
3.1 - Aesthetics

3.1.1 - Introduction

This section describes the existing aesthetics, light, and glare setting and potential direct and indirect effects from project implementation on visual resources and the site and its surroundings.

Descriptions and analysis in this section are based on site reconnaissance by Michael Brandman Associates, as well as review of the Sacramento County General Plan, City of Elk Grove General Plan, and the proposed project.

3.1.2 - Environmental Setting

Aesthetic Character

Regional Setting

Sacramento County lies near the center of California's Central Valley, at the southern end of the Sacramento Valley. Aesthetic views within the valley region are generally characterized by broad, sweeping panoramas of flat agricultural lands and open space dotted with trees, divided by numerous rivers and creeks, and populated with scattered towns and cities. To the east, the Sierra Nevada and their foothills form a background, and the Coast Range provides a backdrop on the western horizon.

In general, the dominant visual characteristics within the unincorporated area are the open sections of the valley floor, urbanized land uses, agricultural land uses, rivers and creeks, and trees. Because the unincorporated area consists of relatively flat terrain, views of these resources are available from roadways throughout the area, including US 50, Interstate 5 (I-5), State Route 99 (SR-99), SR-16, SR-160/River Road, Grant Line Road, and Scott Road. Oak trees, vernal pools, streams, creeks, the Delta region, and the historic structures and rural communities such as Locke and Sloughhouse are among the County's visual heritage that many residents value as part of their quality of life. Distant views of the Sierra Nevada, the Coast Range, Mount Diablo, and the Sutter Buttes can be visible under clear conditions and are also considered part of the County's visual heritage.

City of Elk Grove

The City of Elk Grove covers approximately 42 square miles (26,974 acres) in the southern portion of Sacramento County. Urban land uses generally consist of residential, commercial, office, industrial, recreational, and public uses within and adjacent to the City of Elk Grove. Natural features in the vicinity of the City include the Stone Lakes National Wildlife Refuge, the Cosumnes River, the Sacramento River and associated tributaries (such as Deer Creek, Morrison Creek, and Laguna Creek), and vegetation communities such as valley oak woodland, annual grassland, valley foothill riparian, and agricultural lands. Agricultural uses are concentrated in the eastern portion of the City and on a smaller portion of south Elk Grove. The remaining portions of the City are developed with urban uses.

Project Site

The 7,869-acre project site primarily contains agricultural uses consisting of fallow/row crops/nursery, orchards, vineyard, and livestock operations. Few structures exist within the project site, and these are limited to barns, rural housing, storage sheds, and related structures. A small area surrounding the intersections of Hood Franklin Road/County Road J8 and Bilby Road/County Road J8, identified as the Old Town Franklin community, is developed with relatively suburban uses. The existing land uses in this community can be described as a mix of rural housing, light industrial, commercial, and public facilities. Sunset Sky ranch Airport (Elk Grove Airport) is a privately owned airport that lies in the eastern portion of the project area, immediately adjacent to the existing Elk Grove city limits. Effective July 1, 2010, the airport was closed. Exhibit 2-4 shows the existing land uses on the project site.

The project site is mapped as containing 446.4 acres of Prime Farmland and 4,862.8 acres of Farmland of Statewide Importance. Both designations fall under the Important Farmland designation as classified by the California Department of Conservation Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program.

Approximately 2,474 acres of the project site are encumbered by an active Williamson Act contract. Some property owners have filed Notices of Non-Renewal on approximately 548.8 acres to initiate termination of the contract. Exhibit 2-5 shows the Sphere of Influence Amendment (SOIA) Area properties for which a Non-Renewal Notice has been filed.

Exhibits 2-3a and 2-3b provide photographs of the project area.

Surrounding Land Uses

Below is a description of surrounding land uses, including views from and of the project site. Considering the greater expanse of SOIA Area boundaries, the views described in this section exemplify general characteristics of the project area and the surrounding areas.

