

3.1 AESTHETICS

This section describes the aesthetic and visual qualities of the SOIA area and provides a qualitative evaluation of the project's potential impacts on the area's visual character, scenic vistas, and scenic resources, as well as potential impacts from light and glare. The analysis includes a description of the existing environmental conditions, the methods used for assessment, and the potential direct and indirect impacts of project implementation.

No comments in response to the Notice of Preparation were received regarding aesthetics.

3.1.1 Environmental Setting

CONCEPTS RELATED TO SCENIC RESOURCES

Visual changes, and whether they are considered adverse, are highly subjective. One person may conclude that any change in a pleasing visual setting is adverse. Others may find the same changes to be acceptable or even an improvement. Further, there are few formal tools available to evaluate changes to the visual environment and conclude significance. This discussion uses general terms and concepts that draw upon the methodologies of the U.S. Forest Service (1995) and the Federal Highway Administration (1981), two of the relatively few public agencies that have formalized visual resource assessment.

In this section, the viewshed is comprised of short-range, medium-range, and long-range views. Short-range views include the immediate foreground (from 0 feet to approximately 300 feet). Medium-range views include everything within the viewer's general vicinity (from approximately 300 feet to about 0.5 mile). Long-range views are anything further than 0.5 mile from the viewer. A scenic vista is a location from which the public can experience unique and exemplary high-quality views, including panoramic views of great breadth and depth.

Scenic or visual resources can include both the natural and built features of the landscape that contribute to the experience and appreciation of the environment by the general public. Therefore, the landscape is understood to include the built environment (i.e., developed features), the natural environment (i.e., undeveloped land in its natural state), and the managed environment (i.e., agriculture and any other use where vegetation provides the dominant visual character, but the uniformity required by farming and the associated infrastructure keep the landscape from appearing completely natural).

Visual Quality

Visual quality is defined as the overall visual impression or attractiveness of an area as determined by the landscape characteristics, including landforms, rock forms, water features, and vegetation patterns. The attributes of line, form, and color combine in various ways to create landscape characteristics whose variety, vividness, coherence, uniqueness, harmony, and pattern contribute to the overall visual quality of an area.

Viewer Exposure

Viewer exposure addresses the variables that affect viewing conditions from potentially sensitive areas. Viewer exposure considers the following factors:

- ▲ landscape visibility;
- ▲ the proximity of viewers to the project;
- ▲ whether the project would be viewed from above, below, or from a level line of sight;

- ▲ whether the line of sight is open and panoramic to the project area or restricted by terrain, vegetation, and/or structures;
- ▲ the duration that the project area would be visible to a particular viewer; and
- ▲ whether the view is publicly accessible, with large numbers of viewers, or is a private view and experienced by a small number of viewers.

Viewer Sensitivity

Viewer sensitivity is the overall measure of the variable receptivity of viewers to adverse visual changes in an existing landscape. Individuals have varying degrees of sensitivity to changes in visual conditions, often depending on the character of the land use from which they are viewing the scene and the overall visual characteristics of the place. In areas of more distinctive visual quality, such as designated scenic roads, parks, and recreation and natural areas, viewer sensitivity is characteristically more pronounced. In areas of more indistinctive visual quality or visual quality that is generally representative of the setting, sensitivity to change tends to be less pronounced. This analysis of viewer sensitivity is based on the combined factors of visual quality before and after project implementation, viewer types and numbers of viewers, and visual exposure to the project.

Light Pollution

Views of the night sky can be an important part of the natural environment, particularly in communities surrounded by extensive open space. Light pollution refers to all forms of unwanted light in the night sky, including glare, light trespass, skyglow, and over-lighting.

The terms “glare” and “skyglow” are used in this analysis to describe the visual effects of lighting. Glare is direct exposure to bright lights. Light that is either emitted directly upward by luminaires or reflected from the ground is scattered by dust and gas molecules in the atmosphere, producing a luminous background known as skyglow. Skyglow is highly variable depending on immediate weather conditions, quantity of dust and gas in the atmosphere, amount of light directed skyward, and the direction from which it is viewed. In poor weather conditions, more particles are present in the atmosphere to scatter the upward-bound light (National Lighting Product Information Program 2007).

EXISTING VISUAL CHARACTER

Regional Viewshed

Sacramento County lies near the center of California’s Central Valley, at the southern end of the Sacramento Valley. Views in the 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.

Project Site

The project is located at the southern boundary of the City of Elk Grove, within an area that has been transforming from rural residential and agricultural uses to suburban uses. Views of the project site from the existing residential areas to the west and north are limited by vegetation and sound walls constructed along Willard Parkway and Bilby Road. Open views of the site are provided to motorists on Bilby Road, Bruceville Road, and Willard Parkway; as well as those recreating at Backer Park north of the site.

