

# *Limits to Growth and Quality of Life in Oxnard, California*

A Set of Indicators of a City's Sustainability  
Reflecting the S. O. A. R. Ordinances



*A COOPERATIVE EFFORT BETWEEN  
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### **Additional Information:**

The Report and the Complete Set of Indicators is available in printed form (approx. 55 pages) for \$15.00, including postage from:

The Sustainability Council of Ventura County  
P.O. Box 7817, Ventura, CA, 93004-7817

or visit the Council's Web site for The Report and the Complete Set of Indicators at  
at [www.sustainabilitycouncil.org](http://www.sustainabilitycouncil.org).

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## ***Limits to Growth and Quality of Life***

### ***I. Executive Summary, with Recommendations***

A. The Set of Indicators. Ventura County in 2001 has 820,000 people and sits on the edge of the Los Angeles metropolitan area, where new space for urban development is almost gone. Ventura

County voters passed a number of separate Save Open Space and Agricultural Resources (SOAR) initiatives between 1995 and 1998, which limit the expansion of most cities and urban development of the unincorporated areas surrounding the cities for the next 20 years. What we, the CSUN Project Faculty and Students and The Sustainability Council of Ventura County, present here are a set of baseline indicators of the quality of life in Oxnard just as SOAR limits to growth begin taking effect. We concentrate on quality of life issues such as urban density, health, and civic engagement in Oxnard near the beginning of the twenty-year timeline of the SOAR initiatives.

We have designed this set of quality of life indicators to gauge whether or not Oxnard, the county's largest and most diverse city, improves or degrades its economic, social, and environmental well being over the next twenty years. We define an improvement as a move toward sustainability, degradation as a move away from sustainability. The sustainability of a system, such as a city, can be defined as its ability to meet the needs of present generations in these three areas without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs. These are broad measures and together over time we believe they will show, as a set, just how development decisions enhance or reduce Oxnard's quality of life.

This set of indicators emerged from a lengthy process involving our attendance at meetings and conferences on sustainable development and "smart growth," our own stakeholder survey about the SOAR initiatives and their efficacy, as well as our convening of focus groups and other community forums to discuss and help formulate the indicators themselves. We also reviewed existing sustainable development indicators from around the nation.

B. Recommendations about the Indicators. Development in Ventura County may proceed, as it has in most parts of the country, with construction of more residential and industrial areas connected by more streets and freeways that diminish recreational and open space as well as farmland —that is, through more "sprawl." The SOAR initiatives will force decision makers and the public to consider alternative development scenarios that preserve more open space, encourage mixed-use development and in-fill construction, and promote more public transportation and pedestrian-friendly areas. Civic engagement is crucial to those decisions.

Likewise, the set of indicators offered here requires active public debate and participation in order to keep them current and responsive to change: watching, revising and or adding to them will make them truly long term indicators of the city's quality of life. Therefore, we make the following recommendations to future keepers of these and other indicators:

1. Continue ongoing data collection and dissemination of indicators to the public and decision-makers.
2. Continue revision of indicators based on evolving quality of life needs.
3. Continue monitoring indicators annually.
4. Expand efforts to educate the public about sustainable development indicators.
5. Involve government agencies in new forms of data collection that will foster the development of interactive, sustainability indicators.
6. Use indicators as a foundation for shaping public policies.
7. Promote indicator development and “ownership” by community-based organizations.
8. Develop an inventory of sustainable development projects in Oxnard and Ventura County.

To communities and organizations that use these or develop their own indicators, we recommend:

1. Continue to seek feedback from the community about quality of life issues.
2. Encourage local stewardship of the indicator process.
3. Continue collaborative efforts in the indicator process.
4. Continue university-community partnership on behalf of sustainable development activities in Ventura County, particularly the development of a sustainability studies center at California State University Channel Islands, and sustainability principles as a general education requirement in high schools, community colleges, and universities.
5. Establish sustainable development indicator demonstration projects in urban-agricultural land use settings, especially concerning the design of livable communities.

