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**CITY COUNCIL**

Javier Lopez, Mayor  
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Bret Silveira, Dist. 3    Daniel A. Martinez, Dist. 4

Date: September 27, 2023

To: Responsible Agencies, Trustee Agencies, Interested Parties and Organizations

Subject: Notice of Preparation of a Draft Environmental Impact Report

Project Title: Copper Trails Specific Plan and Annexation

Lead Agency: City of Ceres  
Community Development Department  
2200 Magnolia Street  
Ceres, CA 95307

Project Applicant: Stewart S. Fahmy and Nav Athwal  
c/o NorthStar Engineering Group, Inc.  
620 12<sup>th</sup> Street  
Modesto, CA 95354

The City of Ceres is the Lead Agency and will prepare an Environmental Impact Report (EIR) for the Copper Trails Specific Plan and Annexation project. As required by the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), the City is soliciting the views of Responsible and Trustee Agencies as to the scope and content of the environmental information that is germane to your agency's statutory responsibilities in connection with the proposed project. Your agency may need to use the EIR prepared by the City when considering a permit or other approval for the project. The City is also providing a copy of this Notice of Preparation to other parties and organizations that may have an interest in the Copper Trails Specific Plan and EIR.

The Copper Trails Specific Plan and Annexation project and its probable environmental effects are described in the full version of the NOP, which is available for review. The City of Ceres has determined that an EIR will be prepared without preparation of an Initial Study as permitted in Section 15060(d) of the State CEQA Guidelines.

Due to the time limits mandated by State law, your response to this notice must be sent at the earliest possible date but not later than 30 days after receipt of this notice.

If you would like to discuss the project or the environmental impacts that should be addressed in the EIR, the Ceres Planning Commission will conduct a public scoping meeting on October 16, 2023 at 6:00 p.m. at the Ceres Community Center, 2701 4th Street, Ceres, CA

Please send your comments by mail or email to Christopher Hoem, Director of the Ceres Community Development Department as shown below. Please provide the contact person's name and associated contact information for your agency or organization.

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Christopher Hoem, AICP  
Community Development Director, City of Ceres  
christopher.hoem@ci.ceres.ca.us  
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Date 9/26/23

## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

### COPPER TRAILS SPECIFIC PLAN AND ANNEXATION PROJECT

#### Project Location

The project site is in unincorporated Stanislaus County south of and adjacent to the City of Ceres (Figure 1). The Copper Trails Specific Plan (CTSP) area is bounded by SR 99 and Mitchell Road on the east, Service Road on the north, Blaker Road on the west, and TID Lower Lateral 2 on the south. The non-CTSP annexation area is located north and east of the CTSP and south of the existing City boundary. Much of the non-CTSP area is located west of SR 99 and is bounded by Service Road to the south, Central Avenue to the west, Industrial Way to the north, and SR 99 to the east. The eastern portion of the non-CTSP annexation area consists primarily of the mainline SR 99 and associated State Highway right-of-way between 9<sup>th</sup> Street on the northwest and Moore Road to the southeast. An additional area to be annexed is located between the SR 99 right-of-way and the existing City of Ceres boundary to the northeast.

#### Project Description

The proposed project consists of the approval, annexation, and subsequent development of the CTSP area, including related permits and approvals. The CTSP establishes a plan for, and would result in, development of residential, commercial, and other urban land uses within the approximately 534.6-acre CTSP area (Figure 2). Proposed urban development within the CTSP would require City approvals of the CTSP, the proposed annexation, amendments of the Ceres General Plan, pre-zoning of the annexation area, one or more development agreements, and future Tentative Map application submittals. Other required permits and approvals would include cancellation of Williamson Act contracts, adjustment of the boundaries of the Ceres Fire Protection District, and encroachment permits from the Turlock Irrigation District.

CTSP approval and annexation would result in the potential development of approximately 260.3 acres of low-, medium-, medium high-, and high-density residential units within the CTSP area. The total dwelling units that would be potentially developed is 2,392. Approximately 107.4 acres is proposed for Regional Commercial development, which is estimated at 1,169,586 square feet of floor area. The CTSP also proposes approximately 42.3 acres of parks and open space, including street landscapes, and 3.4 acres for new public uses that would be in addition to the 74.1 acres already occupied by the Central Valley High School and Hidahl Elementary School, both operated by the Ceres Unified School District. The CTSP planned circulation system would utilize and improve existing roads and add new roads and streets and provide for development of new bicycle and pedestrian trails and open space linkages to provide access to and between the residential neighborhoods, commercial areas, schools, and parks of the developed CTSP area.

Along with annexation of the CTSP area, the project proposes the annexation of 146.1 acres of currently unincorporated land outside the CTSP area to the City of Ceres (Figure 3). The non-CTSP annexation area is located between the existing City boundary and the CTSP area (Figure 3). This annexation would avoid the creation of unincorporated "islands," which are contrary to State and local annexation statutes and policies.

All annexations would require approval from the Stanislaus LAFCo. City approvals would also be required for the annexation of the non-CTSP lands. Annexation of the non-CTSP area would include pre-zoning of the area consistent with the Ceres General Plan and potentially extending the availability of City utilities and services to this largely developed unincorporated area. The non-CTSP area includes discontinuous tracts of undeveloped land with some new development potential, which is quantified in other parts of the Project Description.

## PROBABLE ENVIRONMENTAL EFFECTS OF THE COPPER TRAILS SPECIFIC PLAN AND ANNEXATION PROJECT

The CTSP EIR will consider the potential environmental effects of urban development that could result from adoption and implementation of the Copper Trails Specific Plan, referred to as “CTSP development”, as well as of the annexation of the CTSP area and the non-CTSP area. The anticipated scope of the analysis and issues to be addressed are described in the following sections. The EIR will be a programmatic analysis of the potential environmental effects of urban development facilitated by the CTSP and will focus on mitigation measures that can be used to guide future development by incorporation into the goals, policies, standards, and implementation measures of the CTSP wherever feasible.

