

4.1

AESTHETICS

INTRODUCTION

This section of the EIR describes existing visual and aesthetic resources for the project site and the region, and evaluates potential impacts of the project with respect to urbanization of the area. In addition, the Davis General Plan goals and policies pertaining to aesthetics are described. The California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) describes the concept of aesthetic resources in terms of scenic vistas, scenic resources (such as trees, rock outcroppings, and historic buildings within a state scenic highway), the existing visual character or quality of the project site, and light and glare impacts. The following impact analysis is based on information drawn from the City of Davis General Plan¹, the *Program EIR for the City of Davis General Plan Update and Program EIR for Establishment of a New Junior High School* (General Plan Update EIR)², and the *Draft Environmental Impact Report for the Covell Center Project (1997)*³.

ENVIRONMENTAL SETTING

The following setting information provides an overview of the existing condition of visual resources in the Covell Village area, located within Yolo County, just north of the City of Davis City Limits.

Regional Setting

The City's planning area is located 11 miles west of Sacramento and approximately 79 miles northeast of San Francisco. The planning area consists of approximately 160 square miles, and is characterized by agricultural/open space landscapes to the north, west, and south; highly developed urban landscapes within the City Limits; and open space lands, including the Yolo Bypass Wildlife Area to the east. Views from agricultural fields are enclosed on the west by the Coast Range hills. Views to other directions are open to the horizon, although the Sierra Nevada Mountains, Sutter Buttes, and Mount Diablo can be seen on clear days. The UC Davis campus is located adjacent to the southwest corner of the City and occupies a total of 2,900 unincorporated acres. General Plan land uses within the planning area include Residential (low, medium, and high density); Neighborhood Retail; Community Retail; General Commercial; Business Park; Industrial; Public/Semi-Public; Parks and Recreation; Urban Agriculture Transition Areas; Agriculture; and Natural Habitat.

The planning area has no officially designated scenic highways, corridors, vistas, or viewing areas (Davis General Plan Update EIR, p. 5A-1). Landscapes in and near the City are predominantly urban, with the core area of the community having more established neighborhoods and urban landscaping. Newer developed areas on the edges of the community are more noticeable from a distance due to the immaturity of the

landscaping. The City's planning area buffers the City on all sides by extending into areas that are dominated by agricultural uses, and views in this area are open and rural in nature.

Project Area Setting

The Davis General Plan Update EIR (January 2000) includes a description of the Covell Village project site and the site's surrounding land uses. The project proposed for the site at the time the General Plan Update EIR was prepared was entitled "Covell Center." A description of the project site from the Davis General Plan Update EIR, and a more detailed description as included in Chapter 3 of this EIR (Project Description), are provided below.

Description of Project Site as included in the General Plan Update EIR (January 2000)

The Davis General Plan Update and Program EIR states the following regarding the aesthetic character of the "Covell Center" project site:

Overall, views from the project site are considered primarily urban with surrounding viewsheds consisting of apartment complexes, homes, small fast food restaurants, retail and industrial uses, and a community golf course. Open space and lands in agricultural production are typical views to the north of the site, with a new golf course to the east. Views of the project site from surrounding areas are unimpeded because the site is used for low-lying crops, such as tomatoes.

Detailed Description of the Covell Village Project Site as included in Chapter 3, Project Description, of this Draft EIR

The project site consists of approximately 422 acres of land within Yolo County, California (please refer to Figure 3-1, Regional Location Map). The project site is generally located north of Covell Boulevard, between Pole Line Road and F Street (please refer to Figure 3-2, Project Location Map). The site consists of a 383-acre parcel identified by Yolo County Assessor's Parcel Number (APN) 035-970-033, as well as an approximately 39-acre portion of APN 042-110-011, which adjoins the northwestern boundary of the 383-acre parcel.

