

2.6 Visual/Aesthetics

2.6.1 Regulatory Setting

The NEPA of 1969 as amended establishes that the federal government will use all practicable means to ensure all Americans safe, healthful, productive, and aesthetically (emphasis added) and culturally pleasing surroundings (42 USC 4331[b][2]). To further emphasize this point, the FHWA in its implementation of NEPA (23 USC 109[h]) directs that final decisions on projects are to be made in the best overall public interest, taking into account adverse environmental impacts including, among others, the destruction or disruption of aesthetic values.

CEQA establishes that it is the policy of the State to take all action necessary to provide the people of the state “with... enjoyment of aesthetic, natural, scenic and historic environmental qualities” (California Public Resources Code [PRC] Section 21001[b]).

2.6.2 Affected Environment

The information in this section is based on the Visual Impact Assessment (VIA) (October 2018).

2.6.2.1 Visual Setting

The project location and setting provide for the context for determining the type of changes to the existing visual environment. The proposed project is located on SR 55 between just north of the I-5/SR 55 interchange and just south of the SR 55/SR 91 interchange, in the cities of Anaheim, Orange, Santa Ana, and Tustin in Orange County, California (See Figure 1.1-1). The project is located less than 3 miles east of the Santa Ana River, around the Santa Ana Valley of Southern California. The landscape is characterized by man-made development, with the majority of structures consisting of living, working, and business buildings, roads, and utilities. The land use within the corridor or project corridor is primarily urban that is developed with freeways (SR 55 and SR 22) and residential, commercial, and industrial uses such as hospitals, a church, schools, parks, and offices. The project corridor is defined as the area of land that is visible from, adjacent to, and outside the highway right-of-way and is determined by topography, vegetation, and viewing distance. SR 55 is not a designated State Scenic Highway, nor is it labeled as any other type of view corridor. SR 55 also does not include any scenic resources.

Visual Resources and Resource Change

Visual resources of the project setting are defined and identified below by assessing visual character and visual quality in the project corridor. Resource change is assessed by evaluating the visual character and the visual quality of the visual resources that comprise the project corridor before and after the construction of the proposed project.

The visual character of the proposed project will be compatible with the existing visual character of the corridor.

Key View #1

The existing view along northbound and southbound SR 55 between 4th Street and 17th Street is below grade of the surrounding facilities (Figure 2.6-1). It consists of a wide, 10-lane freeway with existing retaining walls of varying height, evenly landscaped slopes, protruding trees along the outer limits, tall buildings to the left, and a distant view of hilltops in the background. The strong lines of the existing lanes on the freeway draw the eyes directly toward the hills in the distance and contrast with the soft and irregular shapes of the surrounding vegetation. The proposed retaining wall along southbound SR 55 between 4th Street and 17th Street will be pushed out 10 to 15 feet, parallel to the existing walls, thus maintaining similar forms, lines, colors, and textures and height within the area. The existing 17th Street northbound on-ramp auxiliary lane will be realigned to the east, but within this view it will not be seen.

Key View #2

The southbound SR 55 Katella Avenue off-ramp consists of an aesthetically treated retaining wall to the left of the view with heavily tree-lined canopies behind it and a uniform, sloped landscape to the right, adjacent to the freeway underpass (Figure 2.6-2). Between the bottom of the slope and the edge of the travel way is an existing storm drain. The existing utility lines and poles behind the trees create uniform lines across the left of the view. In this view, the proposed widening of the southbound SR 55 Katella Avenue off-ramp will cut into the existing landscape but will not visually compromise any vertical elevation characteristics. The additional lane will be continuous of the existing road elevation and angle. The storm drain will most likely need to be relocated 15 feet below the existing ramp.

Key View #3

The existing Park and Ride lot is located at the northeast corner of the on-ramp southbound SR 55 and North Tustin Avenue intersection (Figure 2.6-3). The SR 55 freeway is approximately 25 feet above grade of the existing Park and Ride lot with a sloped landscaped buffer and a 4-foot retaining wall adjacent to the sidewalk. The street median, retaining wall, lot elevation, top of slope, and freeway ramp all create horizontal lines across the view. The existing utility poles encroach into the horizontal lines and break up what could be a strong horizontal element. The existing trees soften the view. The proposed relocation of the Lincoln Avenue southbound off-ramp proposes a new off-ramp bridge that will cut into the side of the existing slope and gradually descend to intersect with North Tustin Street. A new retaining wall will extend from the sidewalk of Lincoln Avenue to the edge of the middle of the existing Park and Ride lot. It will start at 20 feet high and taper down to 4 feet tall. Another proposed retaining wall will be at the top of the slope, parallel to the existing Park and Ride lot. It will start at 14 feet tall and taper down to 4 feet tall.

