

2.5 Visual/Aesthetics

2.5.1 Regulatory Setting

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969, as amended, establishes that the federal government use all practicable means to ensure all Americans safe, healthful, productive, and aesthetically (emphasis added) and culturally pleasing surroundings (42 United States Code [USC] 4331[b][2]). To further emphasize this point, the Federal Highway Administration (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.

The California Environmental Quality Act (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 Section 21001[b]).

2.5.2 Affected Environment

This information in this section is based on the *Visual Impact Assessment* (VIA) (2017) and *Visual Impact Assessment Technical Report Addendum* (VIA Addendum) (2018). The VIA followed the methodology in the Federal Highway Administration’s (FHWA) Guidelines for Visual Impact Assessment of Highway Projects (January 2015). Additional details on the methodology are provided in the VIA. The VIA Addendum addresses minor alterations to the components of the Build Alternative identified after completion of the VIA.

2.5.2.1 Visual Setting

The proposed project’s location establishes the context for determining the impact of proposed changes to the existing visual setting. The proposed project is located in a developed urban area in Orange County, which is surrounded by Laguna Coast Wilderness Park to the west, Aliso and Wood Canyons Regional Park to the east and southeast. State Route 133 (SR-133), within the project limits, winds through Laguna Canyon and is surrounded by mounding hills and natural vegetation consisting of grasslands, coastal sage scrub plants, and rock outcroppings. The project area 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. Figure 2.5-1 shows the location of the proposed Build Alternative along the existing SR-133 and Key View Points within the project area.

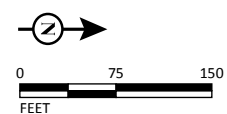
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FIGURE 2.5-1

LEGEND

- Project Area
- Key View Location



SOURCE: Bing (2017); Caltrans (2018)

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SR-133 Improvement Project

Key View Points

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2.5.2.2 Visual Character

Existing and proposed view conditions from the Key View Points identified in Figure 2.5-1 are shown on Figure 2.5-2. The Key View Points include the following: (1) section view just south of the El Toro Road intersection looking north along SR-133, (2) view just south of the El Toro Road intersection looking west at Laguna Coast Wilderness Park, (3) section view north of the El Toro Road intersection looking north along SR-133 with views of State Route 73 (SR-73) in the background, and (4) view north of the El Toro Road intersection looking south along SR-133 of the existing shoulder with existing dry and storm conditions. As shown in Figures 2.5-1 and 2.5-2, the visual character of the viewshed is characterized by rocky bluff towers above canyon trails that lead through oak and sycamore woodlands and up into ridges with expansive vistas. Coastal sage scrub vegetation covers hilltops and slopes along with patches of native grasslands and maritime chaparral. Large rock formations and mature native oak trees are visible in the foreground and rolling hills are present as in the background. The primary land use within the project area is a conventional highway through a flat rural land with limited scattered residential. Anneliese's Schools is located south of El Toro Road on the northbound side of Laguna Canyon Road within a rural area. Views to and from the project corridor of SR-133 consist of open space hills and ridgelines associated with Laguna Coast Wilderness Park, and Aliso and Wood Canyons Regional Park. Although the project area is not an eligible or designated State Scenic Highway, Laguna Canyon Road is designated as a Viewscape Corridor in the Scenic Highways Plan Map within the Transportation Element of the County's General Plan. El Toro Road is also designated as a Viewscape Corridor in the Scenic Highway Plan Map. SR-133, within the limits of the City of Laguna Beach, has also been identified as a scenic highway within the Scenic Highways Element of the City's General Plan.

2.5.2.3 Visual Quality

Visual quality is evaluated by identifying the vividness, intactness, and unity present in the project corridor. Public attitudes validate the assessed level of quality and predict how changes to the project area can affect these attitudes. This process helps identify specific methods for addressing each visual impact that may occur as a result of the Build Alternative. The three criteria for evaluating visual quality are defined below:

- Vividness is the extent to which the landscape is memorable and is associated with distinctive, contrasting, and diverse visual elements.