The site is bordered along three sides (south, east, and west) by existing urban uses and the City of Davis city limits. Land uses to the west of the site include the ConAgra property, Northstar Development, and the California Northern Railroad tracks. Residential neighborhoods are located to the south and east of the site along Covell Boulevard and Pole Line Road, respectively. The western portion of the site's northern boundary is agricultural land, while the eastern portion abuts the decommissioned City of Davis landfill. The northern boundary of the residential portion of the site is coterminous with the northern boundaries of the existing neighborhoods to the east and west of the site. The existing Covell Drain enters the site at the extreme northwestern corner, runs south along the railroad tracks, and then crosses the property eastward in a drainage canal known as "Channel 'A'."

Unique Visual Features

The project site slopes gently to the northeast and is characterized by open, productive and non-productive agricultural land consisting of grasses and ruderal vegetation. The site is bisected east-west by a drainage channel (Channel “A”) installed within the last 15 years. The channel supports some riparian vegetation. Several trees are located on the project site along Channel “A” and near the on-site residence. One large valley oak tree, located northeast of the residence in the central portion of the site, is of particular noteworthiness due to the tree’s prominence and aesthetic quality. A portion of an old drainage swale, which does not have an outlet, meanders through the southern part of the site. An older residence and related farm buildings are located in the mid-southern portion of the site.

Project Features

The proposed project involves the development of an approximately 422-acre mixed-use community. The project contains a broad range of housing sizes and types, in addition to a mixed-use Village Center, fire station site, 10-acre school site, bikeways, natural areas, 60 acres of habitat, and a 10.7-acre park (See Figure 3-3).

REGULATORY CONTEXT

Specific federal or State regulations do not directly pertain to the visual quality of an area. However, existing policies and regulations established in the City of Davis General Plan and Municipal Code are listed below, as applicable:

City of Davis General Plan

The following are applicable General Plan goals and policies related to aesthetics:

Urban Design and Neighborhood Preservation

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|---------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Goal UD 1 | Encourage community design throughout the city that help to build community, encourage human interaction, and support non-automobile transportation. |
| Policy UD 1.1 | Promote urban/community design which is human-scaled, comfortable, safe, and conducive to pedestrian use. |
| Goal UD 2 | Maintain an aesthetically pleasing environment and manage a sustainable community forest to optimize environmental, aesthetic, social, and economic benefits. |
| Policy UD 2.1 | Preserve and protect scenic resources and elements in and around Davis, including natural habitat and scenery and resources reflective of place and history. |

- Policy UD 2.2 Maintain and increase the amount of greenery, especially street trees, in Davis, both for aesthetic reasons and to provide shade, cooling, habitat, air quality benefits, and visual continuity.
- Policy UD 2.3 Require an architectural “fit” with Davis’ existing scale for new development projects.
- Policy UD 2.4 Create affordable and multi-family residential areas that include innovative designs and on-site open space amenities that are linked with public bicycle/pedestrian ways, neighborhood centers, and transit stops.
- Policy UD 2.5 Ensure attractive functional signs.
- Goal UD 3 Use good design as a means to promote human safety.
- Policy UD 3.1 Use good design to promote safety for residents, employees, and visitors to the City.
- Policy UD 3.2 Provide exterior lighting that enhances safety and night use in public spaces, but minimizes impacts on surrounding land uses.
- Goal UD 4 Create an urban design framework that would strengthen the physical form of the city.
- Policy UD 4.1 Develop an urban design framework plan to consolidate and clarify the relevant design concepts in this chapter and other chapters to promote a positive and memorable image for the city and to reinforce the functional systems of the city such as land use, circulation, and open space.
- Goal UD 5 Create and enforce clear and reasonable design guidelines that operationalize the relevant goals, policies, and actions of this general plan.
- Policy UD 5.1 Develop and implement new design guidelines, which are reviewed periodically.
- Goal UD 6 Strengthen the city’s neighborhoods to retain desirable characteristics while allowing for change and evolution, promoting public and private investments, and encouraging citizen involvement in neighborhood planning.
- Policy UD 6.1 Recognize the existence of individual neighborhoods with general boundaries and facilitate the development of neighborhood strategies in partnership with residents and property owners. The strategies should recognize the unique characteristics of the individual neighborhood and the potential for change, within the context of a well-planned city. The strategies should be directed

toward solving unique neighborhood problems and implementing neighborhood priorities and enhancing livability.

