MEIRS – A METHOD FOR EVALUATING THE ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS OF GENERAL PLANS

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Abstract. Master Environmental Impact Report (MEIR) is the term given Environmental Impact Reports on General Plans, Economic Development Programs and other types of long-range non-specific master planning efforts. This article defines the functional role of MEIR's and describes a methodology for preparing, updating, and maintaining MEIR's as a component of the on-going general planning process.

Since the inception of NEPA and CEQA, planners, engineers, and the general public have become familiar with Environmental Impact statements and reports on specific development proposals. The format is well established. The proposed project is examined and described, its expected physical effects are documented and the environmental setting in which those effects are to occur is described. Impacts are those effects which are expected to induce adverse changes to the environmental setting.

Decisions involving specific projects such as a new flood control facility, a shopping center, a subdivision, or an industrial plant have been, in most cases, preceded by earlier planning level decisions which set aside the area for specific uses and program the public improvements to support the planned uses. The earlier decision is couched in a general plan, economic development plan or similar document. Those general plans and economic development programs, which have been adopted since December 1972, have required an Environmental Impact Report under the auspices of the California Environmental Quality Act.*

2. EIRs on General Plans; Past Experience

The EIRs produced on general plans have addressed environmental impacts associated with the plans, in loose flabby terms, with no quantification and few, if any, recommendations or how identified problems could be mitigated. These EIRs have been prepared exclusively to meet a statutory obligation and not as an aid to the environmental evaluation of subsequent decisions on specific projects, nor as a basis for determining the total effects the General Plan may have on identifiable physical limitations existing in the region.

One prime problem is that Environmental Impact Reports on General Plans have, for the most part, adhered to the same format that is used for Specific Project EIRs. Just as a general plan is different in content and function than a development plan for a


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specific project, the EIR for a General Plan should be different in content and function than the EIR prepared for a specific land use proposal.

3. The Functional Role of General Plans

In order to scope out the type and detail of information and analysis appropriate for an EIR on a general planning program (MEIR), it is first necessary to examine the functions of the General Plan in relationship to specific development. General plans and staged development planning are primarily concerned with the timing and location of different types of physical development within a given spatial setting. Concordantly, an MEIR should address the physical effects that can be expected to attend a particular pattern and staging of development. The first tasks then in designing an MEIR are to identify those physical effects influenced by a general planning decision that are measurable on a general planning level and to identify the level of detail in which these effects can be projected and defined.

Development decisions in General Plans are formulated at a gross land use level and do not deal with specific design details. Areas are slated for residential development at varying densities; industrial development is characterized as heavy, medium or light, commercial, as highway oriented, neighborhood or regional. Within such designations a tremendously wide range of activities and associated environmental effects can occur. Identification or prediction of effects cannot exceed in detail what can be anticipated based on the plan designations and associated standards and controls governing subsequent uses in an area.

In effect, allocation of specific types of land uses to an area through a general plan can only be evaluated in terms of those processes common to the types of activities under consideration (e.g., the traffic, liquid and solid waste generated, water and energy consumed). It is thus under the rubric of these processes that identification of effects and evaluation of impacts can take place. The MEIR then must function as the measure of the processes common to the level of definition upon which a general plan decision is to be rendered.

4. Establishing Spatial and Temporal Boundaries for General Plans through Use of Urban Limit Lines

Impact analysis primarily depends on limits, a set of consistent agreed-upon boundaries against which effects can be measured. Many General Plans do not operate within defined limits, either temporal or spatial. Establishment of temporal and spatial limits is a key to the workability of the MEIR based upon a system of land and service system accounts.

One method for setting such limits which is gaining in popularity is the use of Urban Limit Lines. An Urban Limit Line is established around a city as a boundary within which the city will extend utilities and support urban development (Figure 1). Beyond such a line, land uses are restricted to non-urban types such as agriculture, large lot residential, and recreation. The line may be set for a given period of time, such as five