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Rincon Project No: 16-03127

City of San Luis Obispo
Community Development Department
919 Palm Street
San Luis Obispo, California 93401-3218
Attn: Rachel Cohen, Associate Planner

Subject: **Aesthetics Evaluation for the 71 Palomar Project**
71 Palomar Avenue, San Luis Obispo, California 93405

Project Background

The City of San Luis Obispo originally began work on processing a use permit application for the development of a 41-unit multi-family residential project at 71 Palomar Avenue in the City of San Luis Obispo, based in part on the publication of an Initial Study/Mitigated Negative Declaration (IS/MND) for the originally proposed project. Subsequently, the City's Cultural Heritage Committee (CHC) reviewed the proposed project and analysis of the project pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). The CHC continued the project to a future date and directed the project applicant to revise the project to reduce the extent to which the historic Sandford House is repositioned on the lot, to provide greater spacing between the historic house and proposed new construction, to reduce the scale and massing of the new construction, and to give greater consideration to the way in which the new construction highlights the historic elements of the subject property. An Addendum to the original IS/MND has since been prepared to evaluate whether the additional new information and clarifications resulting from the proposed project design revisions (described in the *Project Description* section below) would result in any new or substantially greater significant environmental effects or require any new mitigation measures not identified in the original IS/MND. This aesthetics evaluation serves to supplement the analysis of potential aesthetic impacts of the revised project in the Addendum. The Addendum, together with the original IS/MND, will be used by the City when considering approval of the proposed project.

Project Location

The project site is located at 71 Palomar Avenue, on the west side of Palomar Avenue between Ramona Drive and Luneta Drive, south of Foothill Boulevard, in the northwest portion of the City of San Luis Obispo, California. The site consists of a single 1.32-acre parcel (Assessor's Parcel Number [APN] 052-162-007) and is zoned High Density Residential (R-4).

Project Description

The proposed project involves the relocation of the 34-foot-tall Sandford House to the southeast corner of the property. The historic Sandford House would be repositioned approximately 33 feet east of and 16

feet south of its current location and would be surrounded by open space measuring 49 feet from Luneta Drive, 46 feet from the neighboring structures to the west, and 52 feet from the neighboring structures to the north. The original historic orientation would remain the same with the house facing Palomar Avenue from the crest of the small slope on the project site. The house would also be rehabilitated following the City Historic Preservation Guidelines and Secretary of the Interior (SOI) Standards. Existing non-historic rear additions to the Sandford House would be removed and the residence, currently serving as student housing, would become amenity space (e.g. leasing, computer and conference rooms, fitness room) for residents and management of the proposed new apartment development.

The proposed project also involves the development of 33 apartment units in six buildings (Buildings A through F) on the areas of the project site north and west of the proposed location of the Sandford House. Buildings A through F would include two-story residential (B and R-2) uses with a maximum height of 35 feet. Buildings A and B proposed for the northern portion of the project site would also include open parking garage (S-2) uses to accommodate the 63 semi-subterranean parking spaces proposed for the project. Pursuant to California Building Code (CBC) Section 510.4, where a one story above grade 'S-2' parking garage is provided under a building of group 'R', the number of stories shall be measured from the floor above such a parking area. In addition, according to CBC Section 202 the lowest parking garage is considered a basement and the upper parking garage is considered a story above grade plane. Accordingly, Buildings A and B would technically only be considered two stories in height for purposes of satisfying the R-4 zoning requirements, but nevertheless would have a total of four stories. Due to the lower elevation of the northern portion of the site and design of the proposed buildings, the rooftops of Buildings A and B would appear level with the rooftops of the buildings (C through F) proposed for the southern portion of the site.

The project would require removal of most of the 55 existing trees onsite (Refer to Figure 1 of the Arborist Report prepared by Rincon Consultants, Inc. in October 2016) to be replaced with over 30 new trees and additional landscaping.

Setting

Regulatory Setting

State

State Streets and Highways Code, Section 260, et. seq. A California highway may be designated as scenic depending on how much of the natural landscape can be seen by travelers, the scenic quality of the landscape, and the extent to which development intrudes on the traveler's enjoyment of the view. When a city or county nominates an eligible scenic highway for official designation, it must identify and define the scenic corridor of the highway, defined by the motorist's line of vision (a reasonable boundary is selected when the view extends to a distant horizon). A city or county must also adopt ordinances to preserve the scenic quality of the corridor, including: 1) regulation of land use and density of development; 2) detailed land and site planning; 3) control of outdoor advertising (including a ban on billboards); 4) careful attention to and control of earthmoving and landscaping; and 5) careful attention to design and appearance of structures and equipment.

