

Preliminary Visual Analysis for the 6226 Ontario Road Development Project, San Luis Obispo, San Luis Obispo County, California

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PREPARED FOR

Art Weldon

PREPARED BY

SWCA Environmental Consultants

**PRELIMINARY VISUAL ANALYSIS FOR THE
6226 ONTARIO ROAD DEVELOPMENT PROJECT,
SAN LUIS OBISPO, SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY,
CALIFORNIA**

Prepared for

Art Weldon
P.O. Box 369
Arroyo Grande, CA 93421
(805) 503-2308

Prepared by

Robert G. Carr
CA. Landscape Architect 3473

Bill Henry, Director

SWCA Environmental Consultants
1422 Monterey Street, Suite C200
San Luis Obispo, CA 93401
(805) 543-7095
www.swca.com

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1 INTRODUCTION

This preliminary visual analysis assesses the potential effects that the proposed access roads, driveways, and upper-lot development associated with the proposed Weldon-Ontario Road Development Project (project) may have on the visual setting. A primary purpose of the report is to accurately portray the potentially most critical elements of the project, as identified by County of San Luis Obispo (County) Department of Planning and Building staff. An “Information Hold” letter, dated March 8, 2019, was provided by the County to the project applicant’s representative specifically requesting the following information:

2. *Provide a visual analysis of the proposed project from the northbound lanes of US Highway 101 looking west toward the project site. The visual analysis shall simulate the cut and fill slopes for all roads and driveways, house pads and the dwellings on each proposed building site visible from US Highway 101. Simulations for the road and driveway are required.*

Based on the above request, this preliminary visual assessment includes the following:

- Photo simulations of the proposed road and driveway;
- Identification of visual planning policy applicable to the project site; and
- Preliminary recommendations for avoiding, minimizing, or mitigating potential visual impacts.

Although three potential building sites are identified on the project plans (Figure 1), no information regarding associated final pad elevations and grading, building forms, or vegetation removal was available at the time of this report. As a result, the visual assessment provides photographic data for the uppermost building sites (Sites 1 and 3) in order to gain a preliminary understanding of potential issues related to overall lot visibility and ridgeline development (Figure 2).

This report offers information useful for the selection and determination of specific design characteristics and other potential uses, based on the extent of visibility as well as expected visual perception and values. This study provides accurate preliminary information and may be used as the basis for a more focused assessment as required. No California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) findings are made as part of this report.

2 VISUAL ASSESSMENT METHODOLOGY

The findings of this study are based on multiple field visits conducted over several days, including review of the entire site as well as the surrounding area. Resource inventories were conducted both on foot and from a moving vehicle.

Locations of critical project elements such as the proposed roadway limits and building envelope corners were identified based on site plan information provided by the project applicant. These critical project features were measured and staked in the field, and corresponding horizontal and vertical location data was developed. Reference flags were positioned at each critical point. These flags were used as a visual scale reference for confirming roadway alignment and limits of earthwork, ensuring accuracy of photo simulations, and for determining overall project visibility. Thirty-five-foot-tall reference flags were positioned within the boundaries of Building Envelopes 1 and 3, representing the maximum allowable building height for the Rural Lands zoning designation.