Exhibit 3.1-1 shows the location of representative photos taken at the SOIA area. As shown in Exhibit 3.1-2 through Exhibit 3.1-5, the SOIA area is currently graded flat, and used for dry farmed and irrigated croplands. A few rural residences are also present on the SOIA area. The primary visual features of the SOIA area are associated with these uses: several trees, croplands, vineyards, and a few buildings. There are several irrigation canals that occur on the site and power distribution lines are present. The SOIA area has no rock outcroppings and is not located on a state scenic highway.

Views of the site from the southern end of Backer Park are depicted in Exhibits 3.1-2 and 3.1-3. From the center of the park, the view across Bilby Road to the south is open and relatively unobstructed (Exhibit 3.1-2). The area is agricultural in character, with infrastructure (e.g., roads, fence posts, gates, and electrical lines) in the foreground, managed open space in the middle ground, and the rooflines of a few agricultural structures and distant trees in the background. These same general characteristics are true looking southeast from the western end of the park, an area where there is parking available and visitors are likely to observe the site (Exhibit 3.1-3). However, from viewing locations within the park, intervening landscaping partially obstructs views of the site.

From the western edge of the site looking east from Willard Parkway, there are fewer obstructions in the foreground and the site provides open views of agricultural fields with the rooflines of nearby residences partially obstructed by treetops in the distance (Exhibit 3.1-4). Looking northeast, the residences on the north side of Bilby Road are more apparent in the background of the open agricultural fields (Exhibit 3.1-5). From the western edge of the site, views are similar, although more obstructed by the existing residences that front Bruceville Road. Views of the site from the south are limited because the existing agricultural use of the properties limits viewing opportunities to those managing the land. There are no residences or existing cross streets between Franklin Boulevard and Bruceville Road near the southern boundary of the site.

EXISTING VISUAL QUALITY AND VIEWER SENSITIVITY

The site provides views of moderate visual quality. For viewers accustomed to the busy views associated with working and residing in urban and suburban areas, the openness and simplicity of the views of the site from nearby residences, roadways, and Backer Park may be particularly attractive. These viewers are also more likely to reside in the area and are, therefore, more likely to develop a familiarity with the site. Motorists on the adjacent roadways are generally less likely to be sensitive to changes in the character of the site because they pass it relatively quickly, they may not be familiar with the area, and the site is located along roadways that are currently checkered with new developments, established rural homes, and open farmland.

LIGHT AND GLARE

Existing sources of light and reflective surfaces are limited in the SOIA area. Most of the area is used for farming and the use of exterior lighting is generally limited to the area around the rural residences. Light sources outside of the SOIA area include street lights and indoor and outdoor lights associated with the residential land uses to the west and north. Vehicles traveling along Bilby Road and Bruceville Road may also 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.



Exhibit 3.1-1

Location of Representative Viewpoints





Source: Ascent Environmental 2017

Exhibit 3.1-2

Viewpoint 1: South from Henry Backer Sr. Park



Source: Ascent Environmental 2017

X16010132 01 001

Exhibit 3.1-3

Viewpoint 2: Southeast from Henry Backer Sr. Park





Source: Ascent Environmental 2017

Exhibit 3.1-4

Viewpoint 3: East from south end of Willard Parkway



Source: Ascent Environmental 2017

X16010132 01 002

Exhibit 3.1-5

Viewpoint 4: Northeast from south end of Willard Parkway



3.1.2 Regulatory Framework

FEDERAL

No federal plans, policies, regulations, or laws apply to the project.

STATE

California Scenic Highway Program

The California Department of Transportation 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.

State Route 160 (River Road) is a State-designated scenic highway that traverses on top of levees along the Sacramento River from the Contra Costa County line to Sacramento's southern city limit. River Road meanders through the historic Delta agricultural areas and small towns along the Sacramento River. State Route 160 is over 4 miles west of the project site.

LOCAL

The project site lies within the jurisdictional boundaries of Sacramento County; therefore, the County's policies, as well as the Sacramento LAFCo's policies, would apply. Furthermore, if the SOIA is approved, it would likely lead to annexation to the City of Elk Grove. Thus, applicable policies of the City of Elk Grove's General Plan are described below.

Sacramento County General Plan

The following policy from the Sacramento County General Plan would apply to the SOIA.

- ▲ **Policy LU-31:** Strive to achieve a natural nighttime environment and an uncompromised public view of the night sky by reducing light pollution.