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Existing Conditions
Key View Point #1



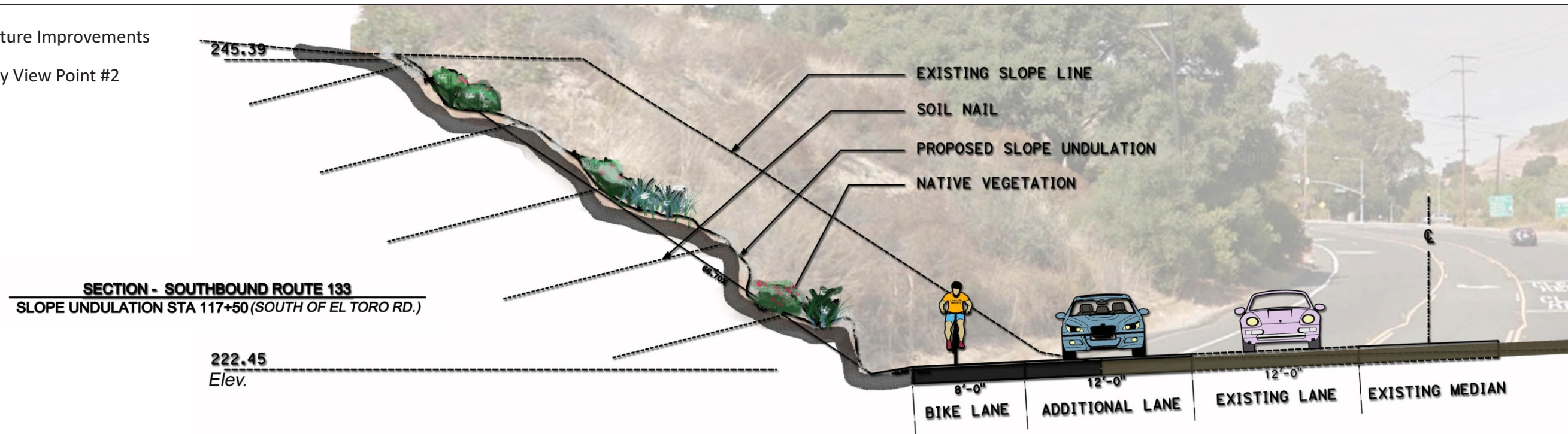
Proposed Conditions
Key View Point #1



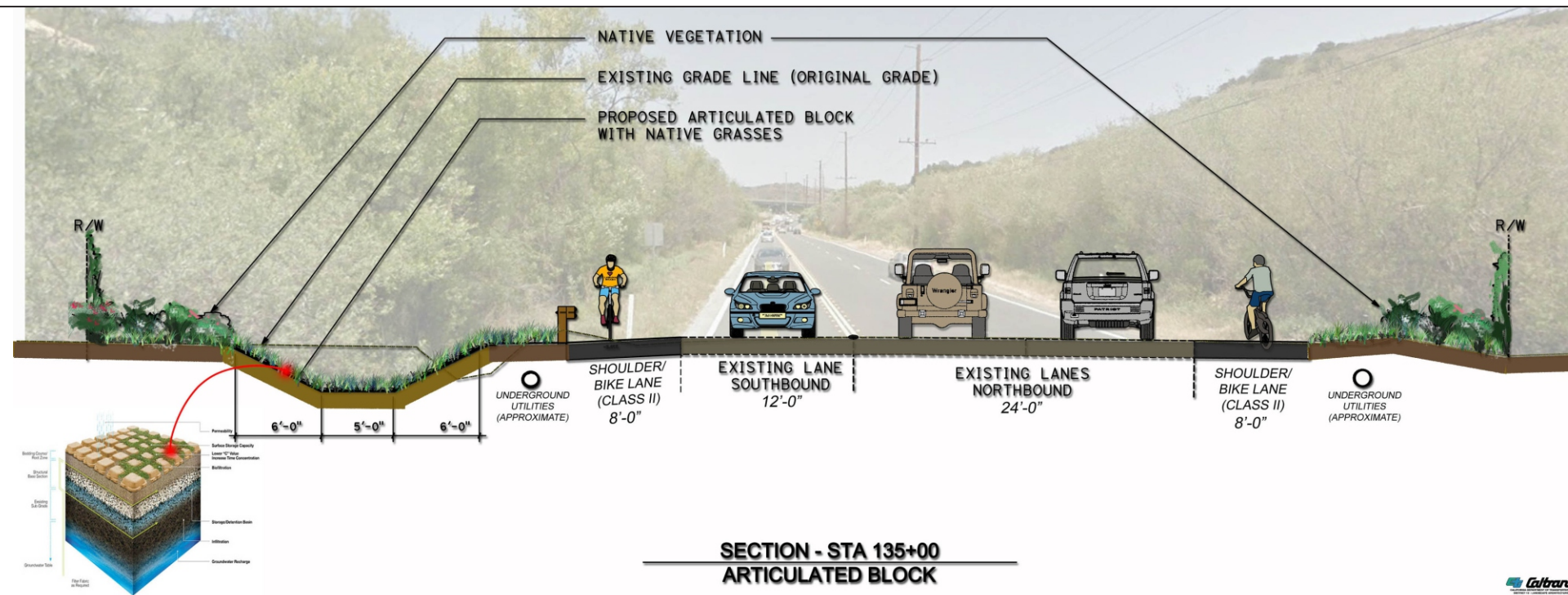
FIGURE 2.5-2
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Key View Point #2



