



# The OJAI

## Safeguarding the Past, Planning for the Future

Community & Organizational Assessment Report

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*“This report may provide the impetus for an extended  
community discussion about the future of Ojai”*

## Introduction

This report provides a comprehensive, if somewhat truncated, initial analysis of the Ojai city government and the community we serve. It is intended to be a report to the Mayor and City Council, to be used by them and me in formulating the policy direction for the community for the next several years. But it is my humble wish that it will also be reviewed and discussed by city employees, citizens, and others who have an involvement in, and a love for, this town and the surrounding area. It is my belief that Ojai is facing a significant time in its development, and it is my hope that our successors will look back on this time and know that we took the crucial steps to ensure Ojai’s future success. I would be pleased to know that this report contributed in some small way to that effort.

This report has been prepared for several reasons. First, it allows me, as the new City Manager, to gain a thorough understanding of the City organization, the community we serve, and the relationship between the two. Second, by reviewing the City organization, I can gain an appreciation for its strengths and weaknesses, and its opportunities for improvement. By so doing I can develop strategies to grasp those opportunities while they are within reach.

Finally, this report may provide the impetus for an extended community discussion about the future of Ojai, a discussion I believe may be somewhat overdue and, in any event, is definitely needed.

It is important to remember while reading this report that these kinds of analyses necessarily focus on the areas needing improvement or at least consideration for improvement. Those areas where things are functioning well will receive little or no discussion. As a consequence, the tone of the report can be perceived as negative, but that is not intended. Decisions that once made sense may no longer do so, not because it was a bad decision but because the circumstances or the needs of the organization and/or community have changed. Nothing in this report should be read as a condemnation of past decisions or decision-making practices.

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Rather, this report merely presents an occasion to sit back and reflect on the Ojai City government and the city and community that we serve, not for the purpose of judging the past, but rather to envision a preferred future and to advance toward it. Too often, we get caught in the hustle and bustle of daily decisions, immediate needs, and bi-weekly Council meetings. Occasionally, it is worthwhile to pause and to look at the big picture. An old adage reminds us that, “If you don’t care where you’re going, it doesn’t matter how you get there.” But I believe that, in Ojai, we care very much where we’re going, so we had better be careful about the paths we choose.

In preparing this report after my first four months as Ojai’s City Manager, I have been fortunate to spend extended time with the whole range of City elected and appointed officials, City staff, interested citizens, business and property owners, representatives of regional governmental agencies, and others who have helped me formulate my thoughts. However, my findings, conclusions, and recommendations are my own, and no one but me is responsible for them.

I especially want to thank the Mayor and City Council for giving me the opportunity to come to this great community, and for providing me this forum through which to advance my thoughts. I also want to thank all those who took the time to share their perspectives on Ojai, its past, present, and future. And I want to thank Paulette Whiting, who gave me invaluable assistance in the production of this document.



This report is organized into four chapters. The first three chapters contain discussions of various findings and conclusions I have drawn in my brief time here. Chapter 1 addresses the current physical appearance and ambience of the town, and the opportunities and threats that may be presented, while the discussions in Chapter 2 center on the future measures that might be taken to address those opportunities and threats. Chapter 3 focuses on my observations of the City government organization. Finally, Chapter 4 contains a series of recommendations to move forward.



*“Ojai’s downtown is extraordinarily visually arresting”*

## Chapter 1

# The Incomplete Quilt

I first saw Ojai when my wife and I drove into town for my initial interview with the City Council, and we both fell in love with the place. I had never been here before, despite being a native Californian, but we immediately took to the sense of isolation, the east-west valley, the surrounding mountain views, and the distinctive architectural style, among many other things. This is truly one of the great-looking towns in California, probably in the nation.

In addition to the overall appearance, Ojai is blessed with a strong, cohesive commercial core. The downtown/village center/commercial core area (pick your phrase) is vital to the identity of the community since, in most people’s minds, downtown is the community. When one thinks of a particular city, it is usually a scene from the downtown that comes to our mind’s eye, and defines that city for us.



Fortunately, the Arcade/Post Office/Pergola/Libbey Park area—Ojai’s downtown—is extraordinarily visually arresting, and harmonious with the visual style and ambience of the rest of the town. In fact, as is often the case, Ojai’s downtown has largely set the style for the remainder of the community, and the visual appeal of Ojai’s village center is certainly one of the town’s strengths.

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And it is a town of strengths. This is a town that many people fall in love with; I have heard over and over in the last several weeks how much people like living, working, and visiting here. The strength of the downtown combines with the equally extraordinary natural setting to create, I suspect, in most first-time visitors exactly the same reaction I had, “Wow, what a great place!”

This initial, visceral reaction is created from a first impression of the natural setting and the built environment; and that impression is overwhelmingly positive. So one of the challenges of the town is to preserve and nurture those elements of the built environment, and to minimize our impacts on the natural environment, thus preserving that positive emotional response of people, whether first-time visitors or life-long residents.

On further investigation, the town feels even better. The neighborhoods are distinctive, and often handsome. The sense of peace and isolation is often palpable. There are surprises and rich details throughout the downtown. Libbey Park, Libbey Bowl, the bike path, Ojai Library, and City Hall are public facilities that complement and enhance the community. And the agricultural uses surrounding the town remind us of the town’s beginnings, and keep us grounded.



So, much of Ojai’s appearance and ambiance contribute to our characterization as “Shangri-La.” The town truly is a hidden jewel.

It is every bit as spectacular as any visitor destination in the state, but I suspect is relatively less well known. And just as important, it is a wonderful town in which to live.

It seems to me that one of the great characteristics of Ojai, and one that sets it apart from some other visitor destinations, is that we are still a real town. Our residents are real people, with real jobs, and we still have real businesses in town. There is still a range of housing choices even if the housing market, as elsewhere in the region, continues to climb. The streets are safe, and traffic levels, while undoubtedly higher than in the past,

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are well below what we see elsewhere in the county or, especially, in the L. A. Basin. I believe one of the reasons Ojai is popular with visitors is that they can see that this town functions well as a place to live and work, but at the same time is a great place to just be. This, of course, stands in contrast to many of the places our visitors call home.

