

# Tips for Reading an Environmental Impact Report

by Laurence Wiener

*The California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) was conceived in the 1970s to promote the goal of ensuring that local government decision-makers understand the environmental impacts of their decisions. To implement this goal, the Governor's Office of Planning and Research developed CEQA implementation guidelines, which stated that Environmental Impact Reports (EIRs) should be no more than 150 pages and written in plain language that can be readily understood by decision-makers and the public.*



**H**owever, people familiar with modern EIRs have become painfully aware that most of them stray far from these ideals. Today, EIRs commonly exceed 500 or even thousands of pages, and their language has become overly complicated. Terms unfamiliar to some readers, such as "the threshold of significance" and "traffic level of service," are used liberally.

Unfortunately, as EIRs become more burdensome to read, they appear intended for lawyers and consultants rather than local decision-makers and the public. Cities sometimes treat EIRs as hurdles to be overcome rather than tools to help make better decisions.

However, city council members and commissioners do not need to abandon EIRs to their consultants and attorneys. With

a little helpful background, every local official can learn to read an EIR critically and focus on the information that is most important to making good policy decisions for their community.

This article provides four tips to help you exert local control over the EIR process, read EIRs more effectively and become a more effective decision-maker for your city.

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Laurence Wiener is an attorney with Richards, Watson & Gershon and can be reached at <LWiener@rwglaw.com>.

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## 1 Read With Your Objectives in Mind.

Modern EIRs contain too much information to read without focusing on the information that you will ultimately need to do your job as a city council member or commissioner.

CEQA requires you to answer four basic questions before considering whether to approve a project for which an EIR was prepared:

1. Has the EIR identified each of the project's significant environmental impacts?
2. If so, has each significant impact been reduced or avoided?
3. Are there feasible alternatives to the proposed project that would meet its objectives with fewer environmental impacts?
4. If the proposed project will have a significant impact on the environment, does it benefit the community despite these impacts?

The purpose of the EIR process is to help you, as a decision-maker, answer these questions. As you read an EIR, focus on the information that helps you do that.

## 2 Impose Local Values on the EIR Process.

Every EIR contains a great deal of technical information. As a result, readers may be reluctant to question its assumptions and recommendations. However, to make an EIR work most effectively, you must ensure that it reflects your community's values.

For example, each EIR contains "thresholds of significance." These are the standards by which the EIR measures whether a project has a significant impact on the environment. In other words, if an impact exceeds a threshold of significance, the impact is considered significant. If the

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impact is below the threshold, it is considered insignificant.

Therefore, setting the thresholds can be the most critical factor in determining whether an impact is significant. However, in many cities, the thresholds are not consciously established by the city, but instead are established by the EIR's author. While the author may have a great deal of expertise in environmental science, setting thresholds of significance is not a simple matter of science; it also involves policy and value judgments that vary from community to community.

To fully understand the environmental impacts set forth in an EIR, the reader should review the thresholds of significance and understand the choices made in establishing these thresholds. If the thresholds are not explained precisely in the EIR, then the reader should ask for them to be made explicit.

Furthermore, decision-makers should also provide input concerning the choice of thresholds for their community. CEQA encourages every community to develop its own thresholds. Tailoring thresholds to your city or county has the advantage of making EIRs better reflect local values. Establishing such thresholds should also make each EIR process run more smoothly, as decision-makers will be comfortable

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## City Manager, Martinez, CA

The City of Martinez, population 36,900, is located along the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers in the central part of Contra Costa County just 35 miles northeast of San Francisco. The City is currently seeking a City Manager who is a dynamic and team-oriented individual. The incoming manager will be politically astute; visible; approachable; and accessible to the community, Council, and staff; and will be personable with a sense of humor as well as an ability to get things done. The individual selected for this position of City Manager will have experience in development-related approaches to revitalization, economic development, planning, and capital projects. The City Manager will be savvy in forming cooperative working relationships, dealing with private enterprise, and comfortable in an environment that may be resistant to some development-related approaches. This position requires a broad understanding of municipal operations, particularly in the areas of finance, budget, economic development and redevelopment. He/she must be willing to hold people accountable and lead by example. A Bachelor's degree from an accredited college or university in public or business administration or a related field is required. A Master's degree is preferred. The salary range for the City Manager is open, and is dependent upon qualifications. The City also offers an attractive benefits package. To apply for this opportunity, please visit our website at [www.bobmurrayassoc.com](http://www.bobmurrayassoc.com) and you will be prompted to apply online. If you have any questions, please contact **Mr. Bob Murray** at (916) 784-9080. A detailed brochure is available. **Filing Deadline: March 15, 2008.**



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## AIRPORT MANAGER City of California City

The City of California City, population approx. 13,123, is located in the Southern California High Desert. The City is seeking an Airport Manager who will be under the direction of the Public Works Director, to plan, direct, coordinate and administer the activities of the California City Municipal airport and the Dial-A-Ride Program. See job description for full explanation of duties. Qualified applicant must possess: a Valid Class C California Drivers license. Must obtain a printout of an excellent driving record from the DMV; High School Diploma or GED equivalent. Graduation from an accredited college or university with a Bachelor's degree in Airport Management, Business Administration, and or Public Administration. 3 or more years military or civil aviation experience is desirable. FAA Private Pilot's license is desirable. Must be able to pass oral interview, background check, pre-employment physical, and drug test.