Key View Point #3

FIGURE 2.5-2
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SR-133 Improvement Project
Existing and Proposed Conditions
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Existing Conditions

Key View Point #4



Storm Conditions



Proposed Conditions

Key View Point #4



FIGURE 2.5-2
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- Intactness is the integrity of visual features in the landscape and the extent to which the existing landscape is free from non-typical visual intrusions.
- Unity is the extent to which all visual elements combine to form a coherent, harmonious visual pattern.

The roadway viewshed includes canyon walls, dirt shoulders, existing drainages and overhead utility poles on the sides of the roadway. Factors contributing to vividness include visual patterns of the canyon landscape, characterized by harmony among the natural topography, native vegetation, rock outcrops, and open space. The natural visual setting creates a sense of unity for highway viewers and highway users. The presence of overhead utility poles does detract from the vividness of the natural topography and vegetation.

2.5.2.4 Viewer Groups

The primary viewer groups in the project area include motorists traveling along SR-133 and/or El Toro Road and visitors to the nearby Laguna Coast Wilderness Park. Other viewers likely to be affected by visual changes associated with the Build Alternative include community residents traveling to and from Anneliese School, and/or visitors to the nearby Aliso and Wood Canyons Regional Park.

2.5.2.5 Viewer Response

Viewer response is a measure or prediction of the viewer's reaction to changes in the visual environment. Each viewer group has its own particular level of viewer exposure and viewer sensitivity, resulting in distinct and predictable visual concerns for each group that help to predict the groups' responses to visual changes.

Viewer Exposure

Viewer exposure is the degree to which viewers are exposed to a view by physical location, number of community viewers, and duration of views. The average viewer exposure of the project area would be moderate-low for both motorist and community residents viewer groups due to the short duration these groups would be exposed to the viewshed by traveling through the project area. As the project area is along SR-133, there are no public views beyond those provided on the roadway that would allow for longer viewer exposure.

Viewer Sensitivity

Viewer sensitivity is defined both as the viewers' concern for scenic quality and the viewers' response to change in the visual resources that make up the view. Sensitive viewers in the project area include motorists traveling along SR-133 and El Toro

Road entering and exiting the City of Laguna Beach, community residents traveling to and from Anneliese School, or visitors traveling to the surrounding recreation facilities at Laguna Coast Wilderness Park and Aliso and Wood Canyons Wilderness Park. As a result, viewer sensitivity in the project area is considered moderate-high.

Average Viewer Response

The narrative descriptions of viewer exposure and viewer sensitivity for each viewer group were merged to establish the average viewer response of all viewer groups. It is anticipated that the average viewer response of all viewer groups is moderate based on the moderate-low exposure and moderate-high sensitivity discussed above. Viewer response for the two viewer groups is summarized in Table 2.5.1.

Table 2.5.1 Viewer Response Summary

Viewer Group	Viewer Sensitivity	Viewer Exposure	Viewer Response
Motorists	Moderate-High	Moderate-Low	Moderate
Community Residents	Moderate-High	Moderate-Low	Moderate

Source: Minor Level *Visual Impact Assessment* (2017) and *VIA Addendum* (2018).