## ***II. Background: Land Use Controls in Ventura County***

Ventura County enjoys an idyllic location, bordering the Pacific Ocean while adjoining metropolitan Los Angeles County to the south and west. There are ten incorporated cities within Ventura County and a few small, unincorporated enclaves. These urban areas are generally separated by agricultural or open-space land, so they have not grown together into an amorphous sprawl of development that is common in the Los Angeles basin. Ventura County’s combination of a strong agricultural economy and a general absence of sprawl is a testament to a number of unique efforts in land use control.

Beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the County established numerous Agricultural Preserves under the State’s Williamson Act. These preserves are now comprised of hundreds of separate Land Conservation Act (LCA) contracts with individual landowners who committed to remain in agriculture for rolling ten- or twenty-year periods in exchange for reduced property tax assessments.

Also around the same time, Ventura County, its cities, and the Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO) signed the “Guidelines for Orderly Development,” which created Areas of Interest that divided the County into eleven sectors in which there is to be only one incorporated city,

or burgeoning urban area, that would incorporate at some future time. The Guidelines specified that no other city would be formed within a given Area of Interest and that the County would not permit urban development in its jurisdiction adjacent to a city.

From the late 1960's to the present, several cities entered into joint agreements with the County and LAFCO to establish a number of Greenbelts. These agreements stipulate that agricultural land would not be annexed for development.

In 1995, the latest land use control mechanism was introduced – an urban limit line around the City of Ventura for a period of 20 years. It was created by the initiative process, sponsored by an organization called Save Our Agricultural Resources (SOAR). The measure requires a majority vote of the citizens of the City of Ventura to amend its General Plan and zoning on a parcel designated “Agriculture” on the General Plan. In 1998, a variation on this same theme was adopted by initiative in the County and most of the cities. The effect was to create an Urban Limit Boundary (URB) around the applicable cities that prevented them from developing outside that boundary without the approval of the voters during the succeeding 20 years. The County was similarly prevented from amending its General Plan to allow for new urban growth. So far, there have been three votes that allowed minor deviations from the previously adopted General Plans of the County and one city. All were successful.

It is clear that the cities and the County are now very limited in how they respond to ongoing demands for additional development. The traditional approach, of simply expanding outward, is no longer a ready option. As the population increases, primarily through births, local jurisdictions will be faced with the prospect of voting to break the Urban Limit Boundaries to expand outward, or altering past development patterns and growing “smartly”—expanding “up-ward” to accommodate higher densities within the URB boundaries. “Smart Growth” concepts include higher densities, renewal/ redevelopment, transit-oriented development patterns, and walkable neighborhoods.

Therefore, this is a perfect time to employ sustainability indicators that establish baseline measures of existing conditions under the traditional development model and that monitor the effects of future development patterns under the constraints of the Urban Limit Boundaries established by SOAR.

### ***III. Land and People Socioeconomic Profile of Ventura County***

A profile of land and people in Ventura County is essential for understanding the setting in which the SOAR initiatives were perceived and adopted by voters. As a general characterization, the County can be viewed as having a significant amount of farmland in spite of its ranking among the top ten urbanizing counties within California. It should also be noted that the Federal government in the form of Los Padres National Forest owns approximately one-third of the County. Table 1 (below) shows a summary of the County's major land categories for 1998:

Table 1

<u>Land Use Category</u>	<u>Total Acreage</u>
Prime Farmland	51,817
Farmland of Statewide Importance -	37,698
Unique Farmland	22,644
Farmland of Local Importance	11,076
Grazing Land	207,853
Urban Built-up Land	95,522
Open Space	125,403
Total	552,013

It is against this backdrop of agricultural and open space land uses and ongoing pressures to urbanize that voters passed the SOAR initiatives in 1995 and 1998.