Local

City of San Luis Obispo General Plan. The City of San Luis Obispo regulates aesthetics of buildings and public spaces through implementation of adopted policies and programs. The Land Use Element (LUE), Circulation Element (CE), Conservation and Open Space Element (COSE), and the implementing statutes of the Municipal Code, Community Design Guidelines and Historic Preservation Guidelines are the core of

this mechanism. The General Plan LUE and CE provide policies and programs for maintenance of public views during urbanization along viewing corridors and scenic roadways throughout the City. The following LUE policies define the local regulatory setting related to the protection of visual resources in the City:

> *Policy 2.2.10. Site Constraints. Residential developments will respect site constraints including property size and shape, ground slope, access, creeks and wetlands, wildlife habitats, wildlife corridors, native vegetation, and significant trees.*
>
> *Policy 2.3.5. Neighborhood Pattern. The City shall require that all new residential development be integrated with existing neighborhoods. Where physical features make this impossible, the new development should create new neighborhoods.*
>
> *Policy 2.3.7. Natural Features. The City shall require residential developments to preserve and incorporate as amenities natural site features, such as land forms, views, creeks, wetlands, wildlife habitats, wildlife corridors, and plants.*
>
> *Policy 2.3.9. Compatible Development. The City shall require that new housing built within an existing neighborhood be sited and designed to be compatible with the character of the neighborhood.*
>
> *Policy 2.3.11. Residential Project Objectives. Residential projects should provide:*
>
> *A Privacy, for occupants and neighbors of the project;*
> *B Adequate usable outdoor area, sheltered from noise and prevailing winds, and oriented to receive light and sunshine;*
> *C Use of natural ventilation, sunlight, and shade to make indoor and outdoor spaces comfortable with minimum mechanical support;*
> *D Pleasant views from and toward the project;*
> *E Security and safety;*
> *F Bicycle facilities consistent with the City's Bicycle Plan;*
> *G Adequate parking and storage space;*
> *H Noise and visual separation from adjacent roads and commercial uses (Barrier walls, isolating a project, are not desirable. Noise mitigation walls may be used only when there is no practicable alternative. Where walls are used, they should help create an attractive pedestrian, residential setting through features such as setbacks, changes in alignment, detail and texture, places for people to walk through them at regular intervals, and planting.)*
> *I Design elements that facilitate neighborhood interaction, such as front porches, front yards along streets, and entryways facing public walkways;*
> *J Buffers from hazardous materials transport routes, as recommended by the City Fire Department.*

In addition, the following Circulation Element policies define the local regulatory setting related to the protection of visual resources:

> *Policy 15.1.2. Development Along Scenic Routes. The City will preserve and improve views of important scenic resources from streets and roads. Development along scenic roadways should not block views or detract from the quality of views.*

A *Projects, including signs, in the viewshed of a scenic roadway will be considered "sensitive" and require architectural review.*
B *Development projects should not wall off scenic roadways and block views.*
C *As part of the city's environmental review process, blocking of views along scenic roadways should be considered a significant environmental impact.*
D *Signs along scenic roadways should not clutter vistas or views.*
E *Street lights should be low scale and focus light at the intersections where it is most needed. Tall light standards should be avoided. Street lighting should be integrated with other street furniture at locations where views are least disturbed. However, safety priorities should remain superior to scenic concerns.*
F *Lighting along scenic roadways should not degrade the nighttime visual environment and night sky per the City's Night Sky Preservation Ordinance. (City of San Luis Obispo, 2014a).*

The COSE also lists policies and programs that protect public viewsheds. The following COSE policies influence the local visual resources regulatory setting:

Policy 9.1.2. Urban Development. Urban development should reflect its architectural context. This does not necessarily prescribe a specific style, but requires deliberate design choices that acknowledge human scale, natural site features, and neighboring urban development, and that are compatible with historical and architectural resources. Plans for sub-areas of the City may require certain architectural styles.