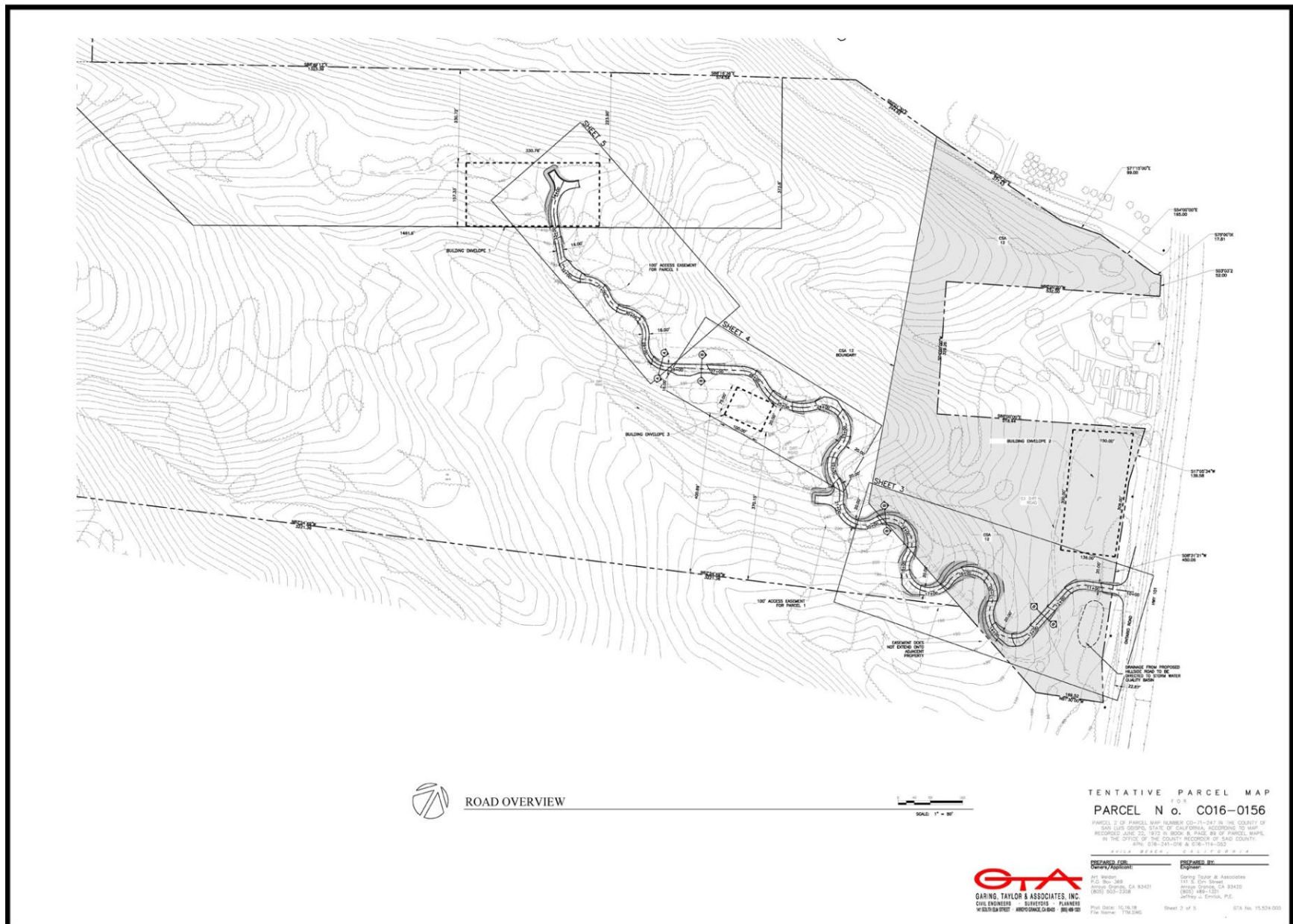


Figure 1. Project layout plan.