So much of recent development in the western United States, including Ventura County, is bland, sterile, and characterless. Today's new suburban development is too often endless subdivisions of houses that all look the same, with commercial centers indistinguishable from one another, which creates towns with no special features, no character, no soul. But Ojai is different. We're a little jumbled, a little funky, maybe more than a little idiosyncratic. Just as we have earned the "Shangri-La" nickname, we can also be fairly called the "Anti-LA," as we were in a recent news article.

So, one of the things that attracts visitors here, I believe, is the character of the town. Generally, people want to visit someplace that is different from where they live, to see different things, to have different experiences from their daily lives. And certainly Ojai is different from most towns in our region.

I believe it is these two features, the idiosyncratic character of our natural and built environments, and the genuineness of our urban design and culture, that sets Ojai apart, and makes this town both a wonderful place to visit and to live. But we have not finished developing, and that is the source of the uncertainty and angst many have expressed.



### *The Incomplete Quilt*

One of the first impressions I had of this town, after noting what a great place it is, is that Ojai is not yet finished, not yet complete. While there are few vacant lots within the single-family neighborhoods, we continue to see applications for additions to make homes larger. Much of the town's streets and associated structures are in need of replacement or major repair. And perhaps most important, many of the commercial properties along Ojai Avenue, and away from the Arcade, are vacant or underdeveloped.

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Ojai, in physical appearance at least, is like a beautiful, incomplete quilt. What is here is gorgeous, but several of the panels are missing. We can all, in our minds eye, envision how much more beautiful the finished quilt will be, as long as the new panels complement the old.

That is what causes the uncertainty among many of us, I believe. We look around at examples (in other cities) of new building, which developers and others hold up as quality development, and we realize what a bad fit such a development would be for Ojai. “If that’s what we’re going to get, I don’t want it” is a sentiment one hears; better to have nothing than to allow development that will undermine Ojai’s distinctive character. And so we have at least skepticism, maybe hostility, toward all development, because we see so few examples of development that could fit Ojai and that could complement—and even enhance—our ambiance.

But such development is possible. After all, the Arcade, the Post Office tower, the Library, the Museum, were designed, built, and maintained by people just like us. The unique ambiance and design of Ojai is the result of a series of choices made by our predecessors over time, choices that, in their variety yet cohesion, have created this town we all cherish so highly. Just as they made choices, now it is up to us to further our predecessor’s legacy by making our own choices to complete the development of our town, to fill in the panels on the quilt.

And it is up to us to make the choices. The recent increases in property values may have been faster than historic rates, but—at least in the long run—property values in Ojai will continue to rise. There is a limited supply of land, and yet demand continues to increase with our population. As a result, the price of dirt will continue to increase. We can do little in Ojai to limit that demand, and we must recognize that property owners will have greater and greater incentives to submit development proposals.

### *“Just Say No”*

It seems that many in Ojai have developed an attitude that no growth is good growth. In looking at growth elsewhere, it is easy to see why people feel this way: So much of development elsewhere is bland and characterless, and is considered inappropriate for Ojai.



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But property owners do have a right to develop their property and, as we have seen, the current market will, sooner or later, give them the incentive to pursue development. Further, not all developers/lenders understand Ojai's character; we're different, remember? Too often, it is easy for developers and their financiers to go with a proven product, that is, one that has sold elsewhere. But Ojai is not elsewhere, and many current products would undermine or distract from what we're trying to build here.

The most common recent scenario, then, has gone something like this: Developer ties up property; developer proposes a project; City rejects project (or City approves, but significant opposition is heard); developer revises project; City rejects again; developer tries again; City finally approves, perhaps with misgivings, but believing the latest proposal is the least of evils. There are several problems with this approach:

- 1) The developer has spent a lot of time and money looking for a project concept that will be approved; all things being equal, those costs will be passed along to the eventual tenants/owners of the project.
- 2) The City may have approved the project, but the result is, at best, a compromise design, resulting from the City reacting to (a series of) proposals.
- 3) The entire development review process, and the political culture associated with it, takes on an adversarial, negative cast.
- 4) In the end, none of the participants feel good about their involvement. At best, everyone feels equally bad, which may be the cynic's definition of a good compromise, but is hardly a constructive basis for civic involvement.



So if our current process is not producing good outcomes, either as to development itself or the feelings of the people involved, why do we keep doing it? Because, I believe, we haven't considered another possibility, another way of approaching development, another way that can complete the quilt in a way that will make us, and our successors, proud. That approach is the subject of the next chapter.



*“We need to develop comprehensive and relatively detailed land-use plans for much of the City.”*

## Chapter 2

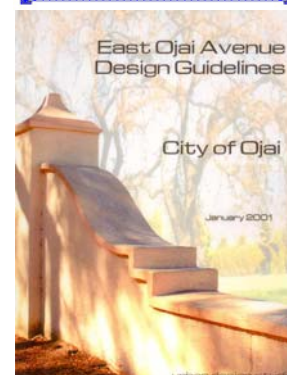
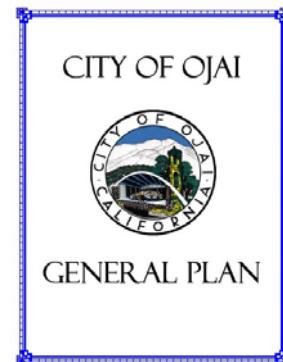
### Plan the Work, Work the Plan

At present, when it comes to land-use matters at least, the City of Ojai and our citizens are in a reactive mode. As discussed earlier, we can’t tell a property-owner exactly what the City “wants” on a particular parcel, except in a generalized way based on the zoning. And this is true for big parcels and small, visible parcels and those hidden away, commercial parcels on Ojai Avenue and residential parcels on a cul-de-sac. So what is needed is planning. Simply stated, I believe we need to develop comprehensive and relatively detailed land-use plans for much of the City.