West

Stone Lakes National Wildlife Refuge, which protects scarce natural habitats and agricultural resources, forms the western boundary of the project site. The Stone Lakes National Wildlife Refuge lies within the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta. Land uses within the refuge include aquatic habitat, annual grasslands, seasonal wetlands, pastures, oak woodlands, and agricultural uses. Agricultural uses occupy the area immediately next to the proposed SOIA Area's western boundary. County of Sacramento land use designations west of the project site include Agricultural Cropland, Natural Preserve, and Resource Conservation.

Views of the agricultural fields are the primary views to the west. The Union Pacific Railroad forms the western boundary of the project site and can be seen from the west, followed by the agricultural

uses to the east. The vertical elements in this visual expanse are the power transmission lines and a few scattered structures that are visible in the distance.

North

The project site is bounded by the City of Elk Grove to the north. Residential uses dominate the western portion of the City north of the proposed SOIA boundary, and rural residential and small-scale agricultural uses prevail in the eastern portion of the City to the north of the proposed SOIA Area boundary, except for some industrial uses near the intersection of Grant Line Road and Waterman Road. City of Elk Grove land use designations north of the project site include Commercial, High-Density Residential, Medium Density Residential, Low Density Residential, Estate Residential, Southeast Policy Area, and Elk Grove Triangle Policy Area.

The views of single-family residences up to two stories high are the primary views to the north, west of Bruceville Road. A senior apartment community (Seasons at Laguna Ridge), located at the northeast corner of Bruceville Road and Bilby Road, is also visible to the north. The views to the north, east of Bruceville Road consist primarily of agricultural fields and related residences and structures. Views of commercial and light industrial development are available at the junction of SR-99 and Grant Line Road. The land uses on the north side have unobstructed views of the project site.

East

The community of Cosumnes and the unincorporated communities of Wilton and Sheldon lie to the east of the project site. Both Wilton and Sheldon are primarily rural in character, and rural residential development on large lots is typical of the communities. Rural residential and agricultural uses exist immediately east of the project boundary. The Cosumnes River and its associated FEMA 100-year floodplain form the eastern boundary. County of Sacramento land use designations east of the project site include General Agriculture, Agricultural Cropland, Natural Preserve, and Resource Conservation.

The riparian areas associated with the Cosumnes River are visible to the east. Sunset Sky ranch Airport (Elk Grove Airport) is a recently closed, privately owned airport that lies in the eastern portion of the project area, immediately adjacent to the existing Elk Grove city limits. Views of the remaining airport infrastructure may be available at a localized level. The land uses on the east side have unobstructed views of the project site that primarily include agricultural uses.

South

The unincorporated communities of Bruceville and Point Pleasant lie to the south of the proposed SOIA Area boundary. Land uses in this area are similar to the adjacent agricultural land uses within the project site. County of Sacramento land use designations south of the project site include Agricultural Cropland.

The project site has unobstructed views of agricultural land uses to the south. A light industrial development can be seen to the south at the intersection of Eschinger Road and Carroll Road. The land uses on the east side have unobstructed views of the project site.

Light and Glare

The project site is sparsely developed and primarily used for agriculture and related activities. These rural land uses typically do not generate substantial amounts of glare, lighting, or illumination, and the ambient nighttime lighting and illumination levels are very low. Vehicles traveling along Bilby Road, Bruceville Road, Kammerer Road, and Eschinger Road may contribute to some light and glare. However, these roads mainly lie along the project boundaries; as such, the existing light and glare conditions on the project site are low.

3.1.3 - Regulatory Framework

State

California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA)

CEQA affords protection for the environment, including aesthetic resources. The CEQA Guidelines Appendix G provides four criteria that may be used to evaluate the significance of visual quality impacts: negative effects on a scenic vista, damage to scenic resources within a state scenic highway, degradation of the visual character or quality of a site and its surroundings, and creation of a new source of substantial light or glare affecting views.