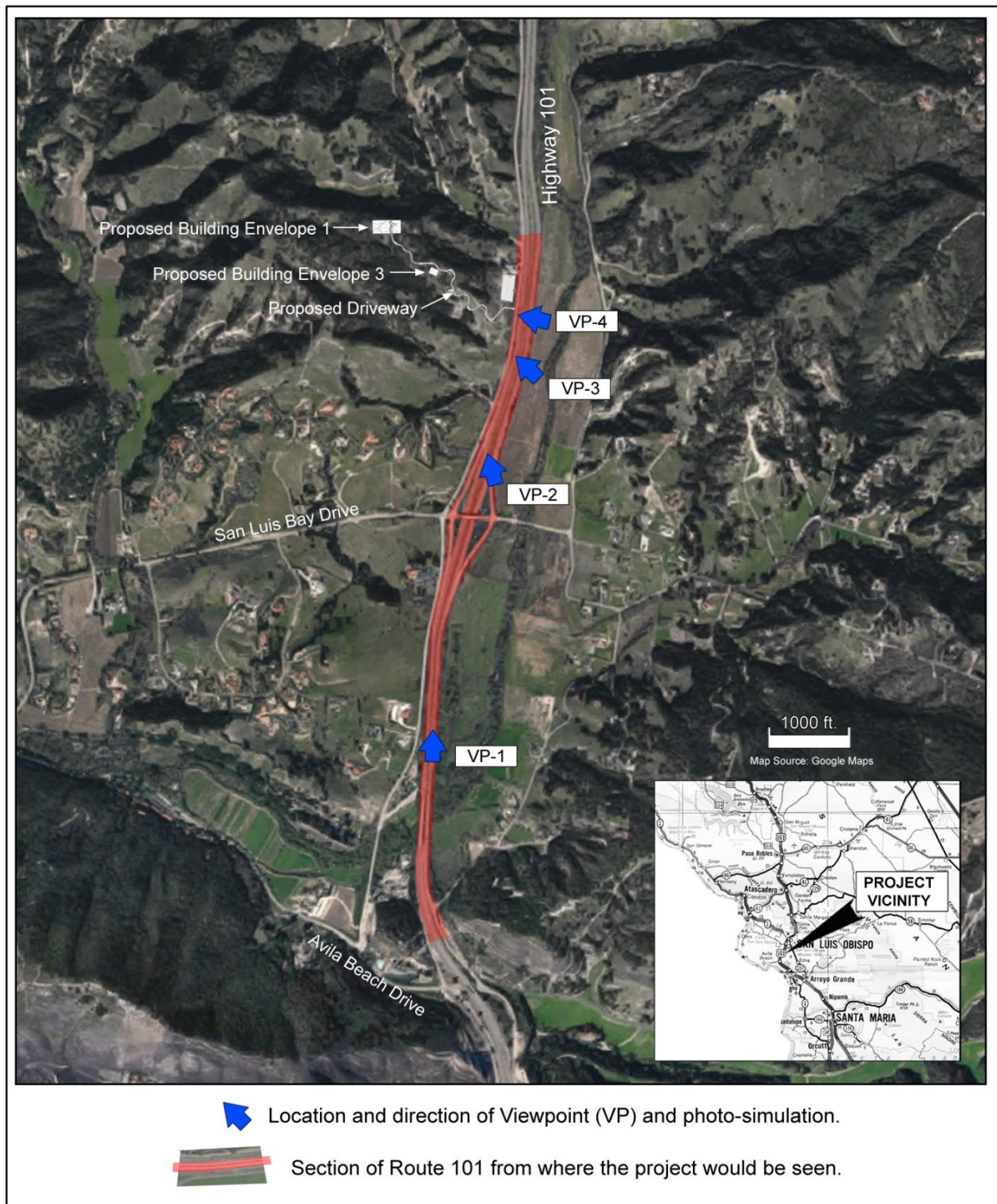


Figure 2. Viewpoint location and visibility map.

The project site was viewed from locations on U.S. Route 101 (US 101) and in the surrounding area. Representative viewpoints (VPs) were selected that best illustrate the visual changes that would occur as a result of the project (refer to Figure 2). Photo simulations were then prepared to quantify potential project visibility and to assess related visual effects. Images of the existing views as well as photo simulations of the proposed project from the VPs are shown in Figures 3 through 6.

3 COUNTY OF SAN LUIS OBISPO PLANNING POLICY AND ORDINANCES RELEVANT TO THE PROJECT

The regulatory setting pertaining to visual resources includes review of the proposed development's consistency with the County of San Luis Obispo General Plan Conservation and Open Space Element, San Luis Bay Inland Northern Sub Area Plan, County Land Use and Real Property Division Ordinances, and County of San Luis Obispo Design Guidelines.

3.1 General Plan Conservation and Open Space Element

3.1.1 Chapter 9 – Visual Resources

This section defines the following as major visual issues:

Scenic Landscapes. Development will inevitably occur within some of the county's scenic areas. The location and design of development in these areas can have a profound effect on urban and rural landscapes. Buildings that are appropriately placed and designed can complement and even blend with the natural landscape. However, inappropriately located and designed development including telecommunication facilities, roads, and billboards can detract from and conflict with an area's overall character. Land management practices may also cause unnecessary harm to visual resources.