Some might protest that we already have enough plans, what with the General Plan, the Downtown (Redevelopment) Statement of Theme, the East Ojai Avenue Design Guidelines, and the like. My response is to suggest that none of those documents, save the General Plan, get at the issue of land use, and the General Plan only speaks to land use in—naturally enough—the most general way.

Land use master plans can define, in whatever level of detail we wish, what uses/structures/details the City wants to see on a particular property, or a group of properties. I can see four distinctive sets of master plans that would be helpful to guide future development and redevelopment. These would address:

1. West Ojai Avenue and the “Y”
2. Downtown
3. East Ojai Avenue
4. Residential Neighborhoods



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### West Ojai Avenue and the “Y”

The main entryway to town has not been examined in a comprehensive way, but there are indications that development and redevelopment may be imminent. Several vacant parcels are being actively marketed, the City and CalTrans have begun planning for a possible makeover of the “Y,” and the shopping center will need to be redeveloped in the next few years. This area, which is separated from the downtown core, has the potential to develop into a stronger, separate commercial node. With the recent development of Ojai Ford and Rotary Park, there is a real opportunity to define how this area should look, and how effectively it operates. I suspect access will be one of the primary issues in developing a master plan for this area.

### Downtown

There is a plethora of plans for downtown already. These include the Redevelopment Area Statement of Theme, Downtown Design Guidelines, and specific zoning overlay regulations. Although none of them are comprehensive land use plans, taken together they may form at least the basis of a downtown master plan that is truly effective. The concern with the multiplicity of downtown regulations is that they may not be consistent, which causes delay and difficulty for staff and applicants alike. One aim of a comprehensive Master Plan would be to eliminate the inconsistencies of the current plans.

### East Ojai Avenue

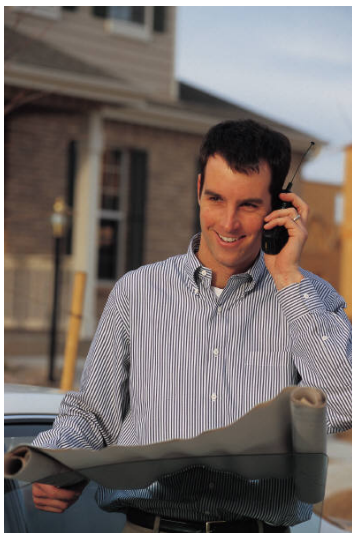
It is this area of town that exhibits the incompleteness of the “quilt” most dramatically. Many of the parcels from Montgomery to the east are vacant, underdeveloped, or underperforming. Traveling east on Ojai Avenue there is an effective buildup to the downtown including the Library, Museum, and Theater, toward the visual focal point of the Post Office Tower and Arcade. Immediately after the intrigue and excitement of the Arcade, however, the visual energy quickly dissipates in a string of vacant and underused parcels. One of the reasons, I believe, that many businesses at that end of town have struggled is that there is no visual lure to bring shoppers any further. The haphazard, leapfrogging development pattern impedes the critical mass needed for a successful commercial area. Therefore, businesses in this area suffer.



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Although the City has adopted design guidelines for this portion of our commercial area, the land uses are not specified beyond the commercial (C-1) zoning. The master plan for this area should include a fairly detailed consideration of land uses, building shapes and massing, opportunities for shared parking and access, and the development of retail clusters.

Incidentally, it is my belief that much of the commercial land on the east side of town could be developed with visitor-serving uses. The existing market (that is, the current amount and mix of stores) is presumably serving our residents, and the population of the town is not going to increase significantly, due to our growth controls. Thus, the commercial land that is currently vacant or underused could be dedicated to visitor-serving commercial uses without affecting the resident-serving market. The master plan for this area should test this hypothesis.



### Residential Areas

Why, one might ask, are master plans needed in Ojai's residential areas, which are approaching build out? Aren't master plans more appropriate for areas of raw land, waiting to be developed? My response is that master planning is worthwhile any time one expects a wave of development or redevelopment to occur, and we are beginning to see redevelopment of our residential areas. As the price of housing continues to climb, more and more homeowners are choosing to remodel and expand their existing homes. In many cases, due to the constraints of the lot size, the addition is in the form of a second story. And in some neighborhoods second stories are

problematic, adding a visual density and often ill fitting in scale compared to nearby properties.

In addition to the potential changes of building size and configuration, there are two other forces at work with the potential to change the look of our neighborhoods. First, many of the neighborhood streets need to be reconstructed. Assuming for the moment the funding for this effort can be found, we should be thinking about how we want our neighborhood streets to look. Second, public street trees constantly are in need of replacement as older trees become diseased and die. Both physical features—streets and trees—are important components to the look and feel of our residential areas, and both should be addressed in a master plan.

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But we cannot, I believe, have just one residential master plan. One of my observations of Ojai is that we have distinctive neighborhoods, which differ in ways such as lot size, building configuration, number and type of trees, street design, and street layout. We should first identify our different neighborhoods, and then develop—in conjunction with the residents—neighborhood master plans. In addition, such groups as the Tree Committee might be enlisted to provide support and guidance in the development of the plans. Such plans might contain some common elements, but are likely to differ on such matters as:

- Single story only, or two-story houses allowed?
- Maximum and minimum house sizes
- Design guidelines
- Type and spacing of street trees
- Desired street cross-section
  - Street width and surface treatment
  - Sidewalks or not?
  - Curb and gutter design

One of the strengths of Ojai is that, for a relatively small town, we still have a range of housing types (and prices) in our neighborhoods. Development of neighborhood master plans would help preserve that variety, and help preserve—to the extent the larger housing market will allow—our affordable housing.