Many of the potential environmental effects of urban development of the CTSP area have already been addressed in the certified Ceres General Plan EIR (the “GPEIR”) at a programmatic level. The General Plan EIR analysis is consistent with the anticipated level of detail of the CTSP EIR, but the relationship between the two documents will be considered in detail in the CTSP EIR. Both the General Plan EIR analysis and the CTSP EIR will address all of the potential environmental effects listed in the current Environmental Checklist in CEQA Guidelines Appendix G.

The Specific Plan and EIR documents will be prepared concurrently. This process will provide the opportunity for the specific plan and environmental consultants to collaborate in identifying mitigation measures for potentially significant impacts that can be incorporated directly into the Specific Plan.

### Aesthetics

Planned development of the CTSP and potential development of the non-CTSP areas would result in conversion of existing vacant land and land in agricultural uses to urban use. CTSP development will proceed in accordance with the Ceres General Plan, and the Municipal Code, as modified by the goals, policies, and urban design standards prescribed in the CTSP. The GPEIR considered the potential aesthetic effects of urban development and found that implementation of General Plan policies would reduce effects to a less-than-significant level. Additional community planning and design requirements in the CTSP would be expected to further reduce any potential aesthetic effects associated with urban development.

### Agricultural and Forestry Resources

Urban development envisioned by the CTSP will result in the conversion of Farmland, as defined in CEQA Guidelines Appendix G, to non-agricultural uses. The amount of potential Farmland conversion will be quantified in the EIR. Project construction will be related to the conversion of agricultural land and loss of soil productivity. CTSP development will contribute to agricultural land conversion envisioned in the Ceres General Plan and addressed in the GPEIR, which were determined to be significant and unavoidable even with implementation of General Plan policies. The potential effects of planned urban development in the CTSP area were considered in the City’s CEQA findings and Statement of Overriding Considerations adopted in conjunction with approval of the Ceres General Plan.

Development proposed under the CTSP may include lands currently under Williamson Act contracts that are intended to encourage continued use of these lands for agriculture. Prior to development on any of these lands, the Williamson Act contracts will need to be cancelled. The GPEIR considered the potential impacts of urban development on lands under Williamson Act contracts and found them to be significant and unavoidable. These potential effects of planned urban development in the CTSP area will be described in the CTSP EIR, noting that these effects were addressed in the City’s CEQA findings and Statement of Overriding Considerations adopted in conjunction with approval of the Ceres General Plan.

There are no forest lands located in or near the project area; the project would have no impact on forest lands, and these concerns would not be addressed in the EIR.



## Air Quality

Development pursuant to adoption of the CTSP as well as further development in vacant portions of the non-CTSP annexation area will result in new ozone precursor and particulate matter emissions from diesel and other construction equipment, as well as dust generated by construction activity on exposed soils. New development envisioned by the CTSP will result in substantial new vehicle trip generation and associated emissions of ozone precursors, carbon monoxide, and particulate matter, and contributions to attainment or non-attainment levels of criteria air pollutant standards. Potential air emissions from urban development in the project area were analyzed in the GPEIR and were determined to be significant and unavoidable even with implementation of applicable General Plan policies. These potential effects will be described in the CTSP EIR, noting that emissions from planned urban development in the CTSP area were addressed in the City's CEQA findings and Statement of Overriding Considerations adopted in conjunction with approval of the Ceres General Plan.

Construction and operational emission impacts from new development will be quantified in the EIR and compared to current SJVAPCD CEQA significance thresholds, using the CalEEMod program and other air quality models as necessary. Likewise, potential mitigation measures for air quality impacts will be reexamined, including measures that can be incorporated into the CTSP. The EIR will consider whether projected future traffic congestion would result in elevated local concentrations of carbon monoxide.

Construction, vehicle traffic, and other aspects of new development in the CTSP and non-CTSP areas would involve new generation of air toxics, including diesel particulate matter. Potential generation of diesel particulate matter and other air toxics, and their potential effects on sensitive land uses, will be considered in the EIR. A Health Risk Assessment of the project will be conducted if project activities could potentially exceed applicable SJVAPCD cancer and non-cancer risk thresholds.

## Biological Resources

The CTSP area was historically in intensive agriculture, primarily almond orchards, and has since been partially developed with urban infrastructure and land uses. There are few areas of native vegetation with wildlife habitat values; these are primarily ruderal areas in underutilized lands, lands along the TID canal alignment, and areas adjacent to existing roads. The GPEIR described the potential biological effects of urban development, which were potentially significant but would be reduced to a less-than-significant level with implementation of General Plan policies.

The EIR will reconsider the potential biological effects of new development on the project area based on an updated biological database check, selected field reviews of the project area, and review of the potential biological effects identified in the GPEIR. Issues to be analyzed will include potential effects on special-status species, potential Waters of the U.S., and migratory bird species. Any applicable habitat conservation plans and local biological requirements will be evaluated.

## Cultural Resources and Tribal Cultural Resources

Development of CTSP and non-CTSP lands may affect cultural, archaeological, or historical resources that may be present, including those of value to local Native American tribes. The GPEIR indicated that development could affect cultural resources, but the General Plan includes goals and policies that would reduce or avoid adverse cultural resource effects. The CTSP EIR will report on cultural resource outreach efforts and a new cultural resource record search for the project area; the EIR will describe the sensitivity of the area in more detail, and identify potential cultural resources that may require additional investigation in conjunction with specific site development.

## Geology and Soils

The GPEIR considered the potential geology and soil effects of urban development and found that implementation of Ceres General Plan policies would reduce effects to a less-than-significant level. Future urban development in the CTSP area will occur on soils in the Ceres area that are generally sandy loam or

loamy sand. The project area is not subject to any known geologic hazards and does not contain designated mineral resources. The CTSP EIR will identify the nature and location of geologic hazards in the region and the character of soils in the CTSP area, including expansiveness of soils and potential for liquefaction. The potential for soil erosion and sedimentation in conjunction with urban development and the effectiveness of the City's required storm water pollution controls in avoiding significant effects will be analyzed. If required, additional mitigation measures will be identified.