Policy 9.1.3. Utilities and Signs. Features that clutter, degrade, intrude on, or obstruct views should be avoided. Necessary equipment including utility, communication, and traffic equipment should be designed and placed as to not impinge upon or degrade scenic view of the Morros or surrounding hillsides and farmland.

Policy 9.1.4. Streetscapes and Major Roadways. In the acquisition, design, construction, or significant modification of major roadways the city promotes the creation of "streetscapes" and linear scenic parkways or corridors that promote the City's visual quality and character, enhances adjacent uses, and integrates the roadway with surrounding districts.

Policy 9.1.5. View Protection in New Development. The City will include in all environmental review and carefully consider effects of new development, streets, and road construction on views and visual quality by applying the Community Design Guidelines, height restrictions, hillside standards, Historical Preservation Program Guidelines, and the California Environmental Quality Act and Guidelines.

Policy 9.2.1. Views To and From Public Places, Including Scenic Roadways. The City will preserve and improve views of important scenic resources from public places and encourage other agencies with jurisdiction to do so. Public places include parks, plazas, the grounds of civic buildings, streets and roads, and publicly accessible open space.

1. *Development projects shall not wall-off scenic roadways and block views.*
2. *Utilities, traffic signals, and public and private signs and lights shall not intrude on or clutter views, consistent with safety needs.*
3. *Where important vistas of distant landscape features occur along streets, street trees shall be clustered to facilitate viewing of the distant features.*

4. *Development projects, including signs, in the viewshed of a scenic roadway shall be considered "sensitive" and require architectural review.*

Policy 9.2.2. Views To and From Private Development. Projects should incorporate as amenities views from and within private development sites. Private development designs should cause the least view blockage for neighboring property that allows project objectives to be met.

Policy 9.2.3. Outdoor Lighting. Outdoor lighting shall avoid: operating at unnecessary locations, levels, and times; spillage to areas not needing or wanting illumination; glare (intense line-of-site contrast); and frequencies (colors) that interfere with astronomical viewing.

City of San Luis Obispo Zoning Ordinance. The Zoning Ordinance of the City's Municipal Code was developed in conformance with the General Plan (City of San Luis Obispo 2015a). Zoning is intended to promote and enforce broad General Plan policies related to land use, physical development, and construction. The following ordinance concerns the visual impact of lighting.

17.18.030. Illumination. No lighting or illuminated device shall be operated so as to create glare which creates a hazard or nuisance on other property. (Ord. 941 – 1[part], 1982: prior code - 9202.6[C]).

17.23. Night Sky Preservation. Establishes lighting regulations that encourage lighting practices and systems that will:

a. *Permit reasonable uses of outdoor lighting for nighttime safety, utility, security, and enjoyment while preserving the ambience of night;*
b. *Curtail and reverse any degradation of the nighttime visual environment and the night sky;*
c. *Minimize glare and obtrusive light by limiting outdoor lighting that is misdirected, excessive, or unnecessary;*
d. *Help protect the natural environment from the damaging effects of night lighting; and*
e. *Meet the minimum requirements of the California Code of Regulations for Outdoor Lighting and Signs (Title 24, Chapter 6).*

Architectural Review Commission. The City's Architectural Review Commission (ARC) reviews and approves the design for proposed buildings within the City. Architectural review is a process whereby the City's ARC examines a proposed project's layout, building design, its relationship to the neighborhood in which it would be located, landscaping, parking, signage, lighting, and other features affecting the project's appearance. This process will be applied to proposed development within the project area, and may result in conditions or design modifications that expand on mitigation measures that may be included in the IS-MND Addendum. The ARC is charged with administering architectural review in a way that creates a pleasant environment, maintains property values, preserves the City's natural beauty and visual character, and ensures orderly and harmonious development. The ARC uses the City's Community Design Guidelines as a basis for evaluating the suitability and appropriateness of individual project design to help achieve attractive and environmentally sensitive development.