### **A Touchstone**

It is common, these days, to talk about the importance of a vision. Organizations, public and private, have invested untold amounts of resources and time in the development of “vision documents,” which purport to provide a clear picture of the desired future for the long term. These documents, which may encompass several pages, are then used to guide the development of more detailed plans that provide specific direction for the medium and short terms.

I must admit to some skepticism about these kinds of documents. While I don’t doubt that there is value, both in the process and in the careful thinking and “wordsmithing” that is needed, I believe that too often the



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documents wind up on the shelf, never to be consulted again. To my mind, that means the process has only fulfilled part of its obligation. While the participants may have received value from their consideration of the future, I find those not involved respond with a collective shrug. That is, the utility of the vision document to guide future planning is diminished to the extent that “vision participants” do not directly write the subsequent plans. And in a complex organization like a community, many more people will be involved in plan development than were ever involved in a visioning process, no matter how inclusionary. Without a deep understanding of and appreciation for the vision, those who develop the plans may not be able to fully incorporate the vision into the plans, that is, the vision and the plans may be inconsistent.



At the same time, I observe that most, if not all, of the cities that I consider successful do, in fact, have some sort of distinctive unifying notion. They may not be formal, and oftentimes they are not lengthy prose. More often these statements are a simple phrase, of half-a-dozen words or less. Sometimes, only a picture is utilized. At times, this vision is merely a concept that hasn't even been articulated, but which virtually all

the folks in town understand. This unifying notion is a core idea, a touchstone, for what the town is all about, and it's an idea that permeates all the plans and all the decisions the town makes: Does this project/proposal/plan/program move the core idea forward, or not?

Once such a core idea is in place, all of the plans and projects and programs are evaluated against the touchstone. Thus, the town acquires a consistency—not uniformity—of building types and patterns, of street life, of neighborhood ambience, that most times is absent in towns without such a touchstone. There still may be significant disagreement as to whether a certain proposal furthers the core idea or not, but at least all the people in town evaluate the proposal against the same criterion, namely, the core idea. Once the distinctive core idea is established in the community, it is internalized to everyone's thinking. And, just as important, it is passed down to new residents and decision-makers. In this way, the core idea is given the breath of life, and as time marches on, the town acquires and perpetuates a distinctive sense of place.

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Some examples may be helpful:

- Santa Barbara’s distinctive architectural style can be traced to the rebuilding of the downtown after a significant earthquake in the mid-1920s. At that time, the city leaders adopted the white stucco/red tile roof/hand painted tile look that we all identify with Santa Barbara.
- Carmel is a “village in the forest,” which was promulgated by the town’s first developer around 1910. The fact that the “forest” is largely planted, not natural, is a testament to the power of the core idea.
- Mendocino’s clapboard, seaside-village look, while not so well known as Santa Barbara’s, is distinctive and familiar.
- San Luis Obispo remade itself on the basis of re-creating the Mission, the grounds around the Mission, and the creek that runs through the downtown.

Each of these cities, which are successful as communities, is also—not so coincidentally—a popular visitor destination. People appreciate the distinctive features of those towns, so different from the bland, homogenized suburbia where they live. And so they come to visit, sometimes to ask, “Why can’t my town look/feel/be more like this?” Part of the answer, I believe, is that they haven’t developed a distinctive core idea in their hometown.



Ojai, I believe, has developed such a core idea of itself. One of my observations is that most—perhaps all—people in town think of Ojai in the same general way, and want to preserve those elements that make the town distinctively what it is. Some clues can be found in the General Plan, which is full of characterizations like:

- Small town feeling
- Picturesque valley setting
- Significant environmental features
- Sustainable resource use
- Refuge
- Open agricultural and “wild” land surrounding community

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- Mission Revival architecture
  - Harmony between built and natural environs
  - Small scale

Other characterizations I would add include:

- Spiritual
- Artistic
- Education and learning
- Mild climate

I think almost all Ojaians would agree that these characterizations are important components of what Ojai is all about, and what we need to preserve in order to maintain the Ojai experience. The interesting thing is that Ojai people, who believe themselves to be on opposite “sides,” because they have opposed each other on one project or another, actually share those same values. That is, they hold the same core idea, the same unifying notion, the same touchstone of “Ojai,” but they just don’t realize it. We haven’t yet articulated to one another that such a touchstone exists; we haven’t come up with the right set of words, or a picture, that encompasses the richness of all the characterizations listed above.



And why, besides general interest, is this important to the City government? Because, if we can develop a unifying notion that Ojai residents today will internalize, and that they will pass down to their successors, we can develop plans and programs and projects that will not only preserve the Ojai we love, but actually enhance it. If the town can be built out in a way that not

only doesn’t damage the current essential fabric of the town, but, to return to the earlier metaphor, fills in the holes in the quilt in ways that are complementary to the current patterns, we will all be the richer for it.

It will take some work to identify the touchstone on which we can gain consensus. But, if we are able to do so, I think we will have taken a monumental step to ensure that the Ojai of the future is not only as good as today, it’s better.



*“Support services are those administrative tasks necessary  
to provide direct services”*

## Chapter 3

# Organizational Assessment

After the perhaps-too-lofty thoughts of the previous chapters, it is time to turn to more concrete matters, namely my assessment of the City of Ojai’s organization, and how we serve our community. As a reminder, these comments will necessarily focus on areas where I believe improvements are desirable, and relatively little comment will be given to those areas where things are functioning well. I will separate my comments into two areas, Direct Services and Support Services. Direct Services include streets, parks, recreation, planning and building, library, police, and other areas within the direct control of the City where services are provided to residents, businesses, property-owners, and visitors. Support Services are those administrative tasks necessary to provide direct services in a legal and appropriate manner, and include finance management, records management, legal oversight, management oversight, and—last but not least—legislative oversight.

The comments are in the nature of both findings and conclusions, and will be followed in the next chapter with recommendations. The findings and conclusions within each of the two areas are not listed in any particular priority order.