California Scenic Highway Program

The California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) administers the California Scenic Highway Program. The goal of the program is to preserve and protect scenic highway corridors from change that would affect the aesthetic value of the land adjacent to highways. SR-160 (River Road) is a State-designated scenic highway that runs on top of levees along the Sacramento River from the Contra Costa county line to the southern city limit of Sacramento. River Road meanders through the historic Delta agricultural areas and small towns along the Sacramento River.

Local

City of Elk Grove

Approval by LAFCo of this SOIA does not authorize any change in land use or governance. However, the proposed project would adjust the City of Elk Grove's SOI and allow the City the opportunity to file an annexation request with LAFCo to annex lands within the SOIA Area. The City of Elk Grove General Plan establishes goals and policies to guide both present and future development within the City's jurisdiction. The City of Elk Grove's General Plan policies and action items related to aesthetics that may apply to potential future development in the SOIA Area are provided below.

- **Policy CAQ-8:** Large trees (both native and non-native) are an important aesthetic (and, in some cases, biological) resource. Trees which function as an important part of the City's or a neighborhood's aesthetic character or as natural habitat should be retained to the extent possible during the development of new structures, roadways (public and private, including roadway widening), parks, drainage channels, and other uses and structures.

If trees cannot be preserved onsite, offsite mitigation or payment of an in-lieu fee may be required by the City. Where possible, trees planted for mitigation should be located in the same watershed as the trees, which were removed.

Trees that cannot be protected shall be replaced either onsite or offsite as required by the City.

- **CAQ-8-Action 1:** When reviewing native or non-native trees for preservation, considering the following criteria:
 - Aesthetic value
 - Biological value
 - Shade
 - Water quality benefits
 - Runoff reduction
 - Air quality (pollutant reduction)
 - Health of the tree(s)
 - Suitability for preservation in place
 - Safety hazards posed by the tree(s)
- **CAQ-8-Action 2:** Develop a list of trees which shall be considered generally exempt from preservation. These may include trees, which pose a threat to public safety, to native trees, or to natural habitat.
- **CAQ-8-Action 3:** Develop a list of trees which may be used when providing replacement trees for the loss of native and non-native trees.
- **CAQ-8-Action 4:** Implement the City's Tree Preservation Ordinance.
- **CAQ-8-Action 5:** Amend the City's Tree Preservation Ordinance to conform with the policies of this General Plan and to expand protection to non-native trees.
- **CAQ-8-Action 6:** Develop a list of trees that should not be planted due to their invasive nature (that is, their ability to escape cultivation or to dominate natural areas) and provide this information to the public and the development community.
- **CAQ-8-Action 7:** Retain the services of a qualified arborist(s) under contract to the City to provide information to decision-makers and staff on the suitability of trees for preservation.
- **CAQ-8-Action 8:** Consider the use of revised standard roadway cross-sections which do not require the removal of trees in order to provide additional roadway capacity.
- **CAQ-8-Action 9:** Provide funds for education, programs, and materials emphasizing the value and importance of trees. Support private foundations with local funds for their tree planting

efforts. Encourage the harvesting of native seeds and plants prior to the clearing of project sites.