Outdoor Lighting Control Ordinance

The City enacted the Outdoor Lighting Control Ordinance in 1998. The ordinance, commonly referred to as the City's "Dark Sky Ordinance," provides standards for outdoor lighting in an effort to minimize light pollution, glare, and light trespass caused by inappropriate or misaligned light fixtures, while improving nighttime public safety, utility, security, and preserving the night sky as a natural resource and thus facilitating people's enjoyment of stargazing. This ordinance does not apply to interior lighting, including lighting at greenhouse facilities. Single-family and duplex properties are exempted.

IMPACTS AND MITIGATION MEASURES

Standards of Significance

An impact to the aesthetic values of the proposed Covell Village project area would be considered significant if any of the following conditions would potentially result from implementation of the proposed project:

- Degradation of the existing visual character or quality of the site and its surroundings; or
- Creation of a new source of substantial light or glare that would adversely affect daytime or nighttime views in the area.

Method of Analysis

The section below gives full consideration to the development of the project site and acknowledges the physical changes to the existing setting. Impacts to the existing environment of the project site are to be determined by the contrast between the site's visual setting before and after proposed development. In this analysis, emphasis has been placed on the transformation of the existing rural setting into a landscape characterized by proposed surface grading and residential and commercial buildout. Although few standards exist to singularly define the various individual perceptions of aesthetic value from person to person, the degree of visual change can be measured and described in a reasonably objective manner in terms of visibility and visual contrast, dominance, and magnitude. Current residents adjacent to the project site and travelers along Pole Line Road and Covell Boulevard would be considered sensitive to the visual and aesthetic alteration of the Covell Village area.

Project-Specific Impacts and Mitigation Measures

4.1-1 Impacts related to altering the existing agricultural character of the project site.

Proposed Project

The project site currently has the appearance of being rural in nature. Implementation of the Proposed Project would replace the undeveloped, rural character of the project site with an urban mixed-use setting. Because the project site currently provides open views from the adjacent roadways and surrounding properties, the change in the character of the site would be recognizable. The change in the site from a rural to urban environment would constitute a permanent alteration of the existing visual character of the project site.

The applicant has indicated that the Covell Village project would include landscaping along the project boundaries, including Pole Line Road, Covell Boulevard, and F Street. The landscaping proposed for the project would be consistent with the City of Davis Zoning Ordinance. In addition, the project would include multiple parks and greenbelt areas, in addition to creating a habitat area at the northwestern boundary of the project site. It should also be noted that the large oak tree located in the southeastern portion of the project site is proposed to be preserved. The landscaping and open space and park areas would increase the aesthetic quality of the project, and would thereby reduce the impacts the project would have on the conversion of the site from an agricultural setting to an urban setting. Furthermore, the type and intensity of development proposed for the project site is consistent with the development currently surrounding the site to the west, east, and south.

However, the General Plan Update EIR (p. 5A-34) states that for the Covell Village site, significant views exist to the north through the site, and development within this viewshed would be a significant visual impact. The General Plan Update EIR concludes that the potential changes in views associated with Variation 3 of the Covell Village site would result in a significant and unavoidable impact. Variation 3 of the Covell Village site, as specified in the General Plan Update EIR (See Figure 3-5 of the General Plan Update EIR), proposed the buildout only of the southern portion of the project site as Research Park, while the remainder of the site was to remain in its current agricultural condition. The current proposal considered in this Draft EIR involves the development of the entire Covell Village site with residential and commercial uses. Therefore, the conversion of the site from a rural to an urban setting would result in *significant* aesthetic impacts.

High Density Alternative

Like the Proposed Project, the High Density Alternative would permanently convert the rural character of the project site to that of an urban setting. As noted above, the Davis General Plan Update EIR concludes that development of only a

portion of the project site would constitute a significant aesthetic impact. The High Density Alternative involves development of the entire project site. Therefore, the impact would be considered *significant*.

Mitigation Measure(s)

Because feasible mitigation measures are not available, this impact would be considered *significant and unavoidable* for the Proposed Project and the High Density Alternative.

4.1-2 Impacts related to light and glare.