### *Direct Services*

**Recent budget cuts have reduced services**—The recent cuts of more than five and one-half positions have clearly reduced services, but there is no system in place to report just how service levels have been lowered.

**As available revenues increase, the City should be very careful in adding to ongoing costs**—The temptation will be, as revenues increase, to restore positions and services that have recently been cut. We should instead take this opportunity to review our levels and methods of service provision. It may make more sense, for example, to enter into contracts, or to put available revenues into one-time capital expenditures instead of ongoing expenses.

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**Not enough resources are being devoted to street maintenance**

—Street crews are barely able to keep up with immediate needs, such as repairing severe potholes. The City has not established a so-called routine maintenance schedule involving periodic applications of such treatments as slurry seal and chip seal.



**The condition of Ojai’s streets is not good**

—Due perhaps to the longstanding lack of maintenance, many of Ojai’s streets are in poor or fair condition. Staff will be bringing a report to Council shortly, outlining the pavement condition indices on every street segment in town. In general, the busier streets are in better condition than less-traveled routes.

**Funding is not available for significant street construction**

—The amount of Gas Tax and other revenues are insufficient for routine maintenance, let alone a comprehensive program of street upgrades and reconstructions. Obviously, a different funding source must be secured to accomplish this. It is unlikely that significant funding will come from outside the community (e.g., grants), so the only sources will be local. As part of the report mentioned above, staff will be discussing the possibility of a city-wide tax or district-type funding, as alternative sources of additional funding.

**Traffic congestion is a big issue in town, but alternatives can be developed**

—I have heard many complaints about traffic congestion in town, but it appears to me that the problem is centered on Ojai Avenue; other streets in town do not have that level of congestion. While the problem of traffic congestion cannot be “solved,” it can be mitigated through the development of alternate routes. Such a route already exists, and is used by locals, to the north of Ojai Avenue; it is possible to go from the East End to below Casitas Springs with only minimal use of Highways 150 and 33. Similarly, a “locals only” route (Creek Road) exists to the south; additional in-town construction will eventually tie Bryant Circle into this route.

In addition, the development of traffic circles should continue to be investigated. Designed properly, these kinds of improvements can increase the capacity of

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intersections, thus reducing congestion, and can also add to visual appeal. Because they are unfamiliar, however, we should proceed cautiously in their development, even if we can identify funding.

**Funding uncertainties also threaten the quality of parks**—Although the City’s park properties are in good condition, we have grown dependent on donations for many of the recent repairs. The more we rely upon donations, the more the donors—not the City or the greater community—set the priorities.

**The upcoming parking study effort should be supported**—The Redevelopment Agency is working on the first phase of a parking study to determine the appropriate amount and location of parking in the downtown commercial core. Eventually, the study will identify ways that the City’s parking resources can be most effectively managed. Completion and implementation of the study will be important to maintain and increase the village center as a shopping destination of choice.



**There are no detailed residential design guidelines, and commercial design guidelines need to be reviewed**—Although Ojai has recognized the importance of good design by requiring design review, we have not yet developed complete guidelines for residential areas, and our commercial guidelines may be inconsistent. As noted in the earlier chapter, I expect that design guidelines would be a part of the commercial and neighborhood master plans.

**A review of zoning regulations is warranted**—It appears that many of our zoning regulations have been “imported” from other zoning ordinances, and may not fit the actual or desired development patterns for Ojai. For example, the minimum lot sizes in some of the residential zones are larger than many of the lots in that zone, creating widespread non-conformity. The minimum lot size in the C-1 zone is much larger than we would want (80 by 120 feet), since it has been shown that one of the most effective tools for keeping national chain operations out is very small footprints.

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The number of zoning regulations that “feel” inappropriate may be indicated by the number of requests for variances we receive; variances should be reserved for the truly unusual case. Therefore, if we are granting a good number of variances (and we have), it may be an indication that our regulations are not meeting our needs.

A more significant review may be warranted, as well. As we continue to infill our remaining commercial land, we should be mindful that we want to maintain a balance between visitor-serving and resident-serving businesses. Too much of the former, in particular, can tilt the scale, in that many of those businesses can afford higher rents. In time, Ojai could lose its “real town” character mentioned earlier, becoming little more than a stage set for visitors. One way to deal with this is to limit the amount of visitor-serving uses allowed; such a limitation is possible only with a much “finer grained” zoning regulation than the current commercial categories permit.



**A comprehensive review of the General Plan is not yet needed**—

Although it has been nearly nine years since the Land Use and Circulation Element was adopted, for example, I believe any comprehensive review of the General Plan should await the development of the master plans addressed in this report; it is likely those master plans would be

incorporated into the General Plan. At least some of these minor amendments would continue, and the Housing Element (the only one with a particular deadline) must be updated by 2008.

**The City has not adopted “green building” codes**—Many progressive cities are now requiring new building to take such measures as using recycled building materials, siting buildings and landscaping to maximize solar benefits, and minimizing the use of harmful building substances. Despite our reputation as an environmentally conscious community, Ojai has not yet adopted such codes.

**The policies related to code enforcement are not clear**—Staff has not, recently at least, reviewed the City’s code enforcement policies, including priorities, processes, and expectations. Such a policy would be of help to staff in administering our efforts.

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**The Library Expansion Project is worthwhile**—The concept behind the Library Expansion project, that donors would provide for the construction, that the City would own the building, and that the County system would operate the facility, is a good one. Further, the project as it is conceived thus far appears to meet the needs of the community for library and meeting space, and it would enhance the physical appearance of the site.



**Funding for the Library Expansion Project is uncertain**—While the concept has been developed, an effective fund-raising organization has not yet been formed. In order for the project to proceed, the entire amount of the construction and soft costs, and an endowment for operations and maintenance, will

have to be raised. This will require a significant fund-raising effort, and this effort is just underway.