And, as for relevant socioeconomic characteristics that foster an understanding of the County and its people, Table 2 (below) provides a comparison with the State as a whole:

Table 2

<u>Socioeconomic Features</u>	<u>Ventura County</u>	<u>California</u>
Population (1999 est.)	745,063	33,145,121
Overall Population Change (1990-1999 est.)	+11.4%	+11.2%
Population < 18 years old (1998 est.)	28.4%	27.3%
White population (1998 est.)	89.9%	79.5%
Hispanic population (1998 est.)	32.7%	31.0%
Black population (1998 est.)	2.4%	7.5%
Home ownership (1990)	65.5%	55.6%
Persons per household (1990)	3.01	2.79
Persons below poverty level (1995 est.)	9.8%	16.5%
Median household income (1995 est.)	\$46,955	\$36,767
College graduates >25 years old (1990)	23.0%	23.4%

#### ***IV. Definition and Introduction to “Quality of Life” or Sustainability Indicators***

The linkage of “Social Equity, a Sound Economy and a Healthy Environment” in the Sustainability Council’s motto points to its vision of a sustainable quality of life. Each element of this triad needs to be understood as an interdependent variable; together they measure the long-term health or sustainability of any system. No one element can be allowed to dominate or the health of the system will suffer. “Sustainability” itself is the ability of any system to maintain a certain level of healthy operation over a long period of time without polluting the environment, using up resources, or lessening bio-diversity.

For human systems, such as a city, the social, economic, and environmental factors must work in harmony with each other. What happens in the area of social justice, for example, affects the economy and the environment, just as the health of the environment determines the well being of the economy and society. The resultant “quality of life” which these factors measure constitutes in our view the sustainability of the system, enabling present and future generations to have their needs met.

In order to monitor the interactive changes among these three systems, one would like to have a reliable method of measuring the impact of air quality, say, on public health and economic productivity. Such a “true” or “ideal” measure of sustainability would require first a clear definition of the limits or carrying capacity of a system. However, we cannot wait until we have such ideal measures of sustainability before we begin to address the interactions among the “triad.” Therefore, we focus on the general sustainability of the “system” of Oxnard by monitoring how certain indicators generally improve or degrade over time.

To understand these interactions, we created the Set of Indicators for Oxnard, but which could be applied to most cities. They were developed in the following way. 1) We devised tailor-made measurements of local systems and stipulated, from a values-perspective, what effects were desirable or undesirable. This required a combination of artfully designed measurement devices and human-defined goals. 2.) We evolved individual Indicators that we believe are sensitive to the likely changes in Oxnard’s quality of life under SOAR limitations. 3.) We also stipulated that these indicators would be based on readily available data that could be found in most communities. We wanted our work to be replicable anywhere. 4.) Furthermore, we selected individual Indicators that would significantly react with each other over time so as to form an interactive set. Thus we refer to the Project indicators as “quality of life” indicators that are intended as a snapshot of conditions in

Oxnard near the beginning of the SOAR initiative timeline and that overtime can track the sustainability of Oxnard as a living and growing city-system.

NOTE: In deliberately limiting the scope of this study to SOAR's effects on density and development issues, as well as civic engagement, and social and environmental health, we did not include one of the three key elements of the Sustainability triad—"a Sound Economy." This is not because it is unimportant or irrelevant to our study. It is; but the economy is frequently and thoroughly measured, and we wanted to shift the focus of our work here to community living space issues and social and environmental health, which are less frequently measured. Also the grant stipulated a focus on these issues. Were we to develop an economic indicator particularly sensitive to the issues in this study, it would focus not just on Oxnard's per capita income or the city's economic output in dollars over time, but on a factor such as economic diversity that would assess both the number and the variety of businesses and economic sectors in the city. This would measure something closer in our view to the sustainability of the economy, since a diverse economy like a diverse natural environment is healthier and more likely to survive over time.