### Greenhouse Gas Emissions

New development in the CTSP and non-CTSP areas will result in potentially significant amounts of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions generated by increased motor vehicle traffic, with lesser emissions from fuel combustion and energy usage in residences and businesses. The GPEIR considered the potential effects of urban development on GHG emissions and found that implementation of General Plan policies would reduce effects of development on GHG emissions to a less-than-significant level.

The CTSP will include land planning and urban design requirements intended to provide a more integrated and energy-efficient land development, to facilitate pedestrian and bicycle usage, and to reduce indirectly out-of-area trips and vehicle miles traveled (VMT). The CTSP EIR will quantify potential GHG emissions associated with new development within the CTSP area and consider the effectiveness of elements of the CTSP that would tend to reduce future GHG emissions vs. future "business-as-usual" emissions, based on applicable significance thresholds and GHG reduction plans.

### Hazardous Materials

Construction activity and future land uses will involve the use of hazardous materials and risk of new environmental contamination, as well as potentially involve exposure of workers and residents to existing and potential future environmental contamination in the project area, such as residual agricultural chemicals and aerial lead deposits. The GPEIR considered the potential effects of urban development related to hazards and hazardous materials and found that implementation of General Plan policies would reduce effects to a less-than-significant level, except for emissions of hazardous materials near schools. These emissions were determined by the GPEIR to be significant and unavoidable.

The CTSP EIR will report the results of a detailed hazardous material database search as well as State database checks. The EIR will describe the potential for human exposure to or for further environmental contamination in areas with existing environmental hazards, with particular attention to emissions near the existing elementary school and high school. The EIR will also assess the potential hazards the project site would be subject to from Modesto City-County Airport operations and from wildland fires.

### Hydrology and Water Quality

The GPEIR considered the potential hydrology and water quality effects of urban development and found that implementation of Ceres General Plan policies would reduce effects to a less-than-significant level. The existing City water supply is currently from groundwater only. New development will involve increased demand on the City's groundwater supply; potential effects on groundwater and the availability of potable water will be addressed in a Water Supply Assessment or equivalent document, as required. The CTSP EIR will also discuss applicable groundwater management plans, including plans required by the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act.

There are no existing natural surface waters in or adjacent to the project site. Drainage from the area is collected by existing ditches alongside roads or percolates into the ground. New development will involve the generation of additional urban runoff and need for treatment and disposal. The CTSP EIR will identify the applicable NPDES Permit and other applicable storm water requirements that are in place reduce potential urban runoff effects. If required, additional water quality mitigation measures will be specified in the EIR.

### Land Use

The CTSP is intended to modify the existing adopted land use plans, designations, and development standards applicable to the CTSP area. The intended result is more specific planning guidance and a regulatory tool that will produce a more attractive, accessible, and integrated development that will complement existing and planned development in the City of Ceres. The CTSP EIR will identify land use changes that will result from CTSP adoption, potential conflicts between the proposed land uses and existing adjacent uses. The CTSP EIR will evaluate the consistency of planned development with the Ceres General Plan and the Subdivision and Zoning titles in the Ceres Municipal Code. These and other potential land use effects are, however, expected to be generally beneficial.

### Noise

Existing noise sources in the CTSP area include the SR 99 freeway, the railway adjacent to the freeway, and local traffic on Service Road, Redwood Road, Central Avenue, and other existing roadways in the area. Future CTSP development will generate new vehicular traffic and commercial activities, which will add to existing noise and contribute to anticipated future noise levels. CTSP development will include residential and other uses that could be exposed to noise levels in excess of City standards. Potential noise effects of urban development were analyzed in the GPEIR and were determined to be significant and unavoidable even with implementation of applicable General Plan policies. The potential effects of urbanization of the CTSP area were addressed in the GPEIR and in the City's CEQA findings and Statement of Overriding Considerations adopted in conjunction with approval of the Ceres General Plan.

Project-related potential increases in roadway noise and potentially significant exposure of noise-sensitive uses to existing and future noise levels will be specifically identified and discussed in the CTSP EIR. Noise levels would be compared to applicable City standards established in the Ceres General Plan and Ceres Municipal Code. Feasible mitigation measures with potential to reduce noise effects will be identified. Potential exposure of land uses to groundborne vibrations will also be analyzed.

### Population and Housing

Land use designations in the CTSP will replace other designations in the existing Ceres General Plan, and the population growth and housing capacity inherent in those designations. The CTSP includes land use designations that would permit some higher-density residential development. The CTSP EIR will analyze potential population growth and its consistency with growth anticipated in the Ceres General Plan. It also will analyze potential housing and its consistency with applicable housing plans, especially the Housing Element of the Ceres General Plan.

### Public Services

New development under the CTSP and in the non-CTSP areas will place potentially significant additional demands on the City of Ceres and other public service entities with responsibility in the project area for public services such as fire protection, police protection, schools, and parks and recreation. The GPEIR considered the potential effects of urban development on public services and found that implementation of General Plan policies would reduce effects to a less-than-significant level. The CTSP EIR will, however, report on project-related contacts made with each service entity as to potential environmental effects that may be associated with the construction or operation of proposed land uses, including the potential need for new or expanded service facilities.

### Transportation

New development within the CTSP and non-CTSP areas will generate additional motor vehicle use and transportation demand on the freeway, arterial, collector and local road systems serving the project area. Additional residential development will increase the need for pedestrian and bicycle access in the area, particularly to the existing schools. Potential transportation effects of urban development were analyzed in the GPEIR and were determined to be significant and unavoidable even with implementation of applicable General Plan policies. The potential effects of planned urban development in the CTSP area considered in the GPEIR and addressed in the City's CEQA findings and Statement of Overriding Considerations adopted in conjunction with approval of the Ceres General Plan.

The CTSP EIR will analyze the impacts of the proposed specific plan land use designations and development standards on traffic, both on existing and proposed roadways. The CTSP EIR will consider the potential effects of CTSP development in terms of vehicle miles traveled (VMT) as provided in SB 743, as well as the magnitude of potential future traffic and its consistency with planned urban street infrastructure. The transportation analysis will extend to potential effects on pedestrian, bicycle, transit, and other relevant transportation modes.