**There is not a formal method for reviewing service levels received from the Sheriff's Office**—The contract with the Ventura County Sheriff for police services appears to serve Ojai well, and Sheriff's Office staff have been very responsive. However, there is not a formal "Contract Cities Advisory Committee," which could review costs, operational details, and the like on a regular basis. To be effective, other Ventura County cities would have to be convinced to join such a group.

**Emergency preparedness planning is uncertain**—Due to the multiplicity of organizations (City, Sheriff's Office, and Fire Protection District) involved in emergency preparedness, I am not yet satisfied that our emergency planning is adequate. However, an update of the emergency plan is underway, and that update and subsequent exercises may allay my concerns.

### *Support Services*

**The City's financial management is improving, after prolonged neglect**—It appears that financial policies, procedures, and controls received inadequate attention for several years. With the arrival of the new Finance Director, various technical controls and procedures have been implemented; examples of these will be presented with the audit report for FY 2004/05, which will be presented on April 11.

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**The City’s purchasing ordinance needs revision**—The ordinance has cumbersome requirements, for example, that all service contracts—regardless of amount—must be approved by the City Council. The approval limits are not clear, and the methods of informal quotations are not spelled out, to give other examples.

**The reserve policy needs to be re-examined**—Currently, the reserve policy states that General Fund reserves should be 50% of expected expenditures. That may be a satisfactory overall level, but the reserves should be segregated by need, and policy levels established for each type of reserve. It could be that the 50% number is a good one, but staff needs to perform an analysis of needs and bring that analysis back to Council for approval.

**The budget document is not a very effective communication tool**—The budget document effectively conveys the numbers, but contains little analysis and explanation. Furthermore, only those with the mind of an accountant can appreciate the format of endless spreadsheets. The budget does not contain an explanation of the service levels to be enjoyed as a result of the planned spending. As a result, the Council and the community don’t really know what they’re buying with their tax dollars.

**Capital expenditure planning could be strengthened**—The City has not developed a comprehensive capital expenditure planning process. Although the Redevelopment Agency does have a five-year plan, not all expected City expenditures have been gathered together so that the Council and community can review planned projects simultaneously. A five-year Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) process could be readily integrated into the City’s budget process.



**The system of financing development review should be examined**—The City has recently undertaken to ensure that development pays for itself, in that fees are set, and deposits taken, such that all costs to the City (our taxpayers) are covered. Staff needs to continuously examine our approach to fees to ensure that all costs are covered, and that we stay within the limits of state law. Eventually, a complete cost-accounting system will probably be required.

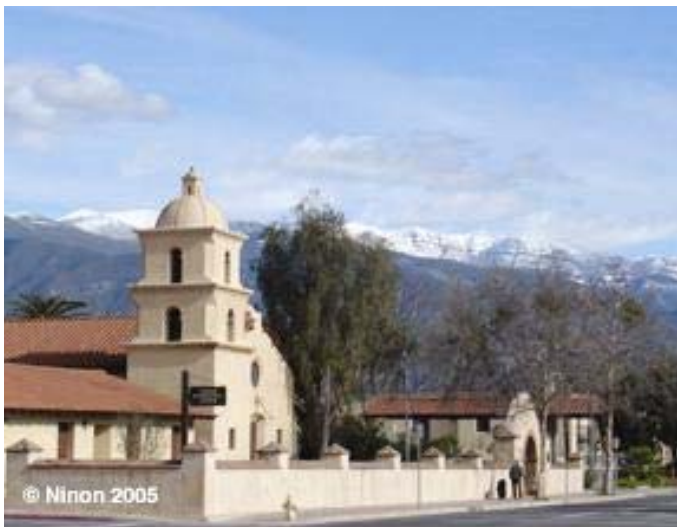
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**The financing of recreation programs should be reviewed**—At present, it is not clear that the total costs of providing recreation programming are fully accounted, and the amount of the General Fund subsidy to recreation users is not clear, either. Staff needs to perform an analysis of the funding for recreation so that the policy-makers can strike the appropriate balance between fee levels and subsidy.

**A revised financial management software/hardware package should be reviewed**—As noted in the Mid-Year Budget Review, the City’s current financial management package is limited. New systems can be expensive, but staff is investigating options and will report to Council during presentation of the FY 2006/07 Budget. The City of Santa Paula is evaluating such systems now, so we may be able to benefit from their efforts.

**An electronic records management system should be investigated**—Probably a lower priority than the financial system, but still worthwhile, is to look into electronic record keeping. Although these systems, too, can be expensive to implement, more and more records can and should be kept electronically rather than hard copy.

**The staffing level at City Hall may need to be adjusted**—The recent staffing cuts have caused what appears to be an inadequate level of support staff at City Hall. I will be examining alternative staffing arrangements over the next several weeks, and may have a report to Council with the proposed FY 2006/07 Budget.



**The cost of support services is not spread to all of the direct services, so the true cost of direct services cannot always be determined**—As with develop-

ment services and recreation, I believe it would be beneficial to structure all the direct services so that they are “fully loaded” with all indirect (i.e., support and management services) costs as well. In this way, the Council

and the community can understand the true cost of the various City services they receive. In order to accomplish this goal, a full cost-accounting (really time-accounting) system will be needed, which is no small task.

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**There is no Administrative Policy and Procedure Manual**—Although the City Manager has at times promulgated administrative policies, there is no method to collect and organize them. As a result, policy decisions can become lost and ignored, not from malice but from a lack of guidance.

**There is no Council Policy Manual**—As with the administrative procedures, there is no organized manual of Council-adopted policies. The only method for retrieving Council policies relies, then, on the memories of staff members, whose memories may not be certain. A Policy Manual, once established, can also ensure consistency of application. In general, everyone in a like situation should receive a like decision, but without the guidance of a Policy Manual, consistency may be difficult to achieve.

