

## V.I. AESTHETICS

This section summarizes the findings presented Chapter V.I of the *Willow Road/Highway 101 Interchange Final Environmental Impact Report*, prepared by Douglas Wood & Associates, Inc. (March 1999: pp. V134-V163). Per the CEQA Guidelines, Section 15150, this EIR incorporates the previous study by reference. Site photographs and visual simulations of the project conditions are contained in the 1999 FEIR.

### 1. Existing Conditions

There are a variety of land-uses visible from the project area including residences, nurseries, recreational areas, agricultural farmland, and open space. West of Pomeroy Road, there is the Black Lake Golf Course, eucalyptus windrows, existing scattered residential development, and new homes that are currently being developed (the Vellagio Development). Between Pomeroy Road and Hetrick Avenue, land uses include scattered residences, fallow fields, and the Pismo Flowers Nursery. The area between Hetrick Avenue and US 101 is dominated by rural development among open grasslands and pasture lands. North of Cherokee Place, along the west side of US 101, there is a large stand of oak woodland. South of Cherokee Place, along the west side of US 101, are open fields that have been subject to recent dryland farming (the Canada property). East of US 101, views include the C&M Nursery beyond which lies Nipomo Creek, and cultivated farmlands. North of the nursery, between US 101 and Nipomo Creek, there are scattered oak trees and pasture lands. Nipomo Creek can be characterized as a riparian corridor with willows and other wetland vegetation. The majority of land between Nipomo Creek and Thompson Road is cultivated farmlands.

The visual quality of the project area is characterized by the following factors: a) the overall attractiveness of the area; b) the nature and extent of unique visual features including landform, vegetative patterns, and water features; c) other man-made features introduced to a site; and d) the frequency with which the site is viewed from adjacent vantage points. The project area has a medium level of visual sensitivity since many views include relatively undisturbed areas, native vegetation, and mature trees. In addition, the site is very frequently viewed by the large number of motorists utilizing US 101. There are no unique geological or physical features within the project boundaries.

Automobile headlights from US 101 constitute the primary source of light and glare in the project area. This light and glare can be seen as far east as Thompson Road and as far west as Hetrick Road. Motorists on other roadways and residences also cause light and glare, but to a much lesser extent, as light and glare from these sources are limited to the areas immediately adjacent to the roadways and homes.

### 2. Thresholds of Significance

In accordance with Appendix G of CEQA Guidelines and the County's Initial Study Checklist, a significant aesthetic impact would occur if the proposed project would:

- Create an aesthetically incompatible site open to public view;
- Introduce a use within a scenic view open to public view;
- Substantially change the visual character of an area;

- Create glare or night lighting which may affect surrounding areas;
- Impact unique geological or physical features.

### 3. Project Impacts

Construction of the Willow Road extension, US 101 interchange and frontage road (the proposed project) will result in the permanent alteration of the nature and appearance of the project area and its immediate surroundings.

**Methodology.** The approach used to define visual sensitivity and aesthetic impacts is based upon concepts and methods utilized by several Federal agencies (e.g., U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management) who address visual sensitivity of a project as a function of the public's aesthetic values and goals. For this analysis, visual sensitivity and impacts are rated as high, medium or low. High sensitivity exists when the affected views are rare, unique or in other ways special to the region or locale. Medium sensitivity exists when the affected views are secondary in importance or are similar to others in the region or locale. Low sensitivity exists when the public can be expected to have little or no concern about changes in the landscape.

Visual Sensitivity is also analyzed within the context of the viewing distance. Viewing distances fall into two categories: foreground, which is defined as the detailed viewscape in a range of zero to one-half mile from the observer, and background, which is defined as the viewscape in a range of one-half mile or further from the observer. Visual sensitivity ratings (i.e., high, medium, low) are assigned in conjunction with a site's corresponding viewing distance. Defining visual sensitivity involves a degree of subjective evaluation because the nature of a particular viewscape, the number of individuals exposed to the view, and the relative value of its components depend on the perception of the individual.