2.5.3 Environmental Consequences

2.5.3.1 Temporary Impacts

Alternative 1 (Build Alternative)

Temporary visual effects from construction activities would occur under the Build Alternative including: vegetation removal, staging activities, truck hauling, dust control, and excavation activity. Although visual effects from construction would not be entirely avoided, to some extent to highway neighbors and highway users, avoidance and minimization would not be necessary during the construction period due to the temporary nature of these effects. Visual effects from construction activities would also be short-term and temporary in nature. Once construction is complete, all temporarily disturbed areas would be restored and/or revegetated with appropriate native habitat according to Project Feature PF-LU-1 and Measure PR-4 described in Section 2.1 (Land Use). In addition, areas temporarily disturbed will be restored with native shrubs and grasses according to Measure BIO-2, as described in Section 2.13 (Natural Communities). In addition, the slope along the southbound side of SR-133, south of the El Toro Road intersection would be restored and revegetated in accordance with Measure PR-4. Permanent highway planting and replacement planting would be implemented as Project Feature PF-VIS-1, as described in further detail, below. No adverse temporary visual effects would occur as a result of construction of the Build Alternative.

Alternative 2 (No Build Alternative)

The No Build Alternative would not include the construction of any of the project improvements within the project area and, therefore, would not result in changes in views to/from the project segment of SR-133. Therefore, the No Build Alternative would not result in short-term visual impacts.

2.5.3.2 Permanent Impacts

Alternative 1 (Build Alternative)

The Build Alternative includes four components: a concrete check dam located within the on-ramp loop for southbound SR-73, safety improvements, shoulder widening for a Class II bike lane and trapezoidal channel, and utility undergrounding.

Resource Change

Resource change, which represents change in visual resources as measured by changes in visual character and visual quality, is described in the following subsections. Resource change would be moderate-low as a result of the proposed improvements as described below.

Visual Character

Visual character includes attributes such as form, line, color, and texture, and is used to describe but not evaluate those attributes. That is, these attributes are considered neither good nor bad. However, a change in visual character can be evaluated when it is compared with the viewer response to that change. Changes in visual character can be identified by how visually compatible a proposed project would be with the existing condition by using visual character attributes as an indicator. For this project, the following attributes were considered:

- **Form:** Visual mass or shape
- **Line:** Edges or linear definition
- **Color:** Reflective brightness (light, dark) and hue (red, green)
- **Texture:** Surface coarseness
- **Dominance:** Position, size, or contrast
- **Scale:** Apparent size as it relates to the surroundings
- **Diversity:** A variety of visual patterns
- **Continuity:** Uninterrupted flow of form, line, color, or textural pattern

The visual character of the Build Alternative would be compatible with the existing visual character of SR-133. The proposed road widening would appear

similar to the existing roadway, and the utility undergrounding would improve visibility and enhance the open space character of the site by removing these urban features. In addition, to avoid impacts to the visual character of the site from removal of the existing boundary fencing of Laguna Coast Wilderness Park, Measure PR-4 states that Caltrans shall install new boundary fencing to match existing cable strand fencing.

The cross-section graphics provided for Key View Points 2 and 3 in Figure 2.5-2 include the proposed graded slopes, vegetation, drainage, widened shoulders, and the Class II bike lane. The check dam and drainage improvements would be located in an area that is below the line of sight for vehicles and would be barely visible from the roadway. In addition, these drainage improvements would connect with the existing drainage facilities, providing continuity. The shoulder widening would require contouring and grading of the slope along the southbound side of SR-133, south of the El Toro Road intersection. While this graded slope would require ground disturbance and vegetation removal, as shown in Figure 2.5-2, it has been designed with undulating pockets providing for native vegetation. Therefore, this graded slope would conform to the surrounding topography and aesthetics with native vegetation and hilly terrain. In addition, the existing mature oak tree located on this slope would be preserved in place if feasible. Caltrans is considering a hybrid option that would include a combination of a low retaining wall/minimal slope grading (in lieu of the 1.5:1 slope as discussed above) to minimize impacts near the intersection of El Toro Road. This would further reduce impacts to oak trees and the visual character of the canyon. However, engineering studies pertaining to the feasibility of this option are still pending. With minimization measure VIS-2, “Caltrans will continue to coordinate with OC Parks during the design phase to finalize details”, visual impacts would be minimized. The proposed drainage improvements would be designed with articulated blocks to allow for native grasses to be established, as shown in Figure 2.5-2, reducing the visual appearance of the concrete channel. The proposed shoulder widening and utility undergrounding would require the removal of trees and shrubs; however, this vegetation removal would expose greater views of the canyon walls and rock outcroppings.