**The system of communications between Council and staff must be constantly monitored**—Council communicates with staff primarily through the City Manager. As in any relationship, continual communication is required for that relationship to be effective. If Council Members do not feel they are getting information completely or timely, or experience any other problem with communications, they need to convey that to the City Manager. Good communication travels on a two-way street. We should also provide an opportunity for the City Council to review the performance of the City Manager, at the appropriate time. It appears that such communications in Ojai are good at present, but this matter requires constant attention.

**The City does not have a clear marketing strategy**—For better or worse, Ojai is heavily dependent on revenues generated from visitors to the community. A rough estimate is that half of the General Fund revenue comes, directly or indirectly, from visitors. Let us assume for the moment that the land-use master plans, traffic congestion management projects,



and parking improvements discussed earlier would result in an increased capacity to accommodate visitors; then the question becomes how to attract those visitors. From a pure business standpoint, bringing in more visitors increases General Fund revenues, which can be used to increase service levels for our residents, businesses, and visitors.

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However, the City does not have a clear strategy for how to attract a specific kind of visitor to Ojai. We cannot be, and do not want to be, all things to all visitors, so the strategy should include an analysis of our target market i.e., a specific *kind* of visitor. Clearly, development of such a strategy should be done in concert with the hoteliers and other businesses that serve our visitors.

**The policy direction of the Redevelopment Agency should be reviewed**—At this time, the goals and objectives for the Redevelopment Agency are no longer clear. Furthermore, the additional resources and time allotted to the Agency are limited. I believe it is time to take a comprehensive view of the Agency’s possible roles and responsibilities, including its housing strategy. Following an analysis and policy direction from the RDA Board (City Council), the five-year financial plan of the agency should be developed and folded into the overall five-year capital plan discussed earlier. In addition, the (possibly revised) housing strategy can form the basis for amendments to the City’s Housing Element.

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These are the major findings and conclusions of this report. However, I should point out that this report and these findings are based on only four months’ experience with the City. There are major processes, budget adoption and a Municipal Election to name two, which I have not yet observed, and that may be the source of further discussion and analysis. And, in any event, I reserve the right to bring forward further opportunities for the Ojai City organization to improve, as those opportunities present themselves.



*“The community should endeavor to identify a touchstone”*

## Chapter 4

# Recommendations

The discussion, findings, and conclusions of the preceding chapters form the basis for the recommendations included here, and the recommendations are generally presented in the order of the preceding discussion. For ease of reference, the recommendations are numbered, but the numbering should not be interpreted as reflecting any priority order. Rather, the numbers merely follow the sequence of the discussion; the priority of the recommendations will be established in the action plan proposed as part of the final recommendation.

These recommendations are split into the following three categories, reflecting the organization of the findings and conclusions: Community Design, Direct Services, and Support Services.

### *Community Design*

**#1 The community should endeavor to identify a touchstone**—As discussed earlier, I believe that virtually everyone in town likes the same things about Ojai, and wants to preserve them, but they just haven’t articulated that agreement to each other. As a result, it appears that we are at odds over goals, when—really—we agree to the goals and are just disagreeing about how to get there. That is a crucial difference. If we can understand that about ourselves, the animosity and negative energy that may exist will diminish. There is no specific process I can recommend to develop this touchstone, but it may surface as a result of long-range planning efforts.

**#2 The City should review and reconcile our downtown plans**—There are several different planning documents that address different aspects of village center land uses. They should be reconciled, with boundaries that are coterminous and with inconsistencies resolved.

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**#3 The City should develop Commercial District master plans**—Two distinct commercial areas, West Ojai Avenue (including the “Y”) and East Ojai Avenue, warrant separate master plans. These may take the form of Specific Plans, to be adopted into the General Plan, or they might be more informal. Still, each area could benefit from some comprehensive analysis.

**#4 The City should develop a series of neighborhood master plans**—These master plans should be designed to maintain the current richness, vitality, and distinctions among our various neighborhoods. They should be developed through neighborhood consensus, and should address matters such as building form and placement, and street design and streetscape.

**#5 The City should endeavor to integrate its planning with regional efforts**—Some regional planning efforts are underway now, and others may form in the future. To the extent the City’s planning efforts can be integrated into those larger initiatives, the City should investigate and analyze the opportunities presented.

**#6 Residential design guidelines should be developed, and commercial guidelines strengthened**—The press of ongoing design applications indicates that the guidelines should be developed sooner rather than later. As master plans are completed, the guidelines may have to be amended, but a set of stopgap regulations may reduce the possibility of design mistakes in the interim.

### *Direct Services*

**#7 The City should develop a long-term program for funding capital reconstruction and ongoing maintenance of streets**—There is no current funding source that will meet Ojai’s street needs, and all indications are that future funding will have to come from local sources, i.e., either a tax increase, an assessment approach, or a decline in services elsewhere. Staff will initiate this discussion with a report on the current condition of our streets, to be presented in the next few weeks.

**#8 The City should develop a circulation plan that provides alternatives to congestion along Ojai Avenue**—As noted earlier, the traffic congestion in town is largely limited to Ojai Avenue. To the extent alternative routes, even circuitous ones, can be developed, local residents will have ways to avoid congestion. Any plans should be included in amendments to the Circulation Element of the General Plan.

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**#9 The City should proceed with plans for traffic circles**—Planning has begun for traffic circles at various locations, including the “Y”. Before tackling the “Y,” the City and CalTrans should experiment with a less-intense location, such as Maricopa/Cuyama/El Roblar.

**#10 A funding strategy for capital needs/improvements in our parks should be developed**—In this way, the City can ensure that the community, not individual donors, are establishing the priorities for park facilities.

**#11 The upcoming parking study should be completed and carefully reviewed**—In order to maximize our success as a visitor destination, and for the convenience of residents, parking in the village center should be effectively managed. The parking study, once completed, should provide direction on how to best use this public resource.

**#12 The City’s zoning regulations should be amended**—Although the zoning code is regularly reviewed in its details, some of the bigger-picture items merit special attention. As noted earlier, these include: minimum lot sizes that may be too large; the frequent use of variances; and, regulations to ensure an appropriate balance of visitor- and resident-serving businesses.