Community Separation. A characteristic that distinguishes San Luis Obispo County from metropolitan areas is the continued existence of rural-appearing land, called Community Separators, between separate, identifiable communities and towns. Open spaces and the rural character between communities are being lost to urban and suburban uses. As Community Separators are typically rural, many of these areas are also scenic. The 2006 San Luis Obispo County Community Separator Study recommends ways to maintain community separation in key areas. Figure VR-2, a map of Conceptual Community Separators, identifies the general locations where special policies should apply.

Visual Resources Goal 1: The natural and agricultural landscape will continue to be the dominant view in rural parts of the county.

Policy VR 1.1 Adopt Scenic Protection Standards

Protect scenic views and landscapes, especially visual Sensitive Resource Areas (SRAs) from incompatible development and land uses.

Implementation Strategy VR 1.1.2 Amend Plans and Ordinances

Amend the Land Use Ordinance, Coastal Zone Land Use Ordinance, and/or Area Plans, as applicable to enact or revise ordinance standards to protect scenic resources.

Adoption and implementation of scenic protection standards shall not interfere with agricultural uses on private lands consistent with AGP30 [Scenic Resources]. Standards

for land use permits, including industrial and processing uses, and subdivisions should include visual assessments by qualified experts; visually effective setbacks near highways and roadways; siting in unobtrusive locations; and standards for height, architectural design, landscaping, lighting, and signs. The standards should emphasize avoiding visual impacts through alternative locations and designs where feasible. Establish consistent Countywide Viewshed Protection Standards.

Visual Resources, Goal 2, The natural and historic character and identity of rural areas will be protected.

Policy VR 2.1 Develop in a manner compatible with Historical and Visual Resources
Through the review of proposed development, encourage designs that are compatible with the natural landscape and with recognized historical character, and discourage designs that are clearly out of place within rural areas.

Policy VR 2.2 Site Development and Landscaping
Through the review of proposed development, encourage designs that emphasize native vegetation and conform grading to existing natural forms. Encourage abundant native and/or drought-tolerant landscaping that screens buildings and parking lots and blends development with the natural landscape.

Visual Resources, Goal 3, The visual identities of communities will be preserved by maintaining rural separation between them.

3.2 General Plan Conservation and Open Space Element, Appendix 9

3.2.1 Guidelines and Standards

The following list includes the kinds of guidelines or standards that should be considered in regulating development to protect visual resources:

Site Design. Structures should be sited and designed to take maximum advantage of existing topography and vegetation in order to screen them from public roads and places such as parks or lakes. Proposed structures should be located so that they do not silhouette against the sky on any prominent ridgelines.

Clustering. To the extent feasible, structures should be clustered on each parcel within existing built areas and/or near existing natural features such as tree groupings or the toe of slopes. On hills and ridges, highly visible open areas should be avoided; structures that project above the ridge or silhouette against the sky as viewed from public roads should be avoided; and driveways should be substantially screened from view where practical.

Grading. Grading, cuts, fills and development should be avoided on hills and ridges that are visible from public roads or places, or minimized where avoidance is not possible. Where feasible, contours of the finished surface should blend with adjacent natural terrain to achieve a consistent grade and natural appearance.

Tree Preservation. Building sites and roadways should be sited to preserve significant existing tree stands and significant oak trees. The removal of trees and other mature

vegetation for development or fire protection purposes should be avoided, or minimized where avoidance is not possible. Special care should be given to avoid the removal of large “specimen” trees, tree groupings, and windbreaks that add historical character.

Landscaping. Development projects should use natural landforms and vegetation to screened development. Where that cannot be done, it is preferred to screen development with native vegetation that is compatible with the scenic resource being protected and which does not obstruct public vistas. A landscaping plan should be prepared by a licensed architect, licensed landscape architect, or other qualified person. Landscape screening should exist or be planted so that there will be at least 50 percent screening at plant maturity, continuing for the life of structures that are visible from Highway One. The landscape screening should consist of native or low water-using vegetation (no invasive species) that is fire resistant. Screening or backdrop vegetation should be located and planted in conformance with CDF requirements for fire safety. The landscape screening should maximize use of evergreen trees and large-growing shrubs that have shapes similar to existing vegetation. At least 50 percent of the plant materials should consist of fast-growing species that will provide a landscape screen while the slower growing species mature. The required landscape screening should be reasonably maintained for the life of the structure.