Sacramento County Zoning Code

Title 1 (General Provisions) of the Zoning Code contains standards requiring that illumination of buildings, landscaping, signs, and parking and loading areas be shielded and directed so that no light trespasses onto adjacent properties. Title III (Use Regulations and Development Standards) requires that lighting is be directed away from residential areas and public streets so that glare is not produced that could impact the general safety of vehicular traffic and the privacy and well-being of residents.

City of Elk Grove General Plan

The following policies from the City of Elk Grove's General Plan would apply to future annexation and development of the project site.

- ▲ **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 on-site, off-site 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 on-site or off-site as required by the City.

- ▲ **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.
- ▲ **Policy LU-38:** Reduce the unsightly appearance of overhead and aboveground utilities.
- ▲ **Policy PTO-15:** The City views open space lands of all types as important resource which should be preserved in the region, and supports the establishment of multipurpose open space areas to address a variety of needs, including, but not limited to:
 - maintenance of agricultural uses,
 - wildlife habitat,
 - recreational open space,
 - aesthetic benefits, and
 - flood control.

To the extent possible, lands protected in accordance with this policy should be in proximity to Elk Grove, to facilitate use of these areas by Elk Grove residents, assist in mitigation of habitat loss within the city, and provide an open space resource close to the urbanized areas of Elk Grove.

Elk Grove Municipal Code

The City of Elk Grove prioritizes the preservation of existing trees and the historic and aesthetic character of the community, as described in the City General Plan. The City’s tree ordinance contains provisions to preserve existing trees through the development review process and a process for tree replacement where preservation is not reasonably possible. The City considers trees with a diameter at breast height (dbh) of 6 inches or greater, or multi-trunked trees with a combined dbh of 6 inches or greater, of the following species as trees of local importance (Section 19.12.040): coast live oak (*Quercus agrifolia*), valley oak (*Q. lobata*), blue oak (*Q. douglasii*), interior live oak (*Q. wislizenii*), oracle oak (*Q. X moreha*), California sycamore (*Platanus racemosa*), and California black walnut (*Juglans hindsii*). For future development projects, tree removal would be addressed as part of the project application (Section 19.12.090).

The tree ordinance requires that mitigation for tree loss be provided at a ratio of 1-inch dbh of new tree for each inch dbh lost (1:1 ratio), unless alternative mitigation is approved by the City. An applicant for future development would be required to prepare a tree mitigation plan if any trees would be removed. Mitigation options (Section 19.12.160) could include on-site or off-site replacement, payment of an in-lieu fee, preservation of existing trees, or on-site or off-site relocation.

The Elk Grove Zoning Code (Elk Grove Municipal Code Title 23) provides development standards that address building mass, setbacks, landscaping, lighting, and signage to achieve an aesthetically-pleasing appearance.

City of Elk Grove Design Guidelines

The City Design Review process is established under Section 23.16.080 of the City’s Municipal Code. This section and corresponding Elk Grove Design Guidelines established a design review process and guidelines for site planning, architecture, lighting, and landscaping, as well as preservation of significant natural features and compatibility with surrounding property. The City strongly encourages incorporating natural features and using landscaping to reduce the potential impacts of lighting from parking areas on both project areas and adjacent vacant land, and that landscaping be designed to maximize screening and buffering between adjacent uses. Design Review is required for development types listed below.

- ▲ single-family residential subdivision maps;
- ▲ master home plans for single-family residential subdivisions;

- ▲ multi-family residential development; and
- ▲ non-residential development (e.g., commercial, office, industrial, and public/quasi-public development).

Any future development that fell under one of the above categories would undergo Elk Grove Design Review and comply with any Elk Grove conditions of approval.

3.1.3 Environmental Impacts and Mitigation Measures

ANALYSIS METHODOLOGY

Visual impacts were evaluated by comparing the expected visual changes that the project would generate against the existing visual character of the site. Visual character is defined narrowly to include only analysis of viewsheds, physical site characteristics, and lighting. This analysis does not include a subjective evaluation of design characteristics such as colors, architectural styles, building materials, or other matters of personal preference. The analysis assumes that open space and rural areas are typically of higher visual quality than urban areas, because the open character preserves visual continuity (the blending of visual elements) and a farther horizon of sight.

The analysis focuses on views of the project site from offsite sensitive receptors and public viewpoints. In determining the extent and implications of the anticipated visual changes, consideration was given to:

- ▲ existing visual qualities of the affected environment and specific changes in the visual character and qualities of the affected environment;
- ▲ the visual context of the affected environment;
- ▲ the extent to which the affected environment contains places or features that provide unique visual experiences or that have been designated in plans and policies for protection or special consideration; and
- ▲ the sensitivity of viewers, access of viewers, their activities, and the extent to which these activities are related to the aesthetic qualities affected by the project-related changes.