**#13 “Green” building code amendments should be investigated and adopted as appropriate**—Rather than prescriptive codes, I believe we should look at performance codes that require more sustainable/green building materials and practices rather than prescribing specific methods. It can be difficult to stay current with the latter approach, since materials and technology are changing so rapidly.

**#14 The City Council should review code enforcement policies and procedures with staff**—Development of policies/procedures, and their adoption by Council will ensure that code enforcement is administered as desired.

**#15 The City should support private fund-raising efforts for the Library Expansion Project**—The City, of course, already supports the effort, and should continue to do so. What is needed next is for private donors to step forward to lead the fundraising; the City and the County Library System stand ready to assist the effort, but the biggest impetus must come from individuals who are passionate about this project.

**#16 The City should explore a more-formal review of service levels provided by the Sheriff’s Department**—As noted earlier, the current contract has

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served Ojai well, although a more formal method for reviewing service levels and cost adjustments would be worthwhile.

**#17 The upcoming revisions to the City’s emergency plan should be carefully reviewed**—After the plan is developed, the City should work with the Sheriff’s Department, the Fire Protection District, and other emergency service providers to design training, including exercises as appropriate, for City personnel.

### *Support Services*

**#18 The purchasing ordinance should be revised**—The usual problem with purchasing regulations is that there are too many, and conflicting, requirements. In Ojai’s case, the problem is the opposite: the regulations are so sketchy it is difficult to determine how to comply with the ordinance.. We may be able to adopt a model ordinance with minor amendments to meet our needs.

**#19 The City should adopt a revised reserve policy**—One of the first priorities for the new budget is the development of a new, more comprehensive reserve policy. Staff will be bringing this matter to the Council in the coming weeks.

**#20 The City’s budget document should be revised**—The intent of the revisions, which will be ongoing, probably over several years, will be to make the budget document more useful for the lay person who may be only nominally familiar with the City operations. A more extensive budget summary is a suggested first step.

**#21 The City should develop service level measures, to be incorporated into the budget**—At first, the service level measures can be relatively simple. But even simple measures can help describe the municipal services that are being “bought” with tax dollars, and can help the Council make informed choices about how to deploy public resources.

**#22 The City should develop a formal, five-year Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) covering all City operations**—All capital projects, whether funded from grants, known donations, or City funds, should be included in a comprehensive document that can be integrated into the budget process.

**#23 The City should undertake a comprehensive fiscal review of the development review process**—The City recently amended its fees with an eye to full cost recovery. We should now review these fees to determine how we’re doing, and whether all costs are being covered.

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**#24 The City should undertake a comprehensive fiscal review of recreation programming**—The City Council should review its fiscal policies related to cost recovery for recreation programs, and all costs—direct and indirect—should be calculated. Then, fees can be adjusted to meet the cost recovery policies established by the Council.

**#25 The City should investigate the purchase of a financial software/hardware package**—The City Council has recently been made aware of the weakness of our current system. Staff is investigating options, and will return to Council with a report with the proposed budget. Fiscal constraints may limit the options, but an upgrade is warranted.

**#26 The City should investigate an electronic records management system**—As noted earlier, this is a lower priority than the financial management system.

**#27 Staffing needs at City Hall should be reviewed**—This review will happen as part of the development of the proposed budget for next fiscal year; one additional clerical position may be warranted.

**#28 The City should consider a full cost-accounting system**—This kind of system, which is actually for time accounting, is used by many private professional firms. Its use may be required if the City is to fully load the cost of support services onto direct services.

**#29 An Administrative Policy and Procedure Manual should be developed**—At first, such a manual would merely be a compilation of existing policies and procedures transferred into a common format within a single document. As new policies are developed, tracking and retrieval will be greatly simplified.

**#30 A Council Policy Manual should be developed**—As with the Administrative Manual, a Council Policy Manual will ensure that Council-adopted policies can be easily referenced and followed.

**#31 The City Council and the City Manager should continually monitor the quality of their communications**—Effective communications are vital to the success of any relationship, and both Council Members and the Manager have an obligation to ensure that good communications between them continues.

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**#32 The City should develop a marketing strategy**—The City should determine how and on what basis it should be involved in marketing the community to potential visitors. Any such strategy should be coordinated with businesses that serve visitors, to maximize the City’s contribution. At this point, I believe that the City’s efforts should be focused on enticing visitors to come in the first place, rather than servicing them after they are here.

**#33 The strategy for the Redevelopment Agency should be reviewed**—I believe it is time for a comprehensive reexamination of Ojai’s RDA, including a review of what we hope to accomplish in the limited time left to it. Further, we should revisit the assumptions and underlying beliefs that guide the Agency. This review should also include the scrutiny of the appropriate RDA role in housing production in preparation for the required amendment to the City’s Housing Element, due in 2008.

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This concludes the specific recommendations. There are obviously too many recommendations to expect that all can be accomplished in the coming weeks, let alone years. My best estimate is that it may take up to five years for us to address every recommendation. First, though, I need the City Council’s concurrence that these recommendations are worthy of consideration.

Accordingly, on April 10, 2006, I will present this report to the City Council, and ask for their agreement that the recommendations should be pursued. I will not be asking for Council endorsement of any of the recommendations, since each of them will be brought back to Council separately, and Council approval will be sought only after further analysis, review, and consideration. If on April 10 the Council does not wish to consider any recommendation further, it will be removed from the list. The remaining recommendations are the subject of the final recommendation, which is:

**#34 Staff should be directed to develop an action plan to consider each of the recommendations in this report**—Such an action plan would identify the person who is primarily responsible for the matter, recommend other staff members who should be involved in the discussion and present the expected timeline for consideration. In addition, any special concerns should be identified. I will develop the action plan, and bring it back to City Council as soon as possible.