Structure design. Minimize building height and mass by using low-profile design that may include partially sinking structures below grade. Minimize the visibility of structures by using colors that blend with colors of the surrounding environment. When structures silhouette against the sky on prominent ridgelines as viewed from scenic roads, include hip roofs with a pitch that causes the building to appear to recede from public view.

3.3 San Luis Bay Inland Area Plan, San Luis Bay Inland Sub Area North

3.3.1 Chapter 4 Land Use – Programs: Rural Lands

5. Viewshed Protection, San Luis Bay. The County should work with property owners toward continuing preservation of natural ridgeline profiles and scenic backdrops through open space agreements, contracts, or other appropriate instruments along the Highway 101 corridor.

3.4 County Land Use Ordinance – Title 22

3.4.1 Article 9 – Planning Area Standards

3. San Luis Bay Sub-Area. Within the San Luis Bay Sub-Area, as shown in Figure 96-1, projects requiring Conditional Use Permit approval shall concentrate proposed uses in the least sensitive portions of properties. Native vegetation shall be retained as much as possible.

3.4.2 San Luis Bay Sub Area Standards

- B. Site planning on sloping sites - Conditional Use Permit projects. Except for lands in the Agriculture category east of Montana de Oro as shown in Figure 96-6, projects

requiring Conditional Use Permit approval on sites with varied terrain shall include design provisions for concentrating developments on moderate slopes, retaining steeper slopes visible from public roads undeveloped.

3.5 County Real Property Division Ordinance – Title 21

3.5.1 Chapter 21.03 - Design Criteria

21.03.010 - Factors to be considered.

The planning commission and the subdivision review board, as the advisory agency, shall not approve or conditionally approve a tentative tract map or tentative parcel map unless it determines that all of the following criteria are satisfied:

- (3) Parcel and Site Design. The design of the subdivision shall comply with all land use regulations and general plan standards and requirements in effect in the area of the proposed subdivision and shall be based upon the following principles and policies:*
 - a. The size and configuration of parcels should be such as to encourage the efficient utilization of land and not deter or hinder the use of adjacent parcels, present or future. Where feasible, the use of clustering with open-space provisions shall be encouraged.*
 - e. The resulting parcels shall achieve optimal utility as measured by:*
 - 2. Minimizing site disruption in developing access drives and building pads with respect to cuts and fills and vegetation removal;*
 - h. Building sites shall be in locations that are least visible from public roads and shall not be located on ridgetops such that future structures will silhouette against the skyline as viewed from public roads, unless an adjustment is approved pursuant to Section 21.03.020 of this title.*

3.6 County of San Luis Obispo County Design Guidelines

This document prepared by the County Department of Planning and Building consists of “design objectives, guidelines and examples that will help retain and enhance the unique character of the unincorporated communities and rural areas of San Luis Obispo County.” The following design objectives apply to the project site:

RU-1 - a. Building site design -New residential subdivisions should locate building envelopes where the visibility of new buildings from public roadways and adjoining properties will be minimized.

- b. Road design. -Roads in new rural subdivisions should be gradually curved to follow natural topography and minimize the need for cuts and fills, but be connected to provide alternate routes.*

RC-7a. – Where possible, large cuts and graded pads should be avoided with foundations being stepped to minimize the alteration of natural contours.

RC-7b. – Building masses should generally follow contours. On sloping sites, buildings should have multiple levels.

RC-7e. – Artificial slopes that are visible to the public should match the natural contours in the immediate vicinity.

4 PROJECT CONSISTENCY WITH COUNTY OF SAN LUIS OBISPO VISUAL POLICY

Consistency determinations would be part of the discretionary review process conducted by the County. In anticipation of that process, this preliminary assessment identifies certain project components that may be inconsistent with County visual policy.