- **Policy LU-35:** The City of Elk Grove shall require that new development—including commercial, office, industrial, and residential development—is of high quality and reflects the City’s desire to create a high quality, attractive, functional, and efficient built environment.
- **LU-35-Action 1:** Prepare and adopt Design Guidelines for residential and nonresidential development.
- **LU-35-Action 2:** The Design Guidelines shall include a provision to minimize the use of reflective materials in building design in order to reduce the potential impacts of daytime glare.
- **LU-35-Action 3:** The Citywide Design Guidelines shall include provisions for the design of outdoor light fixtures to be directed/shielded downward and screened to avoid nighttime lighting spillover effects on adjacent land uses and nighttime sky glow conditions.
- **Policy LU-36:** Signs should be used primarily to facilitate business identification, rather than the advertisement of goods and services. Sign size limits and locations should be designated consistent with this policy.
- **LU-36-Action 1:** Amend the City’s Sign Regulations to conform with this policy, adjusting maximum sign sizes, heights, etc.
- **Policy LU-37:** Require the construction of “City of Elk Grove” signage and landscape treatments at major entrances to the city.
- **LU-37-Action 1:** Develop an Entry Monument Master Plan which identifies the location of City entry statements and provides guidelines for the design of these features and their implementation, including funding.
- **Policy LU-38:** Reduce the unsightly appearance of overhead and aboveground utilities.
- **LU-38-Action 1:** To the extent possible, new utility facilities should be located underground. Facilities to be placed underground should include electrical transformers (where consistent with the guidelines of the electrical utility), water backflow preventers, and similar items.
- **LU-38-Action 2:** Require that development on sites with existing overhead utilities be required to place these facilities underground where consistent with the guidelines of the electrical utility.

3.1.4 - Methodology

The impacts related to aesthetics from implementation of the 2003 Elk Grove General Plan were evaluated in the General Plan Environmental Impact Report (EIR). All mitigation measures identified for impacts in the Elk Grove General Plan EIR and adopted by the City continue to remain the responsibility of the City as part of implementation of the General Plan. Consequently, upon approval of any future annexation request for the SOIA Area, those General Plan policies and EIR mitigation measures are assumed to apply to development within the SOIA Area.

Michael Brandman Associates (MBA) evaluated potential project impacts on aesthetics, light, and glare through site reconnaissance and review of applicable plans and policies. MBA personnel visited the project site and surrounding land uses in October 2010 and documented the site conditions through photographs and notation. The County of Sacramento General Plan and the County of Sacramento Zoning Code were reviewed to determine applicable policies for the proposed project.

3.1.5 - Thresholds of Significance

According to Appendix G, Environmental Checklist of the CEQA Guidelines, aesthetics impacts resulting from the implementation of the proposed project would be considered significant if the project would:

- a) Have a substantial adverse effect on a scenic vista.
- b) Substantially damage scenic resources, including, but not limited to, trees, rock outcroppings, and historic building within a state scenic highway.
- c) Substantially degrade the existing visual character or quality of the site and its surroundings.
- d) Create a new source of substantial light or glare which would adversely affect day or nighttime views in the area.

3.1.6 - Project Impacts and Mitigation Measures

This section discusses potential impacts associated with the development of the project and provides mitigation measures where appropriate.

Scenic Vista

Impact AES-1: The proposed project may have a substantial adverse effect on a scenic vista.

Impact Analysis

This impact will evaluate the potential for the proposed project to adversely affect scenic vistas.

A scenic vista is generally considered a view of an area that has remarkable scenery or is a resource that is indigenous to the area. The project site consists primarily of agricultural land uses and relatively flat terrain. Therefore, views of these resources are available from roadways throughout the area, including SR-99 and I-5. Although the current land uses provide views of an agricultural landscape that is representative of the region, the project area does not contain resources that exemplify the agricultural history of the area (such as historic structures or landmarks; see Section 3.5, Cultural Resources).

However, the proposed SOIA does have the potential to indirectly alter the existing scenic vistas of the SOIA Area through the potential for future urbanization of the SOIA Area. The land use assumptions developed in Section 2, Project Description, allow LAFCo to understand probable

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environmental effects that may result from future anticipated growth. Potential indirect impacts on scenic vistas include the following:

- Views of the valley from roadways such as Kammerer Road or Bruceville Road could significantly change. Instead of unobstructed views of the valley floor and distant hillsides, views from many locations could be blocked with the addition of numerous buildings. It is reasonably foreseeable that some of the new buildings will be multi-story, some with heights that exceed the size of existing buildings in the SOIA Area.
- It is reasonably foreseeable that views of the valley, whether from the valley floor (existing residences) or from the surrounding elevations, would no longer be that of a rural and bucolic setting. Views could become that of an urban/suburban environment that is typical of many cities.