City of San Luis Obispo Community Design Guidelines. San Luis Obispo's Community Design Guidelines were developed to communicate the City's expectations relating to the quality and character of site and building design. Many of the guidelines specifically target the reduction of visual impacts and the promotion of visual harmony with surrounding context (City of San Luis Obispo 2010). The following

chapters and sections from the Community Design Guidelines are applicable to the analysis in this section:

> ***Chapter 2 – General Design Principles:*** *This chapter includes general principles that should be considered in design of all development. Certain guidelines within this chapter apply only to certain types of projects (e.g., residential or non-residential). Site design considerations include designing each project with careful consideration of site character and constraints, designing projects to fit with the best examples of appropriate site design and architecture in the vicinity of the site, keeping building elements in proportion, and selecting exterior treatments carefully.*
>
> ***Chapter 5 – Residential Project Design:*** *This chapter includes guidelines relating to the goals for residential project design, subdivision design and general residential project principles, infill development, multi-family and clustered housing design, and single-family housing design. Qualities examined include protection of scenic roadways; visually-pleasing parking design and location; consideration of neighboring development; quality landscaping and lighting; and site-specific building design.*
>
> ***Chapter 6 – Site Planning and Other Design Details:*** *This chapter provides guidelines for specific details of site and building design that apply to all development requiring architectural review including details relative to energy and resource conservation, lighting, storage, trash/recycling enclosures, landscaping, parking, and public art, among other items.*