Key View #4

The existing southbound SR 55 Lincoln Avenue off-ramp is located about 1,300 feet north of the existing Park and Ride lot located at the northeast corner of the on-ramp southbound SR 55 and North Tustin Avenue (Figure 2.6-4). North of this off-ramp, the existing SR 55 freeway is below grade of North Tustin Street. South of this off-ramp, existing SR 55 is above grade of north past the proposed southbound Lincoln Avenue off-ramp location. At this key view location, the off-ramp is located to the left and SR 55 is elevating in the background on the right.

Figure 2.6-1. Key View 1



This location was taken from the 17th St bridge freeway overcrossing. This view looks directly south down the SR 55 freeway. The 17th St NB on-ramp is located to the left of this view.



Visual simulation of the proposed roadway widening. In this view, an additional lane is added to each NB and SB SR 55 and new retaining walls are proposed.

KEY VIEW #1

SR-55 IMPROVEMENT PROJECT

Figure 2.6-2. Key View 2



This view looks north towards the SB SR 55 Katella off-ramp.



Visual simulation of the proposed roadway widening. In this view, an additional lane is added to the SB SR 55 Katella Ave. off-ramp and the storm drain is relocated to beyond the proposed inside shoulder.

KEY VIEW #2

SR-55 IMPROVEMENT PROJECT

Figure 2.6-3. Key View 3



Park and Ride lot: This view looks towards the northeast corner of the SB 55 on-ramp on N Tustin St.



Visual simulation of the proposed Lincoln Ave. off-ramp relocation.

KEY VIEW #3
SR-55 IMPROVEMENT PROJECT

Figure 2.6-4. Key View 4



SB SR 55 off-ramp: This view looks towards the Lincoln Ave. SB SR 55 off-ramp at N Tustin St.



Visual simulation of the proposed relocation of the Park and Ride lot.

KEY VIEW #4
SR-55 IMPROVEMENT PROJECT

The proposed Park and Ride lot limits will be constructed on the existing off-ramp, extending past the existing utility pole. A proposed crosswalk and vehicular entrance to the Park and Ride lot are also proposed, but the existing median will remain untouched. The start of the proposed off-ramp relocation will be slightly visible in this view, as it runs parallel to SR 55.

Viewer Groups

Neighbors (people with views to the road) and highway users (people with views from the road) are the primary view groups associated with the proposed project. The public views to the project site include motorists along SR 55 and commercial users across from the existing Park and Ride lot along North Tustin Avenue and Lincoln Avenue. Motorists' (highway users') views of the project corridor mostly consist of the wide, 10-lane freeway, existing retaining walls with aesthetic treatment, utility poles and lines, and tree canopies protruding from behind the retaining walls in the distance and adjacent to the walls. In some sections of the freeway where there are no retaining walls, the motorists' views will change to include commercial and residential buildings. Viewers outside the project corridor (neighbors) have limited views because the existing SR 55 freeway is either several feet below grade of the surrounding facilities where the views are mostly screened by existing retaining walls, or it is at least several feet above grade of surrounding facilities. Retail, commercial, and recreational users near the existing Lincoln Avenue off-ramp and Park and Ride lot will have minor views of the proposed relocation of the off-ramp, if any. However, these viewer activities do not have long exposure to the adjacent freeway because viewers' focus would be on active tasks such as ordering coffee, getting gas, or buying a car instead of passive tasks such as sightseeing or relaxing by the road.

Viewer Response

Viewer response measures the change in viewer exposure and viewer sensitivity. Viewer response predicts how the public might react to visual changes brought about by physical changes resulting from the Build Alternative. The resulting level of visual impact is determined by averaging the severity of the resource change with the degree to which people are likely to be affected by the change. Viewer exposure is determined by the number of viewers who would be exposed to views of the Build Alternative, with a combination of factors such as the viewer's activity, distance from the view, and duration of the view. Motorists (highway users) would hardly notice the changes from the Build Alternative because the widening would be accompanied by a retaining wall in similar design, color, and height. The speeds at which the motorists are driving would be too fast for them to be distracted or take much notice of any minor changes. Retail, community, and recreational viewers would have limited exposure to the Park and Ride lot because the nearby development is several feet below grade of the adjacent street; thus their exposure would be distant and short, if any.

Viewer sensitivity is defined both as the viewers' concern for scenic quality and their response to changes in the visual resources that make up the view. The elements that are taken into account are viewer activity, local values, and cultural significance. Motorists have low sensitivity to the existing project corridor because it does not have any scenic highway qualities. The retaining walls help to keep the freeway corridor uniform and harmonious and will be replaced with a similar retaining wall. Retail and commercial viewer sensitivity to the existing project limits are low because of limited exposure and lack of elements having scenic qualities.