These possible inconsistencies are primarily due to:

- The high noticeability and visual contrast of the driveway and associated earthwork as seen from US 101.
- The potential for development on Building Envelopes 1 and 3 to extend above the primary ridgeline as seen from US 101.

5 RECOMMENDATIONS TO INCREASE COMPATIBILITY WITH COUNTY OF SAN LUIS OBISPO VISUAL POLICY

The following preliminary recommendations, in combination with applicable County design and planning standards, would result in the project being more closely aligned with County visual policy in terms of noticeability, contrast, and compatibility with the existing natural setting.

5.1 Roadway

5.1.1 Issues

- The proposed roadway would be highly visible from US 101 as well as a few local roads to the east.
- Most visible section of roadway would be the section from Station 00+00 to 25+00.
- The most visible elements of the road would be the cut and fill slopes, due to the light color of the parent material and soil and the resulting contrast with the surrounding ground.
- California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE) requirements may increase tree removal and thinning, as well as limit the extent of screening revegetation. Secondary access may also be required.
- The visibility of the roadway itself would depend on the color of its surface material.
- Cuts and fills would be very difficult to revegetate, making establishment of vegetative growth a challenge.
- Any aboveground drainage features (not yet shown on the plans) associated with the road may increase visual contrast and noticeability as well as an engineered appearance.

5.1.2 Recommended Measures

The following measures apply to the section of roadway from Station 12+00 to 25+00:

1. Use retaining walls for all cut slopes over 3 feet in height
2. Color and texture retaining walls so they visually recede in the surrounding landscape.
3. Color the roadway surface and any aboveground drainage features and/or use materials that are light brown.
4. Import soil for fill slopes that would support plant growth.
5. Plant oak trees on the areas surrounding the road in natural patterns with the goal of screening the roadway and earthwork from US 101.
6. Include a long-term plant establishment and monitoring program for all new screen planting.
7. Apply erosion control seeding to all disturbed areas.

5.2 Building Envelopes

Although three potential building sites are identified on the project plans, no information regarding associated final pad elevations and grading, building forms, or vegetation removal was available at the time of this report.

5.2.1 Issues

- Building Envelopes 1 and 3 are most critical in terms of silhouetting above the ridgeline.
- Critical factors affecting visibility and visual quality for Lots 1 and 3 include:
 - Structure location within each building envelope;
 - Extent of earthwork;
 - Final building pad elevation;
 - Height of structures;
 - Form, massing, and color of structures;
 - Extent of tree removal related to structure visibility;
 - CAL FIRE requirements may increase tree removal and thinning, as well as limit the extent of screening revegetation; and
 - Extent of replanting, and amount of time it takes for planting to provide screening value.
- The primary issue associated with Building Envelope 2 would be mostly related to the potential change in visual character related to its proximity to US 101.

5.2.2 Recommended Measures

The following measures apply to Building Envelopes 1, 2, and 3:

1. Plant native trees in order to screen visibility of proposed structures as seen from US 101
2. Use building forms and rooflines that are sympathetic to the natural landform.
3. Use muted earth tone colors and natural appearing materials for structure exteriors.

The following measures apply to Building Envelopes 1 and 3:

4. Design building pads and structures such that no part of the structure extends above the adjacent tree line/horizon as seen from US 101.
5. During preliminary design development, conduct a subsequent analysis to confirm the maximum allowable elevation (above sea level) that the structure would not silhouette above the horizon. A preliminary estimate of maximum top-of-structure elevations is:
 - Building Envelope 1: Approximately 450 feet elevation above sea level.
 - Building Envelope 3: Approximately 340 feet elevation above sea level.

The following measures apply to Building Envelope 2:

6. Locate structures as far away from US 101 as possible.



Figure 3. VP 1: Existing view and photo simulation of the proposed project.



Figure 4. VP 2: Existing view and photo simulation of the proposed project.



Figure 5. VP 3: Existing view and photo simulation of the proposed project.



Figure 6. VP 4: Existing view and photo simulation of the proposed project.