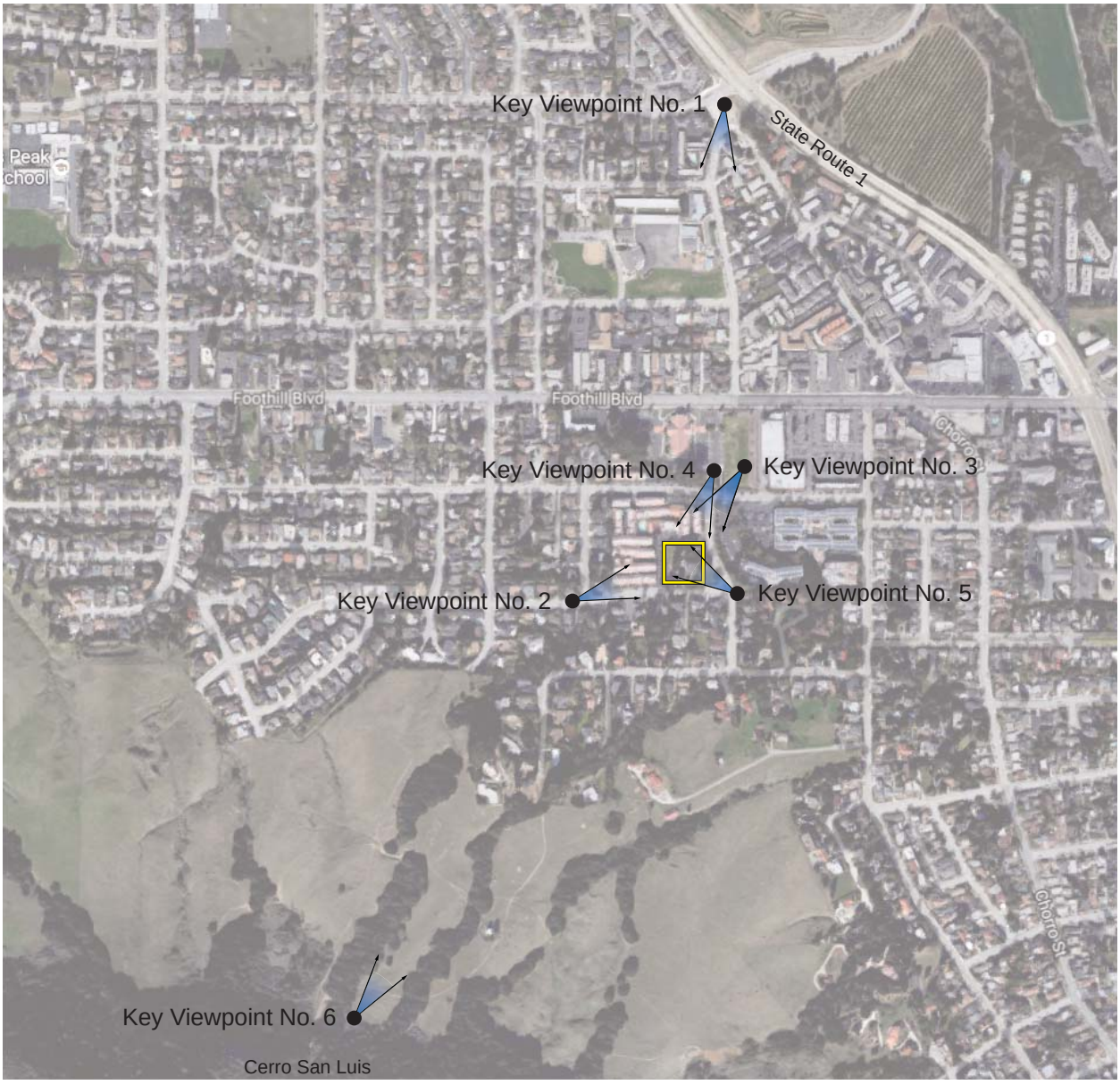
Environmental Setting

Regional

The City of San Luis Obispo is located approximately eight miles from the Pacific Ocean, midway between San Francisco and Los Angeles at the junction of U.S. Highway 101 (U.S. 101) and State Route 1. The topography of the City and its surroundings is generally defined by several low hills and ridges formed by Bishop Peak and Cerro San Luis. These peaks are also known as Morros and provide scenic focal points in the City while the Santa Lucia Mountains and Irish Hills are the visual limits of the area and the scenic backdrop for much of the city. The surrounding hills have created a hard urban edge for the city where development has remained in the lower elevations.