It should be noted that an assessment of visual quality is a subjective matter, and reasonable people can disagree as to whether alteration of visual character would be adverse or beneficial. For this analysis, a conservative approach was taken, and the potential for substantial change to the visual character of the project site is generally considered a significant impact.

THRESHOLDS OF SIGNIFICANCE

Based on Appendix G of the State CEQA Guidelines, a visual resource impact is considered significant if implementation of the project would do any of the following:

- ▲ have a substantial adverse effect on a scenic vista;
- ▲ substantially damage scenic resources, including, but not limited to, trees, rock outcroppings, and historic buildings within a state scenic highway;
- ▲ substantially degrade the existing visual character or quality of the site and its surroundings; or
- ▲ create a new source of substantial light or glare that would adversely affect day or nighttime views in the area.

ISSUES NOT EVALUATED FURTHER

Scenic Vistas

The SOIA area does not include any scenic vistas that have been officially designated by either Sacramento County or the City of Elk Grove. General changes to views of the SOIA area, which provides relatively open, expansive views of agricultural land from public viewing locations (including Backer Park and area roadways) are discussed below with respect to changes in visual quality and community character. There would be no impact to designated scenic vistas, and this impact is not discussed further.

Scenic Resources

Future annexation and development of the SOIA area would not have the potential to affect scenic resources, rock outcroppings, or historic buildings within a State scenic highway. The closest State-designated scenic highway segment is a portion of State Route 160 along the Sacramento River, approximately 4 miles west of the SOIA area. The SOIA area is not visible from the scenic highway segment because of intervening vegetation, development, and Interstate 5. There would be no impact to views from a state-designated scenic highway, and this impact is not discussed further.

IMPACT ANALYSIS

Impact 3.1-1: Substantially degrade the existing visual character or quality of the site and its surroundings.

The visual character surrounding the SOIA area consists of suburban uses that transition to rural residential and agricultural conditions. While approval of the SOIA alone would not result in physical visual changes to the site, future development of the SOIA area could convert the open space character of project site to suburban uses, which would further expand suburban development conditions south of the existing City of Elk Grove. This may substantially alter public views. Because of the size of SOIA area and its location adjacent to agricultural lands in unincorporated Sacramento County, the change in visual character would be considered a **significant** impact.

From public viewing locations, including Backer Park and area roadways, the SOIA area provides relatively open, expansive views of agricultural land. The project site may provide a valuable scenic resource for the general public, and agricultural land is valued by Sacramento County and the City of Elk Grove for its aesthetic properties. Although not completely natural in appearance, the managed environment provides views wherein vegetation provides the dominant visual character.

Residents are generally considered to be the most sensitive to changes in the adjacent visual environment because of their familiarity with the area. Recreationalists may also be more sensitive because they may have an expectation of visual quality. In the case of Backer Park, a suburban sports park, the expectation for natural views is likely low. In addition, the areas of most intense use (i.e., playground, picnic facilities, basketball, and tennis courts) are oriented inward. The southern portion of the park located closest to the SOIA area is used for parking and grass fields.

Views of the site are generally considered to be of moderate visual quality. These views may be valued by residents whose daily exposure to natural areas would be otherwise limited, as well as by motorists familiar with the agricultural aesthetic of the rural areas south of the site. However, exposure to views afforded by the site is generally limited. The existing residential developments are oriented away from the roadways, with sound walls and landscaping that are designed to limit the interface with adjacent properties. Motorist exposure would also be limited because of the relatively low volume of traffic and the speed of travel on adjacent roadways. Individuals recreating at Backer Park would have the most pronounced exposure to the project site; however, views of adjacent open space are not generally core components of an individual's visit to a suburban park where key activities include organized sports and use of the playground.

The SOIA would not directly result in changes to the existing character or quality of the site. However, if the project site is annexed and developed in a manner consistent with the conceptual land use plan, future buildout of the SOIA area would change the perceived visual character and quality of the environment by adding urban elements to a largely agricultural area. Views of open areas would be replaced by views of residential and commercial uses. Residents, motorists, and others who have views of the SOIA area would be affected by these future changes. Agricultural fields could be replaced with buildings, roads, parks, and urban landscaping. Although the current land uses provide views of an agricultural landscape that is of moderate quality and representative of the region, the project area does not contain resources that exemplify the agricultural history of the area; nor are viewers considered to have extended exposure or particular sensitivity to changes in views of the project site.