Although the proposed SOIA would amend the City's Sphere of Influence boundaries, property within the amended SOI Area would not be within the City's jurisdiction until LAFCo approves future requests for annexation of property. Upon approval of those future requests for annexation, the newly annexed property would be within the City's jurisdiction and subject to applicable City General Plan policies and regulations. General Plan Policy LU-35 and associated action items ensure that new development complies with the City's Design Guidelines. Compliance with these General Plan policies and associated action items would ensure development is consistent with the character of the developed portion of the City. However, the existing character of the SOIA Area would change as the area is developed, and scenic vistas could still be adversely affected by the proposed project. This would be potentially significant impact.

Level of Significance Before Mitigation

Potentially significant impact.

Mitigation Measures

No feasible mitigation measure is available.

Level of Significance After Mitigation

Significant and unavoidable impact.

State Scenic Highways

Impact AES-2: **The project would not block views of scenic resources, including but not limited to trees, rock outcroppings, and historic buildings, within a state scenic highway.**

Impact Analysis

This impact will evaluate the potential for the proposed project to adversely affect scenic resources within a scenic highway.

The California Department of Transportation Scenic Highway Mapping System identifies SR-160 as an officially designated scenic highway. The roadway provides a view of the river to the west and of extensive rich farmland to the east. SR-160 is located approximately 4 miles west of the project site's western boundary, and views of the project site either are obstructed by intervening land uses or have limited visibility from SR-160. Other significant natural features in the project area are the Cosumnes River, which provides natural scenic views, and adjacent agricultural lands, which provide an open visual resource. The riparian habitat associated with the Cosumnes River can be seen east of the project site.

Although the implementation of the SOIA could indirectly result in obstructed views from SR-160 and the loss of trees, potential rock outcroppings, and historic buildings within the view from the roadway, SR-160 is located approximately 4 miles west of the project site's western boundary, and views of the project site either are obstructed by intervening land uses or have limited visibility from SR-160. Therefore, rock outcropping and historic buildings in the SOIA Area cannot readily be seen from the highway, and views of scenic resources within scenic highways would not be altered by the proposed project. Impacts would be less than significant.

Level of Significance Before Mitigation

Less than significant impact.

Mitigation Measures

No mitigation is required.

Level of Significance After Mitigation

Less than significant impact.

Visual Character

Impact AES-3: The proposed project may degrade the visual character of the project site and its surroundings.

Impact Analysis

This impact will evaluate the potential for the proposed project to degrade visual character.

The proposed project includes an application to LAFCo requesting an amendment to the City's existing Sphere of Influence to include areas immediately south and southeast of the City. The land use assumptions developed in Section 2, Project Description, allow LAFCo to understand probable environmental effects that may result from future anticipated growth. If the intensity of development based on the land use assumptions occurs in the future, it would significantly alter—but not necessarily degrade—the visual character of the SOIA Area. The SOIA has the potential to indirectly develop the SOIA Area, an area encompassing approximately 7,869 acres. The rural, open space, agricultural character of the area could reasonably be foreseen to change to that of an urbanized environment. Existing buildings, which are limited in both number and size, would likely be

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demolished and replaced by hundreds of new buildings, potentially with heights that exceed the height of existing development in the SOIA Area. Agricultural fields could be replaced with buildings, roads, parks, and urban landscaping.