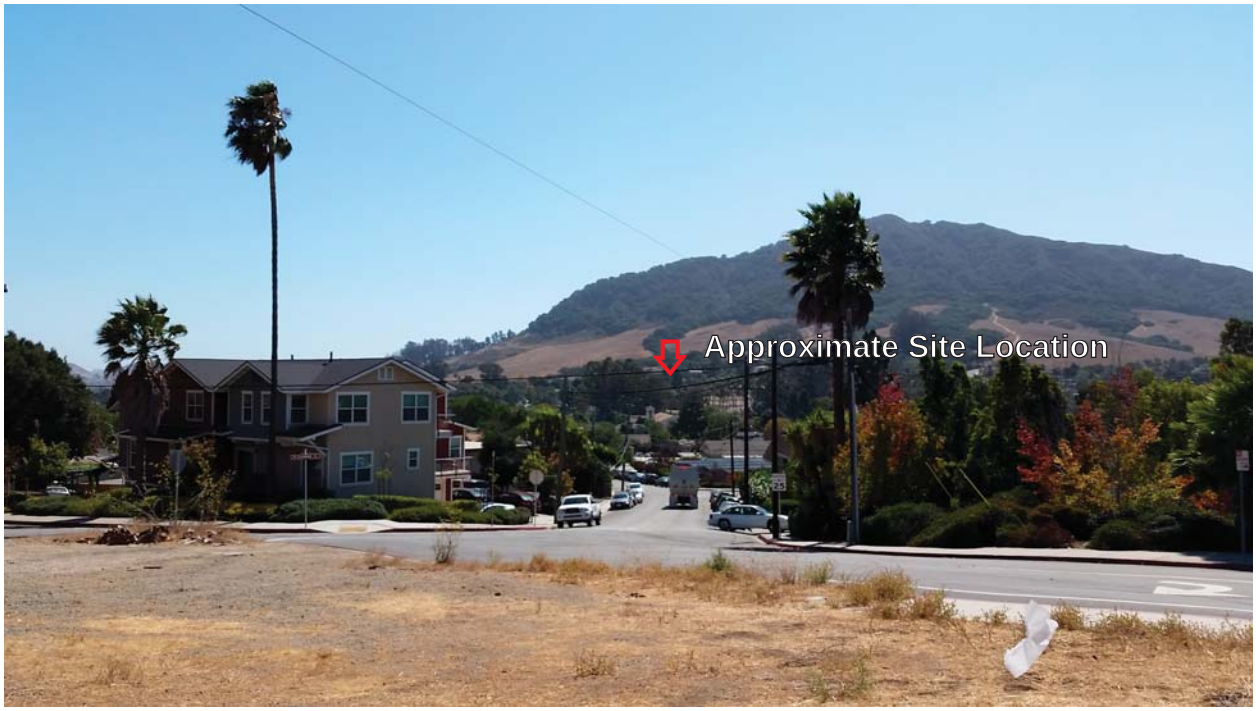
Project Site and Vicinity

The residential neighborhoods south of Foothill Boulevard in the vicinity of the project site exhibit a more suburban character than those in the downtown core of the City. The street pattern in this area forms a rectilinear grid, providing a degree of formality and long visual sightlines along some streets. The neighborhoods in the vicinity of the project site are characterized by residential and commercial development surrounded by mature street trees and the unique visual backdrop provided by Cerro San Luis Obispo and Bishop Peak. The topography of the project site generally slopes down to the northeast. Several mature trees of varying species are located throughout the site, with a total of 59 trees on the site (Refer to Figure 1 of the Arborist Report prepared by Rincon in October 2016). The central and southwestern portions of the project site are currently developed with the historic Sandford House and accessory structures. Despite existing development on the project site, the site possesses a natural character due to the large size and abundance of mature trees on and surrounding the site. Refer to Figure 1 for the location of key viewpoints for the project. Refer to Figures 2a through 2c for photographic documentation of views of the project site from the key viewpoints.

