesis of Laguna Niguel was the establishment of the Laguna Niguel Corporation in 1959 by Cabot, Cabot, and Forbes, making it one of the first master-planned communities in California. The firm of Victor Gruen and Associates was retained to develop a detailed community plan for the 7,100-acre area. The I-5 Freeway was also extended through the area in 1959. Land sales started to occur in 1961 in Monarch Bay and Laguna Terrace subdivisions. In 1964 Crown Valley Parkway connected the freeway to the coast. By 1969, construction was underway of the South County Regional Civic Center and a new freeway interchange at Crown Valley Parkway. With improved access to the I-5 Freeway, a variety of commercial and industrial businesses began to locate along Crown Valley Parkway, Camino Capistrano, and Forbes and Cabot Roads, in what is now the Laguna Niguel Gateway Specific Plan area.

On December 1, 1989, the City of Laguna Niguel incorporated and became Orange County's twenty-ninth city. In 1992, Laguna Niguel adopted its first General Plan, which identified the Camino Capistrano/Cabot Road Business Area as one of three "Opportunity

Areas” that can provide economic and development potential for the City. In 1999, the City adopted the Laguna Niguel Gateway Specific Plan with new land use regulations and development standards that set the stage to revitalize the area and create a vibrant urban district comprised of retail, restaurant, entertainment, hotel, office, and transit-oriented uses. One of the major components of the Specific Plan was to encourage new development by allowing increased land use intensities. The Specific Plan also identified significant circulation improvements, landscaping and streetscape enhancements, pedestrian amenities and a unique freeway identification and way-finding system necessary to improve the image of one of the oldest areas of the community and a prominent gateway to the City.

Even after the opening of the Metrolink station within the Specific Plan area in 2002, there had not been any appreciable development activity to create the urban village envisioned by the 1999 Gateway Specific Plan. The City enlisted the Urban Land Institute Orange County District (ULIOC) to bring its expertise in identifying new initiatives that could be brought to bear in stimulating real change in the Gateway area consistent with the City’s visions. On May 30 and 31, 2006, the ULIOC conducted a Technical Advisory Panel (TAP) workshop consisting of a team of eighteen professionals in the land use planning industry to study the site and make recommendations to the City on how best to address this objective. The ULIOC TAP consisted of high-level land use professionals with backgrounds and experience in transit-oriented development, mixed-use/multi-use development, multifamily housing, affordable housing, retail/commercial development, urban planning and design, traffic/transportation, redevelopment, real estate law/development agreements, market research and site analysis.

The panelists met with civic leaders, key landowners, and business tenants in the Gateway area. The TAP panel presented their findings and recommendations to the City Council concluding that:

- Housing is the key to unlocking the potential of the Gateway District” and that “initial housing must create a new character and sense of place
- There must be a plan for phasing in residential development fronting along Forbes Road and that it will not happen without improvements of the public realm and infrastructure
- Financing options exist for those improvements and the Specific Plan is the vehicle for structuring the entitlements and requirements

- The Gateway needs a “Champion”—both in the Council and City government and in the private sector, e.g., an enlightened developer, in order to succeed with the vision to revitalize the area

In its follow up to implement the recommendations presented by the TAP, the City Council retained the consulting firm PBS&J and a multi-disciplinary team of urban designers, economists, transportation planners, and engineers to prepare an updated Specific Plan. The consultant team was charged with building upon the City’s previous studies for the Gateway area including the goals and objectives identified by the TAP. This Specific Plan is the result of the collaborative planning efforts between the City, the public, land and business owners, and the Consultant team selected for this revision.

## 1.8 PROCESS FOR PREPARING THE SPECIFIC PLAN

Preparation of the updated Laguna Niguel Gateway Specific Plan and its Environmental Impact Report (EIR) involved a series of technical work tasks that generally included the following:

- **Documentation of Existing Conditions.** Background data describing existing characteristics, planned improvements, and development constraints and opportunities in the Gateway area was assembled and considered.
- **Issues and Possible Futures.** Opportunities were presented in a study session with the City Council and workshop with Gateway area landowners and development community representatives to identify critical and essential elements for a successful mixed-use community, including the review of exemplary transit-oriented development projects that have been constructed in various California communities.
- **Visioning.** A shared vision for the Gateway area and the guiding development principles to achieve this vision were developed in consideration of input from the City Council, landowners, and developers.
- **Understanding the Market for Development.** Market analyses and potential demands for housing, retail, office, and hotel uses in the Gateway area were developed and reviewed with the City Council. These examined and differentiated near- and long-term opportunities.
- **Development of Land Use, Urban Design, and Mobility Alternatives.** Alternative land use and urban form concepts and

plans were developed for the Gateway area based on the Vision and market analyses. Three benchmark land use alternatives were differentiated by their mix of uses, development densities, and buildout capacities. These presented a range of possible changes for the Gateway, from minimum to maximum levels of change.

- **Evaluation of Land Use Alternatives.** Alternative land use scenarios were evaluated according to their comparative impacts on the circulation network using the City's Traffic Model. Alternative physical and operational improvements to reduce impacts were developed and tested for their costs and feasibility for implementation.
- **Selection of a Preferred Land Use and Mobility Scenario.** The land use alternatives and related Gateway area improvements were discussed at public workshops with Gateway area land and business owners, and development community representatives. Comments from the workshops were presented to the City Council for selection of a preferred plan.
- **Plan Development.** Plans for land use and urban form, streetscapes and open spaces, mobility, infrastructure, and Oso Creek and applicable development standards and design guidelines were prepared for the selected development scenario. An implementation plan was developed describing the actions that carry out the plans, their priorities, responsible City and outside agencies, and anticipated time frames. These plans were incorporated into the Draft Laguna Niguel Gateway Specific Plan.
- **Environmental Review.** A Draft Environmental Impact Report (EIR) was prepared for the Draft Laguna Niguel Gateway Specific Plan assessing the impacts of the updated Specific Plan in accordance with the procedural and substantive requirements of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA).
- **Plan Adoption.** The Draft Laguna Niguel Gateway Specific Plan and Draft EIR were presented to the Planning Commission, who conducted public hearings and made its recommendations to the City Council. Public hearings were also conducted by the City Council, who deliberated in consideration of public testimony and the Planning Commission's recommendations, and ultimately certified the Final EIR for its adequacy and adopted the Laguna Niguel Gateway Specific Plan by resolution and ordinance.

## 1.9 ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW

A Draft Environmental Impact Report (DEIR) was prepared in accordance with the provisions of California Environmental Quality Act (SCH No. 1998111080) to address the potential environmental effects of the Laguna Niguel Gateway Specific Plan and identify those measures that would mitigate any potential impacts resulting from project implementation to a less-than-significant level. Most of the mitigation measures identified have been incorporated into this Specific Plan as policies, so that it is largely self-mitigating.