

# DRAFT VISUAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT

[Project Name]

Date

Dist-County-Route  
KP/PM  
EA

Prepared by:

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Project Landscape Architect

Approved by:

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Caltrans District Landscape Architect

## **I. PURPOSE OF STUDY**

The purpose of this study is to assess the visual impacts of the proposed project and to propose measures to mitigate any adverse visual impacts associated with the construction of...on the surrounding visual environment.

## **II. PROJECT DESCRIPTION**

The project proposes to construct...

## **III. ASSESSMENT METHOD**

The process used in this visual impact study generally follows the guidelines outlined in the publication "Visual Impact Assessment for Highway Projects", Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), March 1981.

Six principal steps required to assess visual impacts were carried out. They are as follows:

- A. Define the project setting and viewshed.
- B. Identify key views for visual assessment.
- C. Analyze existing visual resources and viewer response.
- D. Depict the visual appearance of project alternatives.
- E. Assess the visual impacts of project alternatives.
- F. Propose methods to mitigate adverse visual impacts.

## **IV. VISUAL ENVIRONMENT OF THE PROJECT**

### **A. Project Setting**

The regional landscape establishes the general visual environment of the project, but the specific visual environment upon which this assessment will focus is determined by defining landscape units and the project viewshed.

### **B. Landscape Units**

A landscape unit is a portion of the regional landscape and can be thought of as an outdoor room that exhibits a distinct visual character. A landscape unit will often correspond to a place or district that is commonly known among local viewers.

### **C. Project Viewshed**

A viewshed is a subset of a landscape unit and is comprised of all the surface areas visible from an observer's viewpoint. The limits of a viewshed are defined as the visual limits of the views located from the proposed project. The viewshed also includes the locations of viewers likely to be affected by visual changes brought about by project features.

## V. EXISTING VISUAL RESOURCES AND VIEWER RESPONSE

### A. FHWA Method of Visual Resource Analysis

**Identify Visual Character** – Visual character is descriptive and non-evaluative which means it is based on defined attributes that are neither good nor bad in themselves. A change in visual character can not be described as having good or bad attributes until it is compared with the viewer response to that change. If there is public preference for the established visual character of a regional landscape and a resistance to a project that would contrast that character, then changes in the visual character can be evaluated.

**Assess Visual Quality** – Visual quality is evaluated by identifying the vividness, intactness and unity present in the viewshed. The FHWA states that this method should correlate with public judgments of visual quality well enough to predict those judgments. This approach is particularly useful in highway planning because it does not presume that a highway project is necessarily an eyesore. This approach to evaluating visual quality can also help identify specific methods for mitigating specific adverse impacts that may occur as a result of a project. The three criteria for evaluating visual quality can be defined as follows:

**Vividness** is the visual power or memorability of landscape components as they combine in distinctive visual patterns.

**Intactness** is the visual integrity of the natural and man-built landscape and its freedom from encroaching elements. It can be present in well-kept urban and rural landscapes, as well as in natural settings.

**Unity** is the visual coherence and compositional harmony of the landscape considered as a whole. It frequently attests to the careful design of individual components in the landscape.

### B. Existing Visual Resources

#### 1. Existing Visual Character

## **2. Existing Visual Quality**

### **C. Methods of Predicting Viewer Response**

Viewer response is composed of two elements: viewer sensitivity and viewer exposure. These elements combine to form a method of predicting how the public might react to visual changes brought about by a highway project.

**Viewer sensitivity** is defined both as the viewers' concern for scenic quality and the viewers' response to change in the visual resources that make up the view. Local values and goals may confer visual significance on landscape components and areas that would otherwise appear unexceptional in a visual resource analysis. Even when the existing appearance of a project site is uninspiring, a community may still object to projects that fall short of its visual goals. Analysts can learn about these special resources and community aspirations for visual quality through citizen participation procedures, as well as from local publications and planning documents.

**Viewer exposure** is typically assessed by measuring the number of viewers exposed to the resource change, type of viewer activity, the duration of their view, the speed at which the viewer moves, and the position of the viewer. High viewer exposure heightens the importance of early consideration of design, art, and architecture and their roles in managing the visual resource effects of a project.

### **D. Existing Viewer Sensitivity**

### **E. Existing Viewer Groups, Viewer Exposure, and Viewer Awareness**

## **VI. VISUAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT**

### **A. Method of Assessing Project Impacts**

The visual impacts of project alternatives are determined by assessing the visual resource change due to the project and predicting viewer response to that change.

Visual resource change is the sum of the change in visual character and change in visual quality. The first step in determining visual resource change is to assess the compatibility

of the proposed project with the visual character of the existing landscape. The second step is to compare the visual quality of the existing resources with projected visual quality after the project is constructed.

The viewer response to project changes is the sum of viewer exposure and viewer sensitivity to the project as determined in the preceding section.

The resulting level of visual impact is determined by combining the severity of resource change with the degree to which people are likely to oppose the change.

## **B. Definition of Visual Impact Levels**

**Low** - Minor adverse change to the existing visual resource, with low viewer response to change in the visual environment. May or may not require mitigation.

**Moderate** - Moderate adverse change to the visual resource with moderate viewer response. Impact can be mitigated within five years using conventional practices.

**Moderately High** - Moderate adverse visual resource change with high viewer response or high adverse visual resource change with moderate viewer response. Extraordinary mitigation practices may be required. Landscape treatment required will generally take longer than five years to mitigate.

**High** - A high level of adverse change to the resource or a high level of viewer response to visual change such that architectural design and landscape treatment cannot mitigate the impacts. Viewer response level is high. An alternative project design may be required to avoid highly adverse impacts.

## **C. Analysis of Key Views**

Because it is not feasible to analyze all the views in which the proposed project would be seen, it is necessary to select a number of key viewpoints that would most clearly display the visual effects of the project. Key views also represent the primary viewer groups that would potentially be affected by the project.

Key view locations are shown in **Exhibit....**

### **Key view #1**

*Orientation*

*Existing Visual Quality/Character*

*Proposed Project Features*

*Change to Visual Quality/Character*

*Viewer Response*

*Resulting Visual Impact*

#### **D. Summary of Project Impacts**

### **VII. VISUAL MITIGATION**

Caltrans and the FHWA mandate that a qualitative/aesthetic approach be taken to mitigate for visual quality loss in the project area. This approach fulfills the letter and the spirit of FHWA requirements because it addresses the actual cumulative loss of visual quality that will occur in the project viewshed when the project is implemented. It also constitutes mitigation that can more readily generate public acceptance of the project.

Visual mitigation for adverse project impacts addressed in the key view assessments and summarized in the previous section will consist of adhering to the following design requirements in cooperation with the District Landscape Architect. The requirements are arranged by project feature and include design options in order of effectiveness. All visual mitigation will be designed and implemented with the concurrence of the District Landscape Architect.

### **VIII. REFERENCES**

U.S.D.O.T., Federal Highway Administration, Office of Environmental Policy, Visual Impact Assessment for Highway Projects, U. S. Department of Transportation Washington D. C. March 1981.