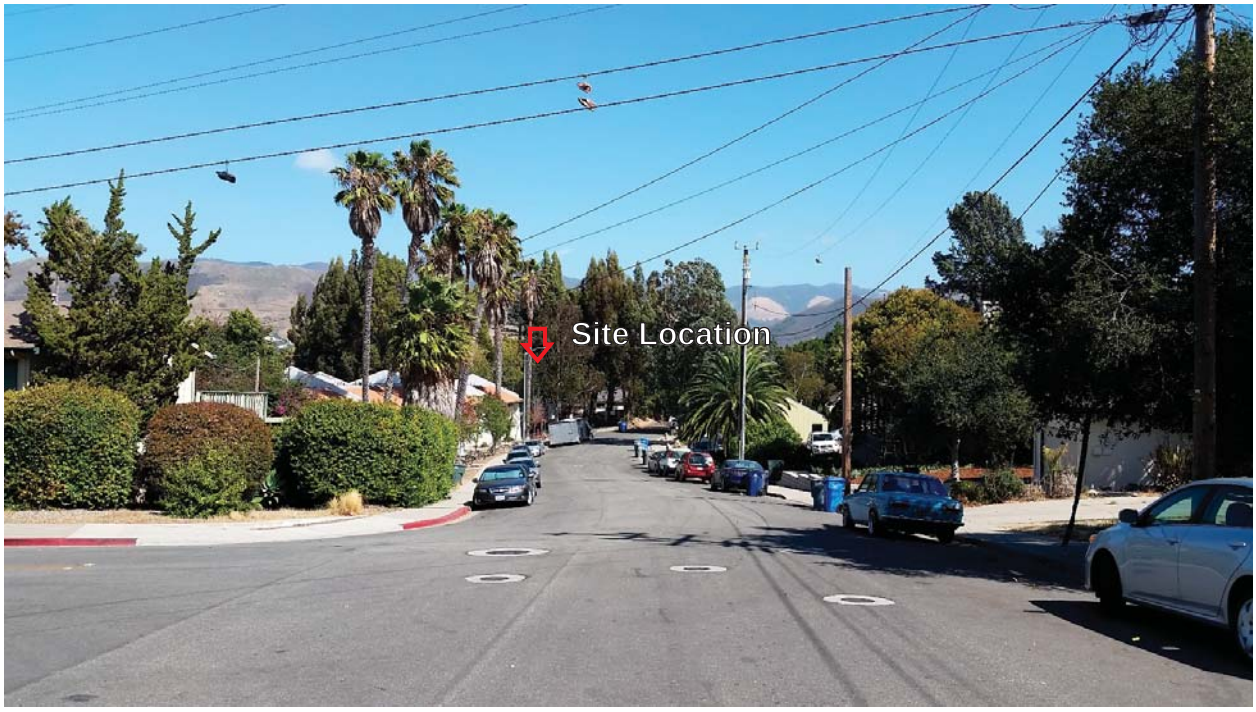


Location of Key Viewpoints

Figure 1



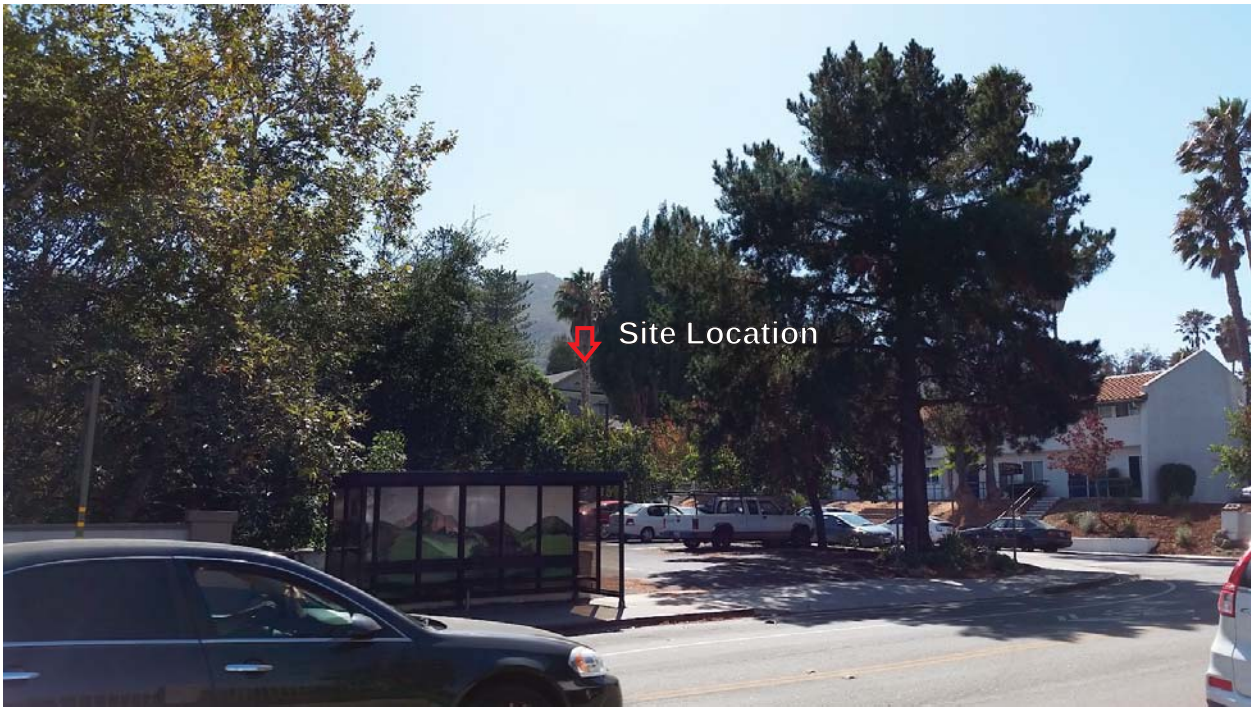
Key Viewpoint 1 : South-facing view of project area from Highland Drive at Ferrini Road, approximately 100 feet west of State Route 1.



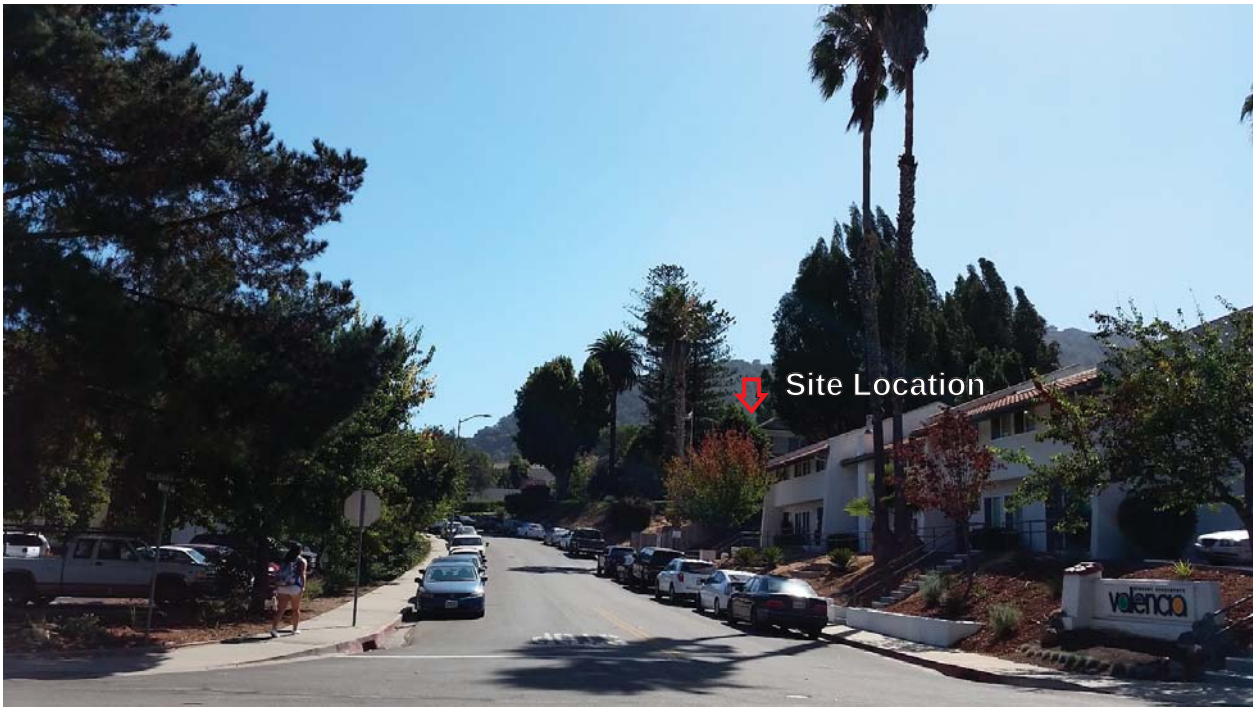
Key Viewpoint 2: East-facing view of project site and adjacent apartments from Luneta Drive at Verde Drive.