Although the developed roadway would appear wider with shoulders/bike lanes on each side, overall incorporation of the proposed project would improve the visual character of the canyon while preserving, enhancing its visual landscape with positive changes to visual resources. These pattern elements would remain

similar year-round, with little seasonal change to the mostly evergreen vegetation. Therefore, changes to the visual character of the project area as a result of the Build Alternative would be moderate to low. There would be no change to the visual character of the canyon beyond the proposed improvements and no adverse effects would occur as a result of the Build Alternative.

The Build Alternative does not include any new lighting features. As stated in Measure VIS-1 in Section 2.5.4, the proposed new galvanized railing of the Midwest Guardrail System (MGS) would be stained with a natural color tan/brown color to unify the appearance of the MGS with its surroundings and would not constitute a source of daytime or nighttime glare for highway users. Therefore, the Build Alternative would have no effect related to light and glare.

Visual Quality

The visual quality of the project area would not be altered by the improvements associated with the Build Alternative. The roadway viewshed from the bottom of the canyon encompasses the roadway views to the tops of the hills on both sides of the canyon. Factors that can contribute to visual quality, including vividness and unity, or memorability of visual impressions and harmonious visual patterns of landscape of the canyon would remain unchanged. Various textural elements, including natural topography, native vegetation, rock outcroppings and open spaces of the canyon, would remain visible and create a sense of unity for surrounding viewers.

Undergrounding of utilities would increase the visibility of these rural textural elements. Undergrounding of the existing overhead utility lines would remove an urban feature from the rural landscape within this portion of Laguna Canyon, thus improving the quality of viewshed experienced by drivers or bicyclists. As described above, the color and staining or oxidizing of the MGS would reduce visual effects of this new manmade feature in the Study Area. Although removal of some native vegetation and oak trees would be required to accommodate the road widening, the existing mature oak tree located on the proposed slope grading would be preserved in place if feasible, and the slope would be planted with native vegetation. The removal of one Utility Company Access Point (UCAP) at Station 121+00 (southbound direction just south of El Toro Road) would further lessen impacts to oak trees and visual quality. In addition, power poles would be undergrounded for the road widening to improve safety while increasing clear visibility. The visual quality would be changed slightly or not at all; therefore, the

overall resource change would be low. Project Feature PF-VIS-1 would minimize visual effects within the existing corridor potentially caused by the loss of existing vegetation.

PF-VIS-1 Landscaping/Plantings. Replacement planting will be included in final design to compensate for the loss of existing vegetation, including trees, removed during construction. Vegetation removed for roadway widening will be replaced with native plants similar to existing plant communities.

With implementation of Project Feature PF-VIS-1, Measures BIO-7 through BIO-10 (as defined in Section 2.13.3.2) and Measures PR-2, PR-3, and PR-4 discussed below, construction of the Build Alternative would not result in adverse permanent impacts to native vegetation, oak trees, and visual character.

Alternative 2 (No Build Alternative)

The No Build Alternative would not include the construction of any of the project improvements on SR-133 or the surrounding area and, therefore, would not result in changes in views to/from the project area. Therefore, the No Build Alternative would not result in long-term visual impacts on and in the vicinity of the project.

2.5.4 Avoidance, Minimization, and/or Mitigation Measures

In addition to the project features described above in Section 2.5.3.2, the following Minimization Measures VIS-1 and VIS-2 would substantially reduce the short- and long-term adverse visual impacts under the Build Alternative.

VIS-1 MGS Treatments. In order to maintain the visual character and quality of the project area, new and replaced Midwest Guardrail System (MGS) will be treated with an organic stain in order to remove the new, shiny galvanized metal appearance. This will result in an earth-tone color applied to the MGS.

VIS-2 Hybrid/Combination Option. The California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) will continue to coordinate with OC Parks during the design phase to finalize details of the 1.5:1 slope vs. hybrid/combination option, which includes combining a low retaining wall and minimal slope grading.