### Utilities and Services

New development within the CTSP and non-CTSP areas will place increasing demands on City potable water, wastewater, and storm drainage systems. Future development will also increase demands for electrical, gas, and communication facilities. The GPEIR considered the potential effects of urban development on utilities and found that implementation of General Plan policies would reduce effects to a less-than-significant level. The CTSP EIR will consider the area-specific utility effects of potential new development and report on contacts with the regulated utilities as to their ability to accommodate new development. As noted above, a Water Supply Assessment or equivalent document will be prepared for the project. Also, potential impacts related to the extension of infrastructure will be analyzed, as well as impacts on existing infrastructure such as Turlock Irrigation District Lower Lateral 2.

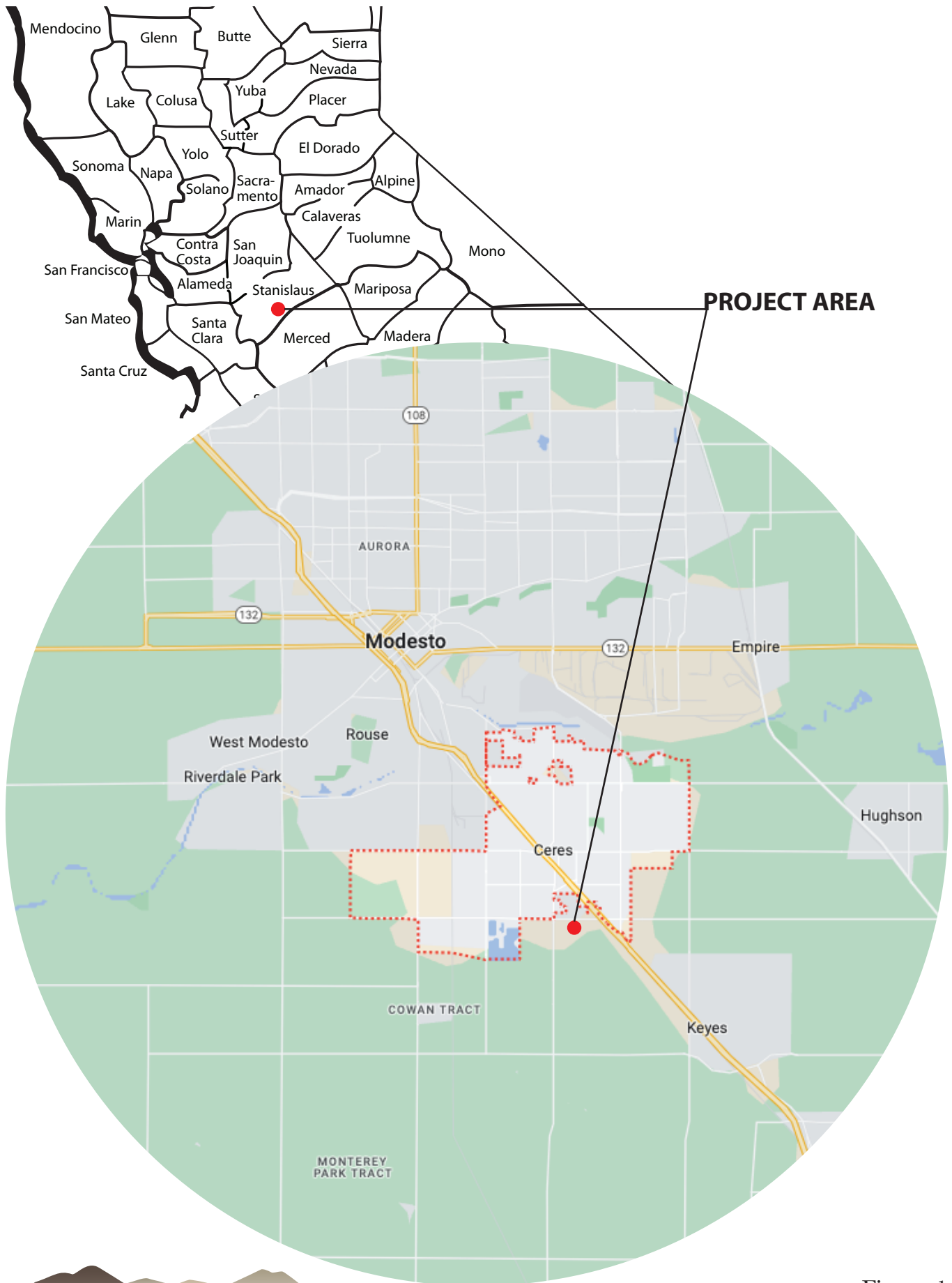
### Cumulative Impacts

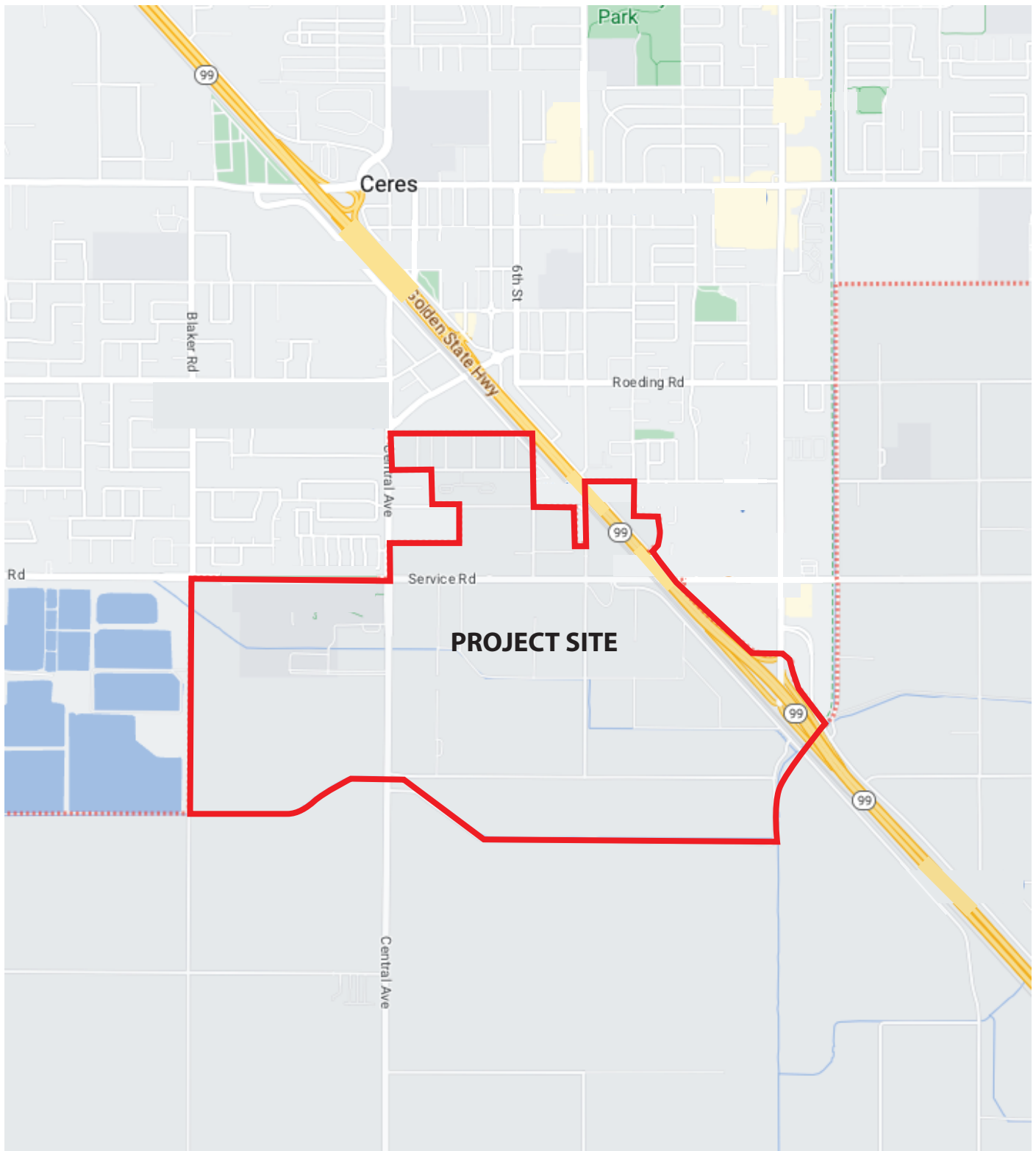
The cumulative impacts of planned urban development in the City of Ceres are described in the certified GPEIR, which will form the basis of the cumulative impact analysis for the CTSP EIR. The CTSP EIR will assess the potential cumulative impacts of the project by issue area and compare them to the analysis in the GPEIR. Should impacts substantially differ between the CTSP EIR and the GPEIR, feasible mitigation measures to reduce CTSP impacts will be identified.

