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September 14, 2001

The Honorable Anna Caballero, Mayor
 City of Salinas, City Hall
 200 Lincoln Avenue
 Salinas, CA 93901

RE: September 18, 2001 "Study Session" On The General Plan Update

Dear Mayor Caballero and City Council Members:

LandWatch wrote you on August 28, 2001, to express our grave concern about the "preferred" land use and circulation alternative being proposed for the Draft General Plan. The staff and consultants have recommended a radical increase in population growth for the City of Salinas. What they propose is planning for the addition of 90,624 new residents from the year 2000 to the year 2020. This goes far beyond the population growth forecasts made by the Association of Monterey Bay Area Governments, which predicts a total growth over that period of only 39,863.

"Natural growth" in Salinas (births over deaths) is projected to be only 29,000 during the twenty-year period from 2000 to 2020. If Salinas is really planning to accommodate more than 90,000 new residents, that means the City is planning for over 61,000 people to move into Salinas from other places. Given the geographical location of the City of Salinas, the only possible conclusion is that the staff wants the City to become an ever-bigger bedroom community for the Silicon Valley.

The staff and consultants also recommend the conversion of 4,400 acres of agricultural land, to accommodate the massive population growth they want Salinas to accept. Our question is this: Is this really what the City Council "*prefers*" in terms of future planning for Salinas?

Frankly, we hope not. We have other ideas we'd like to propose, and we also don't think that this is what the *people* want. This brings us to our major concern with your meeting scheduled for September 18th.

It is our understanding, from your September 18th meeting notice, from previous comments of your staff as reported in the newspaper, and from remarks made by your consultants at the last study session, that the City Council intends to give "feedback and guidance" to its staff and consultants at the September 18th meeting, but that no public hearing will ever be held, and that no formal vote is anticipated before the Draft General Plan and Draft EIR are written.

You apparently contemplate a process by which the staff and consultants will proceed to develop a Draft General Plan and Draft EIR based on informal "feedback and guidance" from the City Council, as expressed at the September 18th study session and previous study sessions, without the benefit of any public hearing—and even without a formal vote by the City Council.

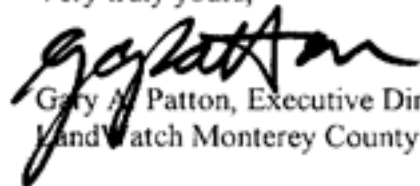
We believe this may well be illegal. If the preparation of a General Plan Update is a “project” under the California Environmental Quality Act (which we think it is) it qualifies as a “project” because it is a “discretionary” activity, proposed to be carried out by a public agency. In our view, the nature and scope of the proposed project must be decided upon by the City Council itself, acting formally. That is how the Council is empowered to exercise its discretion—not by giving informal “feedback and guidance” to consultants and staff, who then, as a practical matter, define the “project” the way they want to.

Whether this legal perspective is accurate or not, it is certainly inappropriate for the City Council to make such a decision (about what the General Plan and General Plan EIR will be based on) without hearing from the public, and without officially exercising their discretion through a vote. Deciding the “preferred alternative” on which the Draft General Plan and Draft EIR will be based is the second most important decision that the Council will make during the entirety of the General Plan Update process. The *most* important decision, of course, will be the final vote, at the end of the process—but determining the “preferred alternative” for the Draft General Plan is almost as important as that.

The City will spend between \$100,000 and \$200,000 (and maybe more) developing a Draft General Plan and Draft EIR. When the City embarks on the preparation of these documents, it ought to be very clear that the “preferred alternative” on which the Draft General Plan and the Draft EIR will be based is truly “preferred” by the City. **How can you legitimately say that the staff-recommended program for massive growth, accompanied by wholesale conversion of agricultural land, is the “preferred alternative” for the future of Salinas, without ever asking for official public input at public hearing? How can you proceed to develop an entire, costly plan based on these kinds of assumptions without ever taking a formal vote?**

LandWatch urges the Salinas City Council to conclude its “Study Session” not with informal “feedback and guidance,” but by directing the Planning Commission to hold at least one public hearing, and then to make a formal recommendation to the City Council on what the “preferred alternative” for the Draft General Plan and the Draft EIR should be. Thereafter, the City Council should itself hold at least one public hearing, and then formally vote to direct the preparation of the Draft General Plan and Draft EIR based on the alternative that the Council decides is truly “preferred”—after hearing officially from the Planning Commission, and directly from the public.

Very truly yours,



Gary A. Patton, Executive Director
LandWatch Monterey County

cc: Members, Salinas City Council
Members, Salinas Planning Commission
David Mora, City Manager
Charmaine Geiger, Community Development Director