Although the proposed SOIA would amend the City's Sphere of Influence boundaries, property within the amended SOI would not be within the City's jurisdiction until LAFCo approves future requests for annexation of property. Upon approval of those future requests for annexation, the newly annexed property would be within the City's jurisdiction and subject to applicable City General Plan policies and regulations. City General Plan Policies CAQ-8 and LU-35 and associated action items would ensure that aesthetically important large trees are retained during development and that new development complies with the City's Design Guidelines. Compliance with these City General Plan policies and action items would ensure development is consistent with the character of the developed portion of the City. However, indirect impacts resulting from this potential future growth would be potentially significant with regard to permanent alteration of visual character of the area from agricultural uses to urban uses.

Level of Significance Before Mitigation

Potentially significant impact.

Mitigation Measures

The following mitigation measure would reduce some impacts related to the alteration of scenic resources. However, land uses and the visual character of the SOIA Area would change with implementation of the proposed SOIA. Therefore, this impact is considered significant and unavoidable.

MM AES-3 At the time of submittal of any application to annex territory within the Sphere of Influence Amendment (SOIA) Area, the City of Elk Grove will impose the following conditions on all discretionary projects: (1) Trees that function as an important part of the City's or a neighborhood's aesthetic character or as natural habitat should be retained to the extent feasible during the development of new structures, roadways (public and private, including roadway widening), parks, drainage channels, and other uses and structures. (2) If trees cannot be preserved on-site, the City may require off-site mitigation or payment of an in-lieu fee. Trees that cannot be preserved shall be replaced either on- or off-site as required by the City, and trees planted for mitigation should be located in the same watershed as the trees that were removed, when feasible.

Level of Significance After Mitigation

Significant and unavoidable impact.

Light and Glare

Impact AES-4: Implementation of the proposed project may result in the introduction of substantial new sources of light and glare.

Impact Analysis

This impact will evaluate the potential for proposed project to introduce new sources of light and glare.

The SOIA Area is primarily agricultural, and sources of light and glare are minimal. Future development of urban uses in the SOIA Area would significantly impact night sky views and increase glare.

The SOIA could indirectly result in the urbanization of an area that is predominantly rural and agricultural. In terms of nighttime views, the change could be significant because large areas with relatively little existing lighting could be replaced with hundreds of buildings and associated lighting. In addition to building lighting, it is reasonably foreseeable that hundreds of streetlights would be installed to serve development, along with the lighting of parking lots, outdoor signage, and recreational facilities. While all of this lighting could be designed to minimize lighting spillover effects, the cumulative effect could be substantial. Since approval of an SOIA by LAFCo indicates that the Commission has designated the revised SOIA Area for future growth, indirect impacts would be potentially significant with regard to increased light and glare.

Although the proposed SOIA would amend the City's Sphere of Influence boundaries, property within the amended SOI Area would not be within the City's jurisdiction until LAFCo approves future requests for annexation of property. Upon approval of those future requests for annexation, the newly annexed property would be within the City's jurisdiction and subject to applicable City General Plan policies and regulations. City General Plan Policy LU-35 Actions 2 and 3 ensure that the City's Design Guidelines include provisions to minimize the use of reflective materials in building design and for the design of outdoor light fixtures to be directed/shielded downward and screened. Compliance with these City General Plan actions would ensure that the increase in light and glare within the SOIA Area is reduced to a less than significant level.

Implementation of Mitigation Measure AES-4 would reduce the increase in light and glare within the SOIA Area by requiring the design to avoid spillover and sky glow impacts.

Level of Significance Before Mitigation

Potentially significant impact.

Mitigation Measures

MM AES-4 At the time of submittal of any application to annex territory within the Sphere of Influence Amendment (SOIA) Area, the City of Elk Grove will impose the following condition on all discretionary projects: All projects in the SOIA Area shall comply

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with the City of Elk Grove's Citywide Design Guidelines by minimizing the use of reflective materials in building design in order to reduce the potential impacts of daytime glare and designing outdoor light fixtures to be directed/shielded downward and screened to avoid nighttime lighting spillover effects on adjacent land uses and nighttime sky glow conditions.

Level of Significance After Mitigation

Less than significant impact.