Proposed Project

The project site consists predominantly of agricultural land; therefore, very little light or glare is currently emitted from the project site. The change from an undeveloped agricultural property to a mixed-use development would generate new sources of light and glare such as parking lots, building lighting, and streetlights. While the types of lighting and their specific locations are not specified at this point, the Proposed Project would increase the amount of light and glare into adjacent areas. The exterior lighting for the project would be appropriately shielded and would therefore be consistent with General Plan Policy UD 3.2, Action c. However, the applicant has indicated that the single family residences proposed for the project would comply with the Outdoor Lighting Control Ordinance. Currently, single family residences are exempt from the Outdoor Lighting Control Ordinance. Therefore, this would be considered a *significant* impact. It should be noted that Alternative 2 (Buildout to 2010 Using Existing General Plan) in the General Plan Update EIR assumed the development of the Covell Village site with approximately 1,247 housing units and an undetermined amount of commercial square footage. The General Update EIR (p. 5A-36) found that impacts to light and glare under Alternative 2 would be less-than-significant.

High Density Alternative

As noted above, the High Density Alternative would result in the construction of substantially more residential units than would the Proposed Project, which would increase the need for lighting. Additional lighting would have the potential to contribute to an increase in glare and other visual impacts. However, the applicant has indicated that the single family residences proposed for the project would comply with the Outdoor Lighting Control Ordinance. Currently, single family residences are exempt from the Outdoor Lighting Control Ordinance. Therefore, this would be considered a *significant* impact.

Mitigation Measure(s)

Implementation of the following mitigation measure would reduce the above impact to a *less-than-significant* level.

The following mitigation measure has been identified for the Proposed Project and the High Density Alternative.

- 4.1-2 *Compliance with the standards of the Outdoor Lighting Control Ordinance shall be included within the Final Planned Development for all land uses, including single family parcels, with specific criteria and standards to be reviewed and approved by the Planning Commission.*

Cumulative Impacts and Mitigation Measures

4.1-3 Long-term impacts to the visual character of the region from the proposed project in combination with existing and future developments in the Davis area.

Proposed Project

The Proposed Project would contribute to the cumulative change in visual character of the Yolo County region from agricultural to urban. Due to the location of the project site within an agricultural area, the larger cumulative context of the visual impact of the Proposed Project could be considered as within the City as a whole. The properties in the immediate vicinity of the project site are currently developed for residential and commercial uses with the exception of the land north of the project site, which is used for agricultural purposes, and the northern portion of the ConAgra parcel to the southwest of the site. Therefore, in terms of the change to the visual character of the project area, development on the project site would be typical of what currently exists west, east, and south of the project site. Should development be allowed, the character of the area would change from flat agricultural fields and roadways to residences and commercial uses interspersed with trees, greenbelt areas, and parks. Development in the City, in addition to the development on the project site, would contribute to a change in the visual character of the area.

The site has been designated Agriculture in the Davis General Plan. As mentioned previously, the General Plan Update EIR concluded that changes to views associated with development of the Covell Village project site would be considered significant and unavoidable. Therefore, the conversion of the project site in addition to other lands in the project area from a rural to an urban setting would be considered *significant*.

High Density Alternative

As with the Proposed Project, the High Density Alternative would result in the conversion of an agricultural area with open fields and very few structures to an urban area with residential, commercial, and other uses. However, the High Density Alternative would include 475 more residential units than the Proposed Project. Although the development would be typical of that surrounding the site to west, south, and east, these changes to the landscape would be permanent, and

the City of Davis General Plan Update EIR has determined that such changes would have significant and unavoidable impacts to views in the project area. Therefore, considered in combination with other projects in the area, the aesthetic impacts of the High Density Alternative would be considered *significant*.

Mitigation Measure(s)

Because feasible mitigation measures are not available, this impact would be considered *significant and unavoidable* for the Proposed Project and the High Density Alternative.

Endnotes

¹ *City of Davis General Plan*, May 2001.

² City of Davis, *Program EIR for the City of Davis General Plan Update and Project EIR for Establishment of a New Junior High School*, January 2000.

³ City of Davis, *Draft Environmental Impact Report for the Covell Center Project*, March 1997.