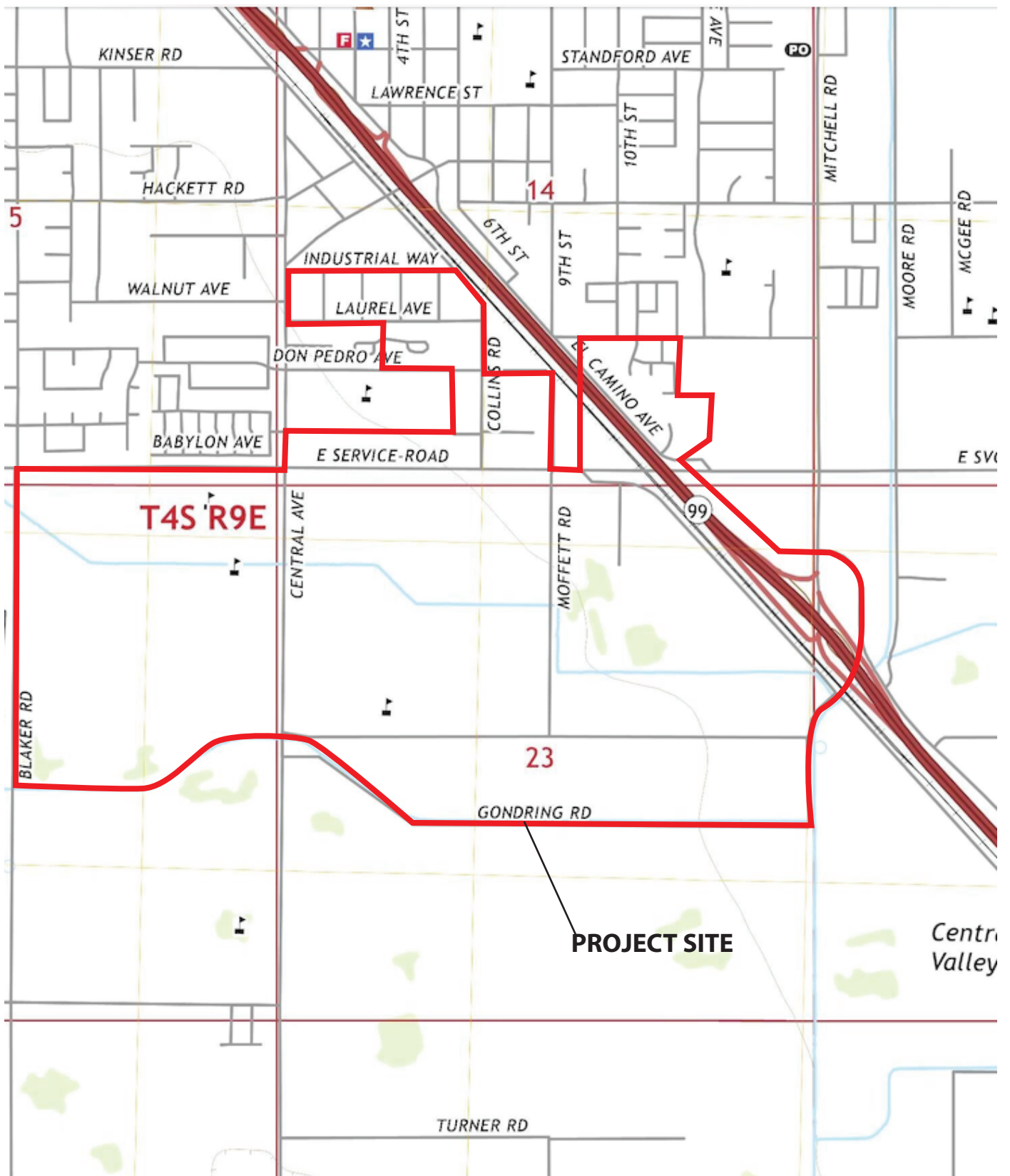
### Other CEQA Issues

State law defines "environmental justice" as "the fair treatment of all races, cultures, and incomes with respect to the development, adoption, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies." Environmental justice is not an issue that CEQA explicitly requires to be addressed, as it is more of a socioeconomic issue than one concerning the physical environment. However, the State of California has recently emphasized the incorporation of environmental justice concerns in land use and environmental planning, particularly in relation to "disadvantaged communities" as defined by SB 535. The

GPEIR did not discuss environmental justice. The CTSP EIR will identify any disadvantaged communities in the project area. If any are determined to exist, the EIR will analyze potential adverse environmental impacts of the project on these communities.