**Long-Term Impacts to Project Area Aesthetics.** Proposed project facilities will be within the foreground views of motorists on US 101 as well as residents within one-quarter mile of the proposed roadway and interchange facilities. Views of the project area from US 101 as well as those within a short distance away (within 1/8 of a mile) from US 101 are considered to be of medium sensitivity in that potentially impacted views are similar to others in the region.

Extension of Willow Road and the provision of a frontage road will result in the addition of a two lane 54-foot wide paved roadway and a 40-foot wide paved frontage road. The provision of an unlit, two-lane paved roadway is not considered to represent a significant aesthetic impact. The proposed US 101 interchange represents a more significant visual influence on the area.

The proposed US 101 interchange will be visible primarily to motorists utilizing this thoroughfare, the proposed frontage road, or to residents in nearby areas. The proposed interchange facility, however, is being configured as an undercrossing rather than an overcrossing. An undercrossing configuration will significantly reduce the aesthetic impacts of the interchange by eliminating the facility from the foreground view of motorists on US 101 as well as from the background views of residents and other individuals within the surrounding areas.

The visual impact of this interchange facility must be judged not only in terms of its appearance but also by the high number of persons viewing this facility. A significant number of motorists using US 101 (tens of thousands) will experience the visual interruption. Although interchanges are provided throughout the region, including as close as 1.3 miles to the south and 1.5 miles to the north, an additional freeway interchange will represent a permanent change in the unobstructed, rural views of the project area from US 101. Therefore, the proposed US 101 interchange represents a potentially significant impact upon views to motorists using US 101. The proposed interchange is also within the US 101 Design Corridor which attempts to minimize impacts to scenic foreground and background views from US 101. The visual impact of the highway interchange can be reduced or “softened” through the planting of vegetation on graded slopes surrounding the interchange facility (see Mitigation Measures below). There are no unique geophysical features in the project area that would be affected by the proposed extension of the roadway or construction of a new interchange at US 101.

The proposed project will result in the removal of oak woodland habitat and a large number of individual oak trees particularly immediately west of US 101. As indicated in section V.F Biological Resources, up to 938 oak trees could be impacted by the extension of Willow Road, the US 101 interchange, and the proposed frontage road. Although pockets of existing oaks maybe preserved in final design (north and south of the Willow Road underpass of US 101), this estimate of potential loss of trees is a worst – case for CEQA purposes. This loss of oak trees is considered a potentially significant visual impact given their visibility from US 101 and their visual contribution to the landscape of the area. This potentially significant visual impact can be mitigated by replacing oak trees in the vicinity of the project-related tree loss in order to visually screen the roadway. Tree replacement should also meet San Luis Obispo County standards as specified in Mitigation Measure F-15 (See section V.F. Biological Resources). In addition, Mitigation Measure F-16 will be required to create, conserve and enhance native habitat areas removed by the proposed project.

The extension of Willow Road over Nipomo Creek will also result in the removal of riparian vegetation at this location. However given the lower elevation and resulting lack of visibility of this area combined with the relatively small area of disruption (less than one acre), this visual impact of the proposed roadway extension over Nipomo Creek is not considered a significant aesthetic impact. Visual impacts to these riparian habitats will also be mitigated through the required provision of replacement habitats and through implementation of Mitigation Measure F-17 (see section V.F Biological Resources).

**Light and Glare.** Construction of the proposed project has the potential of adding night lighting which may generate additional light and glare in the project area. Sources of nighttime lighting include automobile traffic along the project roadways and intersection lighting at the proposed interchange. The intermittent nature of automobile traffic on project roadways is not considered to represent a significant addition to light and glare in the area particularly in comparison to the existing, more constant light and glare levels generated by traffic on US 101. Nighttime traffic on US 101 represents the largest source of introduced nighttime lighting in the project area. Lighting of intersections adjacent to the US 101 interchange will represent an additional constant light source to the area (the interchange itself will not be lit). These permanent light sources will be adjacent to the highway. The impacts of this intersection lighting are considered to be potentially significant but must be considered within the context of existing nighttime light sources in the area.