Nevertheless, development would entail a significant change from the existing visual character of the site and an individual's response to such changes can be variable and highly personal. Further, because LAFCo would not have direct authority over the design of subsequent development, the consistency of the character of such development with adjacent land uses cannot be assured. This impact would be **significant**.

Mitigation Measure 3.1-1: Design future projects consistent with City development standards.

At the time of any application to annex territory within the Bilby Ridge SOIA area, the City of Elk Grove shall require that the applicants demonstrate compliance with the City's Design Guidelines in effect at the time of the annexation application or the establishment of its own design guidelines that are consistent with the City's Design Guidelines to ensure that future development will be compatible with the desired character of the City and to ensure physical, visual, and functional compatibility between uses. Evidence of compliance with this mitigation measure shall be provided in the annexation application to LAFCo.

Significance after Mitigation

The City of Elk Grove has policies in place to preserve the aesthetic quality and character of areas within its jurisdiction. These include Policy CAQ-8, which requires avoidance or replacement of large trees, and Policies LU-35 and LU-38, which require that new development is attractive and the appearance of aboveground utilities is reduced. Implementation of Mitigation Measure 3.1-1 and Mitigation Measure 3.4-4 (preservation and mitigation of trees) would ensure that future development would be compatible with adjoining development in the City through requiring development design consistent with the character of the City and retain trees considered important to the City. However, future development of the Bilby Ridge SOIA would still result in the conversion of 480 acres of open space and agricultural land to suburban development. While minimized to the degree feasible through the local land use agency's control, effects on the visual character and quality of the site would be **significant and unavoidable** because of the substantial alteration of the existing visual character of the SOIA area from future development once annexation occurs.

Impact 3.1-2: Create a new source of substantial light or glare.

The SOIA would not result in any changes in existing land uses and, as such, would not result in new sources of substantial light or glare. If the site is annexed and developed in the future, development could result in the introduction of buildings and facilities that may create lighting and glare on adjoining areas. This impact would be **significant**.

The SOIA would not result in any changes in existing land uses and, as such, would not result in new sources of substantial light or glare. As such, it would be consistent with Policy LU-31 in the Sacramento County General Plan related to preserving the natural nighttime environment and reducing light pollution. The following analysis considers the potential for the creation of light and glare if the project site is annexed and developed in a manner consistent with the conceptual land use plan in the future.

The development of the project site would introduce new sources of daytime glare (e.g., sunlight reflecting from structures and other reflective surfaces and windows) and nighttime lighting (e.g., new residential developments, street lighting, parking lot lights, and security related lighting for nonresidential uses). Daytime glare would have the greatest adverse effects adjacent undeveloped land. In existing residential areas and on

adjacent roadways, the relatively small amount of glare generated by reflection off of typical buildings constructed in a manner consistent with the City of Elk Grove's standards is unlikely to substantially affect use of the area. In the agricultural area to the south, there are no existing receptors near the site and the area is unlikely to be substantially affected by any increase in glare produced by future development.

Future projects would be required to limit outdoor lighting, which would be directed downward and shielded to minimize light spillover and skyglow, and to minimize the use of reflective materials in building design, as described in Elk Grove Zoning Code 23.56 and General Plan LU-35 Action 2 and LU-35 Action 3. Compliance with City General Plan policies, zoning regulations, and design guidelines would minimize lighting and glare. However, future development would still create a new source of light and glare and would adversely affect day and nighttime views in the area that currently do not exist. This impact would be **significant**.

Mitigation Measure 3.1-2: Design development to reduce lighting and glare.

At the time of any application to annex territory within the Bilby Ridge SOIA area, the City of Elk Grove shall require that the applicants demonstrate compliance with the City's Design Guidelines and City Municipal Code standards in effect at the time of the project approval associated with reflective building materials and lighting fixture design and orientation that avoid day time glare and nighttime spillover effects on adjacent areas and nighttime sky glow conditions. Compliance with this mitigation measure may be combined with Mitigation Measure 3.1-1 and shall be provided in the annexation application to LAFCo.

Significance after Mitigation

Complying with Mitigation Measure 3.1-2 would reduce potential glare and adverse effects related to lighting. However, development would still require lighting for security and other purposes that would expand the footprint of suburban lighting conditions associated with the City. This would still contribute to skyglow. Further, compliance with City design guidelines and standards would not necessarily completely eliminate glare in all circumstances. There is no additional feasible mitigation to completely offset this impact. Thus, impacts have been determined to be **significant and unavoidable**.