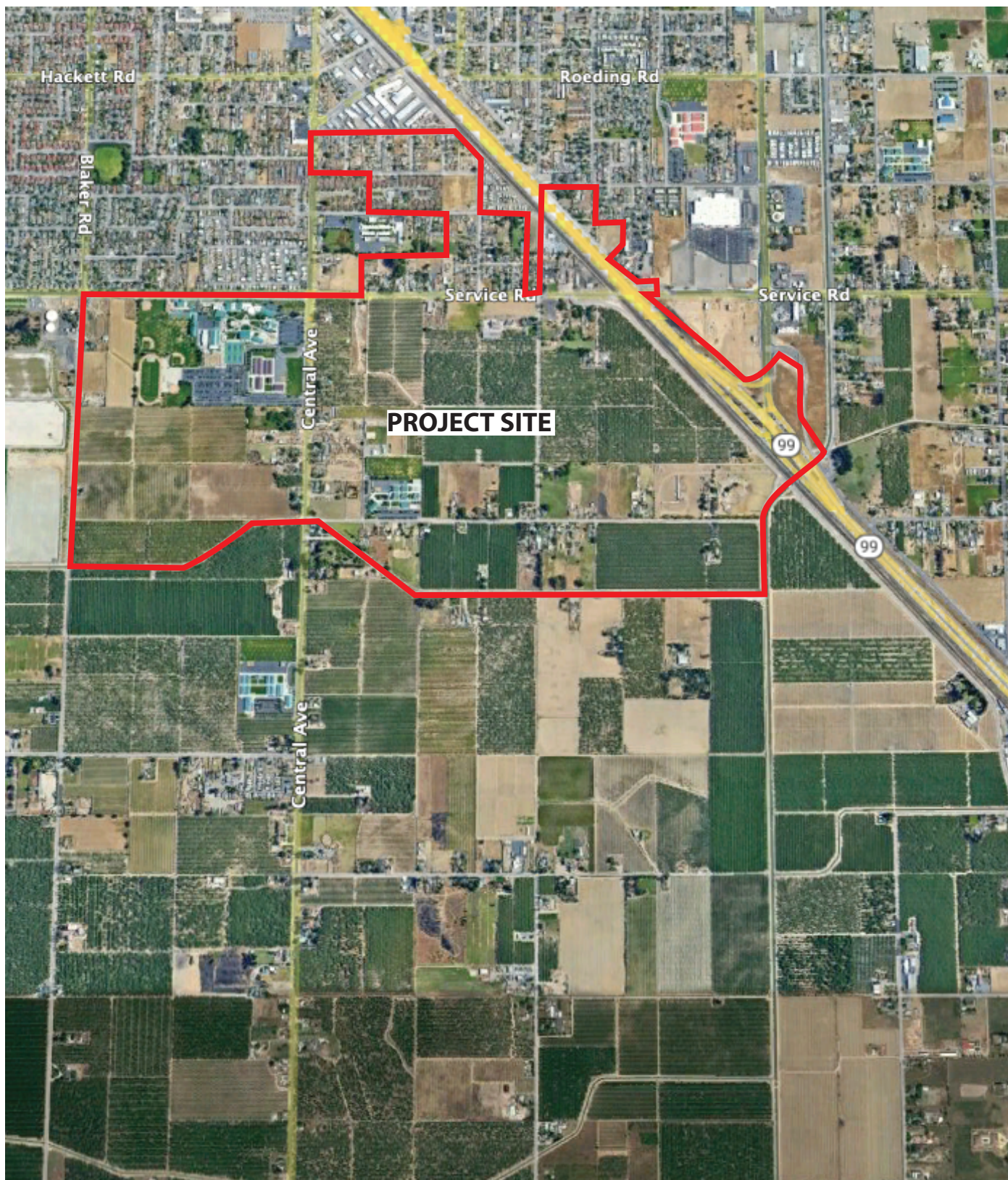






**SOURCE:** USGS Quadrangle Map, Ceres, CA 2021.

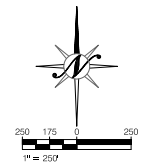
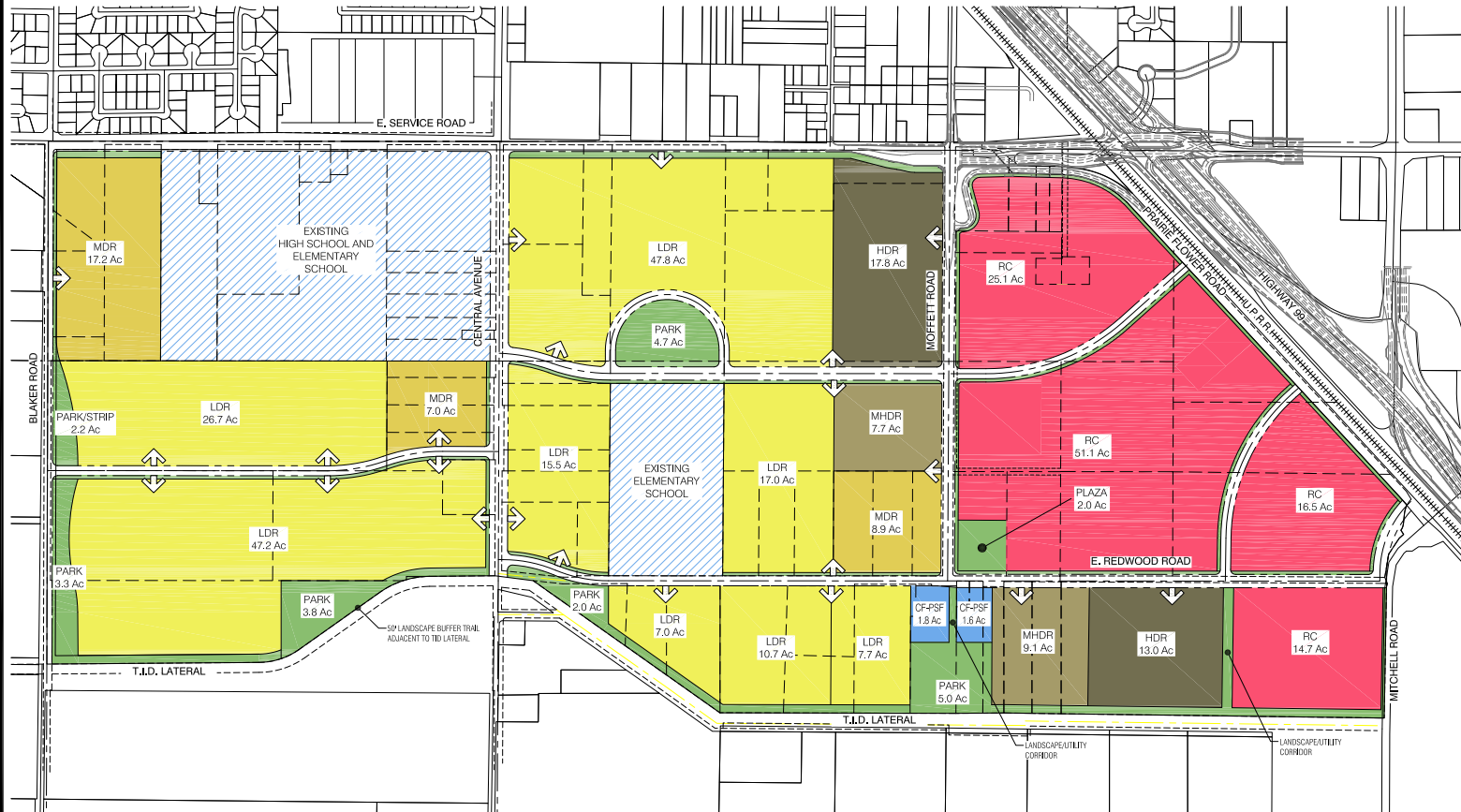