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that the thresholds being used in each EIR are consistent and appropriate.

Mitigation measures are a second area where decision-makers should ensure that the EIR reflects local values.

If an EIR identifies a significant environmental impact, then it is required to recommend mitigation measures that will reduce or avoid that impact. CEQA requires that if these mitigation measures are feasible, they must be incorporated into the project or imposed on the project as conditions.

It is certainly natural to assume that every measure that will reduce an environmental impact should be accepted as beneficial to your community and adopted. Thus, many EIR readers do not read mitigation measures with a critical eye. However, each mitigation measure should be evaluated to determine whether it is appropriate for your community.

For example, an EIR for a project in a downtown retail district may recommend widening a street and reducing the width of the sidewalk to mitigate a traffic impact. While this certainly would mitigate the traffic impact, the measure may also be detrimental to the pedestrian character of the city's retail shopping area and could adversely affect nearby merchants. Is the reduction in traffic delay on that street worth the impact on pedestrians and merchants? This is a decision for the planning commission or city council, not the EIR. While the EIR must recommend measures to reduce environmental impacts, it cannot make the decision regarding whether the measure is ultimately beneficial for your community.

Fortunately, CEQA allows a decision-maker to reject a mitigation measure if social, economic or other considerations make the measure infeasible. Thus, as with thresholds of significance, decision-makers should review the recommended mitigation measures to ensure that they are appropriate for your jurisdiction's unique circumstances.

### 3 Don't Forget to Examine the "No Project" Alternative.

Each EIR must not only evaluate the environmental impacts of the proposed project, but must also evaluate the environmental impacts that would reasonably be expected to occur if the project were *not* approved. This analysis is typically referred to as the "no project alternative" in the EIR.

This "no project alternative" is different than the analysis in the EIR's main body, which answers the question of how the proposed project will affect the condition of the environment as it exists today. This allows the decision-maker and the public to compare the current environment against the proposed impacts of the project.

However, this comparison does not always reflect the true choice facing a city or county. Often, denying a proposed project will not result in preserving the environment in its current condition.

Thus, the "no project alternative" may present the decision-maker with the true choice facing the community. This alternative may explain the environmental impacts of denying the proposed project and therefore may contain information critical to the ultimate decision about whether to approve a project.

### 4 Don't Expect to Find All the Answers in an EIR.

The most important decision concerning any project is whether to approve it. Many considerations influence that decision, and not all of them are addressed in an EIR; it cannot tell you what is best for your community nor whether a project's benefits outweigh its environmental impacts. Those are policy decisions. Nevertheless, the EIR contains much valuable information and, if read critically, can be a tool for better decision-making. ■

**To make an EIR work most effectively, you must ensure that it reflects your community's values.**



#### J O B O P P O R T U N I T I E S

#### City of Elk Grove, CA CITY MANAGER



Elk Grove is a vibrant, growing community of over 130,000 in Sacramento County. Conveniently located halfway between the Pacific Ocean (San Francisco) to the west, and the Sierra Nevada Mountains (Lake Tahoe) to the east, Elk Grove has been one of the fastest growing cities in the country.

The City Manager reports to a five-member Council and administers an operating budget of approximately \$68 million that includes 256 employees plus 180 contract staff. Elk Grove City government is comprised of the following departments: finance, police, neighborhood services, public works, and planning. Significant relevant local government experience and a Bachelor's degree are required; Master's degree highly desirable.

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For more information, contact Stuart Satow

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Sacramento, CA 95815  
Tel: 916 / 263-1401  
Fax: 916 / 561-7205  
E-mail: [resumes@cps.ca.gov](mailto:resumes@cps.ca.gov)

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City of Huntington Beach, CA  
(pop. 190,000)

City Administrator

The City of Huntington Beach is located along the Southern California coast in Orange County, 35 miles south of Los Angeles and 90 miles north of San Diego. Huntington Beach is a Charter City with a 7-member City Council, including the Mayor, who are elected at large, on a non-partisan basis, for overlapping terms. The City has approximately 1,140 FTEs and a total budget of approximately \$330.3 million. Position reports to the City Council and will oversee the City's 14 departments (11 of the department heads are appointed and three are elected). Position requires a relevant bachelor's degree (master's degree strongly desired) and considerable managerial experience in a medium-to-large sized city, county or comparable organization. Salary DOQ. Please apply **online** by **April 11, 2008** at [www.allianceresourceconsulting.com](http://www.allianceresourceconsulting.com). For more information, please visit our website or call Eric Middleton or Nicholas Mesic at (562) 901-0769. EEO/ADA.

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