2.6.3 Environmental Consequences

2.6.3.1 Temporary Impacts

Build Alternative

Construction of the SR 55 Improvement Project would directly result in temporary visual changes as a result of clearing and grubbing, grading, hauling dirt, paving and other construction activities. Construction of the project would result in views of construction equipment, staging areas, and stockpiles. The Build Alternative between 4th Street and 17th Street on the southbound side of SR 55 to facilitate construction of a retaining wall would require removal of a portion of a carport at the apartment complex. This location is not within key views and no loss of scenic resources would occur. Vegetation is generally non-native and does not substantially contribute to the overall visual character and quality of key views. After construction is completed, temporary impacts would end. Because construction impacts are temporary and disturbed areas would be revegetated upon completion of construction, no permanent change in or indirect effect to visual character and quality would occur. The potential visual impacts during construction of the Build Alternative would be minimal.

No Build Alternative

The No Build Alternative would not include the construction of any of the project improvements on SR 55 and, therefore, would not result in direct or indirect changes in views to/from the project segment of SR 55.

2.6.3.2 Permanent Impacts

Build Alternative

The visual quality of the existing corridor will be slightly altered by the proposed project. The proposed Build Alternative in Figure 2.6-1, Key View 1, and Figure 2.6-2, Key View 2, are shown to be minor and subtle. The proposed elements are continuous with the existing infrastructure and do not encroach or obstruct any existing views or elements. The visual quality for all key views will be harmonious, orderly, and coherent with the existing visual quality. The proposed Build Alternative for Key Views 1 and 2 maintains a very similar composition to the existing infrastructure and thus has very little impact on vividness. The existing elements will remain intact and have unity with the proposed elements.

In Figure 2.6-3, Key View 3, and Figure 2.6-4, Key View 4, the proposed Build Alternative will increase in vividness but still maintain its compositional elements. The proposed built elements will be compatible with the existing surrounding environment. The scale, form, colors, and texture will maintain the visual integrity of the project. The proposed off-ramp relocation will keep similar characteristics to those along the street level corridor adjacent to the SR 55 freeway. The proposed off-ramp relocation will also be adjacent to the existing on-ramp location, unifying the structural elements of the highway.

The proposed Build Alternative would result in low changes to both visual character and visual quality, thus resulting in an overall low resource change. In addition, the average response of the viewer groups is anticipated to be low. Indirect or secondary impacts are not anticipated to occur.

The following Project Features have been identified to further enhance visual quality within the corridor:

PF-VIS-1: Architectural treatments and features will be included in the final project design to minimize the loss of, and improve the visual quality on, the project segment of SR 55. The architectural treatments will be developed for retaining walls and noise barriers consistent with the Master Plan of Freeway and Transit Corridor Enhancements: Creating a Quality Environment along Orange County's Transportation Network. All wall architectural treatments will be submitted to the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) District Landscape Architect for review and approval. During construction, the construction contractor will implement the architectural treatments as shown in the project specifications.

PF-VIS-2: During final design, a landscape architect will prepare a Landscape Plan to address landscape treatment within the State right-of-way along the project segment of SR 55. The Landscape Plan will be submitted to the Caltrans District Landscape Architect for review and approval. During construction, the construction contractor will implement the provisions of the approved Landscape Plan as shown in the project specification. The Landscape Plan may include some of the following:

- Identifying/defining the minimum standards for providing landscaping: available land, no conflicts with traffic operations and safety, safe access for maintenance and trash removal, and access to irrigation and water if needed
- Identifying landscaping and hardscape concepts and materials to maintain or improve the visual character of the existing landscaping in the SR 55 right-of-way from south of I-5 to SR 91, including the mainline, ramps, and along noise barriers and retaining walls. The hardscape concepts and materials shall be consistent with the *Master Plan of Freeway and Transit Corridor Enhancements: Creating a Quality Environment along Orange County's Transportation Network* (Dames & Moore 1995)
- Incorporating applicable procedures and requirements in the Caltrans Highway Design Manual, Section 902.1, Planting Guidance (Caltrans 2016d)
- Using drought-resistant plants and xeric (adapted to arid conditions) landscaping techniques
- Providing low-maintenance, erosion-control groundcover species and low-height shrubs in the palette to preserve existing views and prevent erosion
- Providing landscaping as soon as possible in the construction process to minimize bare soil and potential erosion effects
- Ensuring that the landscape plant palette conforms with adopted Caltrans standard specifications
- Replacing landscaping on the TCEs. The Landscape Plan will require coordination with the owners of the TCEs regarding replacement landscaping to its original or better condition after completion of use.

No Build Alternative

The No Build Alternative would not include the construction of any of the project improvements on SR 55 and, therefore, would not result in changes in views to/from the project segment of SR 55. No indirect or secondary impacts on visual resources would result from implementation of the No Build Alternative. Therefore, the No Build Alternative would not result in long-term visual impacts on and in the vicinity of the project segment of SR 55.

2.6.4 Avoidance, Minimization, and/or Mitigation Measures

The project will incorporate the Project Features PF-VIS-1 and PF-VIS-2, outlined above in Section 2.6.3, Environmental Consequences, to help avoid and/or minimize potential impacts. No additional avoidance, minimization, and/or mitigation measures other than the Standard Project Features are required.