**SOURCE:** Google Earth

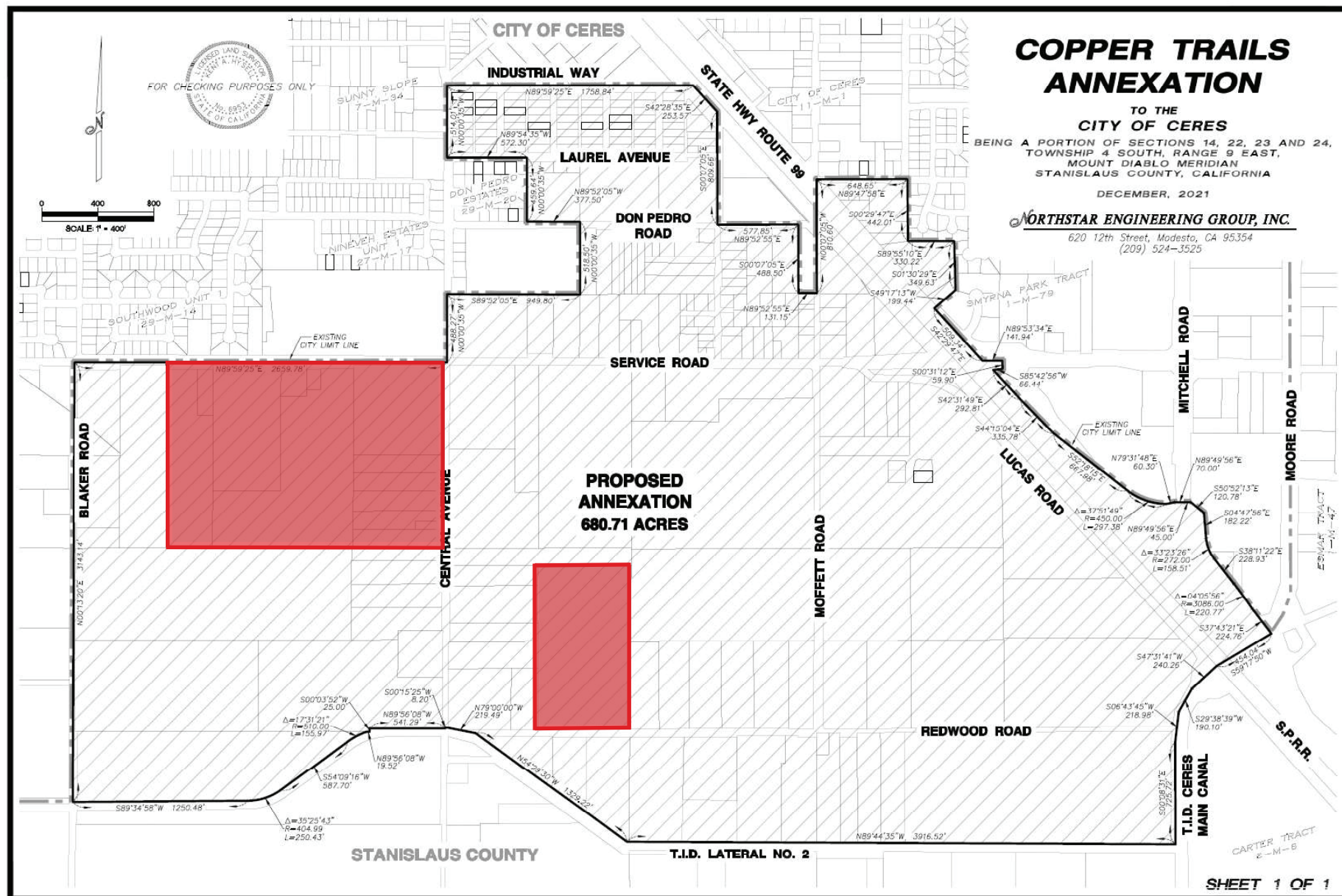


BUBBLE PLAN V1.7 REV. 1  
**COPPER TRAILS**  
 CERES, CALIFORNIA



**LAND USE TABLE**

	PRODUCT	ACREAGE	MIN./MAX. LOT COUNT
	LOW DENSITY RESIDENTIAL	179.6 AC	178 - 1,248
	MEDIUM DENSITY RESIDENTIAL	33.1 AC	232 - 397
	MEDIUM HIGH DENSITY RESIDENTIAL	16.8 AC	202 - 336
	HIGH DENSITY RESIDENTIAL	30.8 AC	616 - 924
	REGIONAL COMMERCIAL	107.4 AC	1,022,900 S.F. - 1,278,570 S.F.
	PARK OPEN SPACE	42.3 AC	
	PUBLIC USAGE	3.4 AC	
	EXISTING PUBLIC USAGE	74.1 AC	
	BACKBONE ROADS	47.1 AC	
	TOTALS	534.6 AC	



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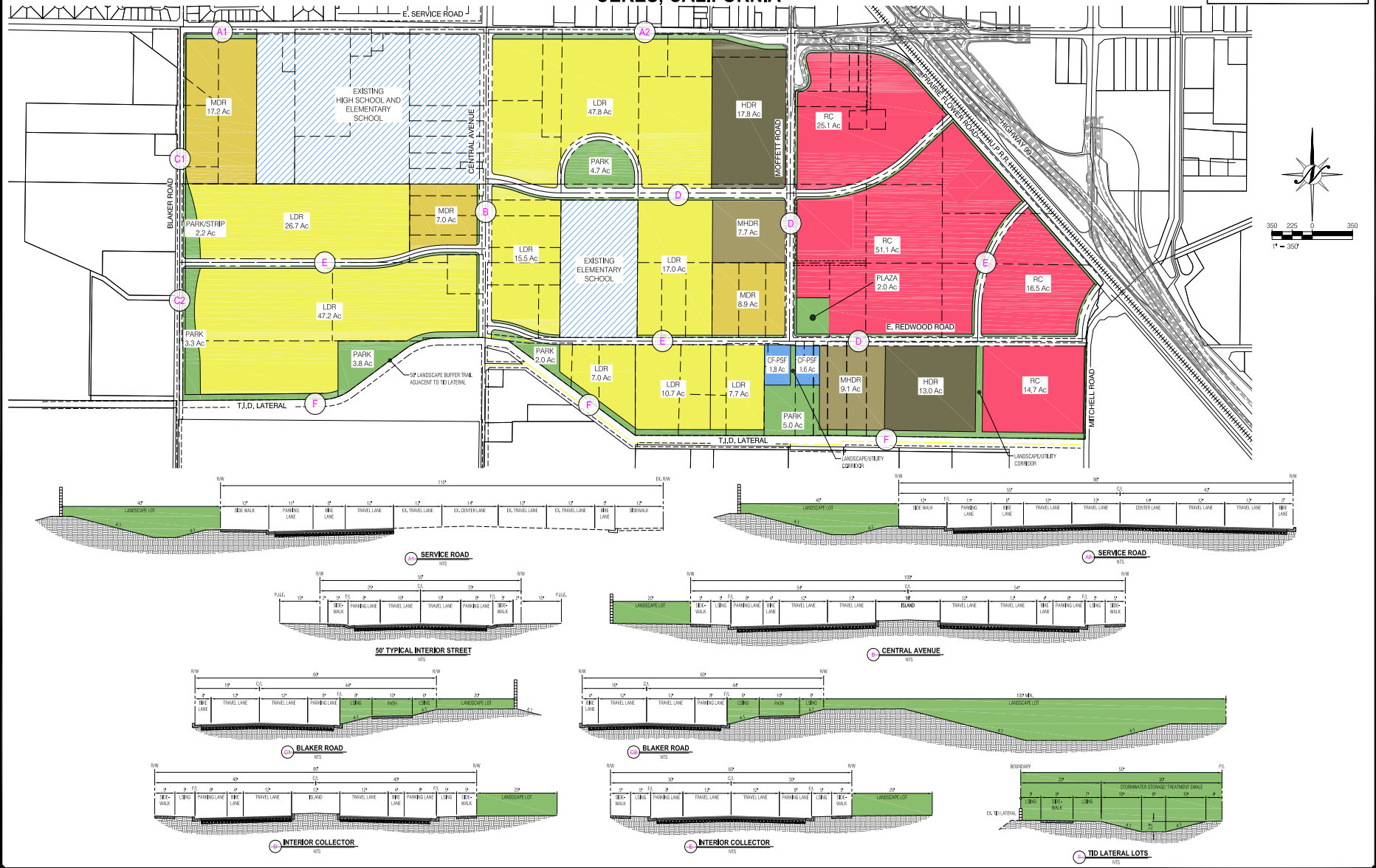


FIGURE 3-3

PROPOSED STREET IMPROVEMENT STANDARDS