The lighting of the US 101 interchange will be confined to on/off ramp signage and standard intersection lighting. Although it is acknowledged that the interchange will be primarily viewed by motorists on US 101, lit interchanges are an expected part of the “visual landscape” of any freeway. As such, additional lighting (ramp signage, intersection lighting) is not considered to represent a significant additional light and glare impact. In addition, the use of downward directed lighting while still visible at nighttime further reduces potential light and glare impacts by preventing upward and side illumination (see Mitigation Measure I-2, I-3 and F-20 in Section V.F. Biological Resources). In addition, the interchange configuration, proposed as an undercrossing, will significantly reduce light and glare impacts in that required lighting will be below or at the existing freeway elevation rather than elevated over the existing highway.

**Short-Term Construction Impacts.** Construction of the proposed project facilities will result in short-term visual impacts by disrupting the existing surface appearance. Short-term construction impacts would consist of grading activities and construction of proposed interchange structures. Impacts to views of the area during project construction are considered to be less than significant due to the short-term nature of construction activities and the relatively small area of disruption which will be constructed in phased sections.

#### 4. Cumulative Impacts

The Willow Road Extension/US 101 Interchange project will create a potentially significant cumulative impact since the interchange and road will change the visual appearance of the project area and introduce additional nighttime lighting. In addition, the project contributes to the long-range development of cumulative projects anticipated for the area. Development of these projects would further impact the visual appearance and light and glare conditions in the project area.

#### 5. Mitigation Measures

**I-1, Revegetation Plan.** All slopes and areas disturbed by grading for any proposed project facilities shall be planted with drought resistant vegetation immediately following construction. A Revegetation Plan shall be prepared for approval by the County of San Luis Obispo, Department of Planning and Building prior to project grading. This plan shall specify the type and location of re-vegetation for all slopes and areas disturbed by grading for any of the project facilities. Larger shrubs and trees shall be planted in groupings or clusters in the vicinity of US 101 in order to buffer views from the freeway and to shield external views of the proposed interchange facility while also providing adequate line-of-sight for motorists. Sufficient topsoil will be stockpiled for use in all re-vegetation areas. The re-vegetation is intended to buffer views of project facilities while also providing adequate line-of-site for motorists. The location and type of vegetation are also important in screening facilities while also maintaining scenic background views.

**I-2, Project Lighting.** All project lighting shall comply with requirements of the County of San Luis Obispo while also conforming to the type of lighting and extent of illumination currently employed by the California Department of Transportation. To the extent allowed, illumination levels and light standard heights shall be as low as possible while still providing for adequate safety. The number of street lights designed for project roadways shall be minimized to reduce potential light and glare

impacts while providing required illumination for access and safety. Lighting plans shall be included in the project design plans to be reviewed by the County Department of Planning and Building.

**I-3, Downward Shielding of Light Sources.** All street and interchange lighting shall be designed in a manner which orients light downward and is shielded to prevent upward and side illumination. Where possible, all exterior lighting should involve low pressure sodium vapor lamps or equivalent lighting technology which reduces potential excess light and glare.

## **6. Residual Impacts**

Implementation of the prescribed mitigation measures will reduce potential project-related aesthetic and light and glare impacts to less than significant levels. Mitigation Measures I-1 through I-3 and F-15 through F-17 and F-20 in Biological Resources will reduce the proposed project's incremental contribution to the change in the area's visual appearance and additional night time lighting. After implementation of mitigation measures, the residual incremental contribution of the project to the area's visual character and night time light would not create an aesthetically incompatible site given the existing road network (public and private) along the project alignment. The new interchange would add additional infrastructure (a new use) to the existing US 101 infrastructure; however this view would not be considered a scenic view, particularly since Willow Road would be an underpass of US 101. Therefore, with project specific mitigation measures the project's contribution to the cumulative aesthetic visual environment would be reduced to less than significant.