Views of Project Site from Key Viewpoints

Figure 2a



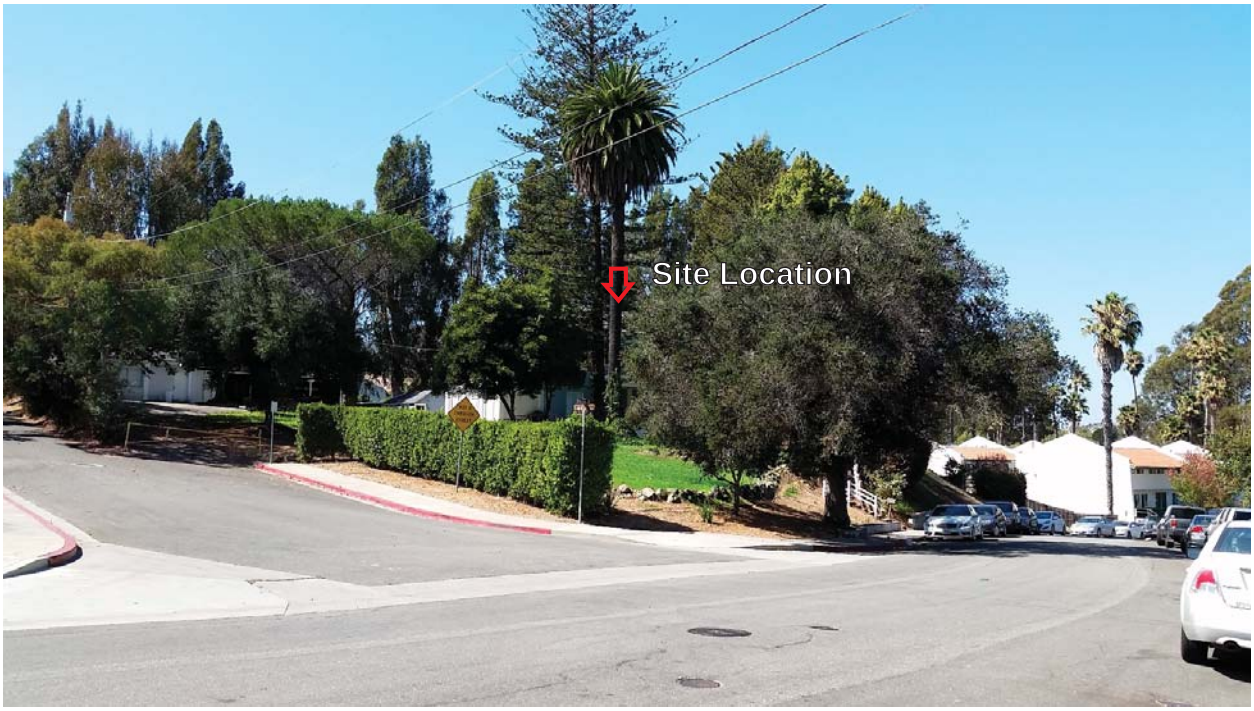
Key Viewpoint 3: Southwest-facing view of project site and surroundings from the north side of Ramona Drive, approximately 130 feet east of Palomar Avenue.



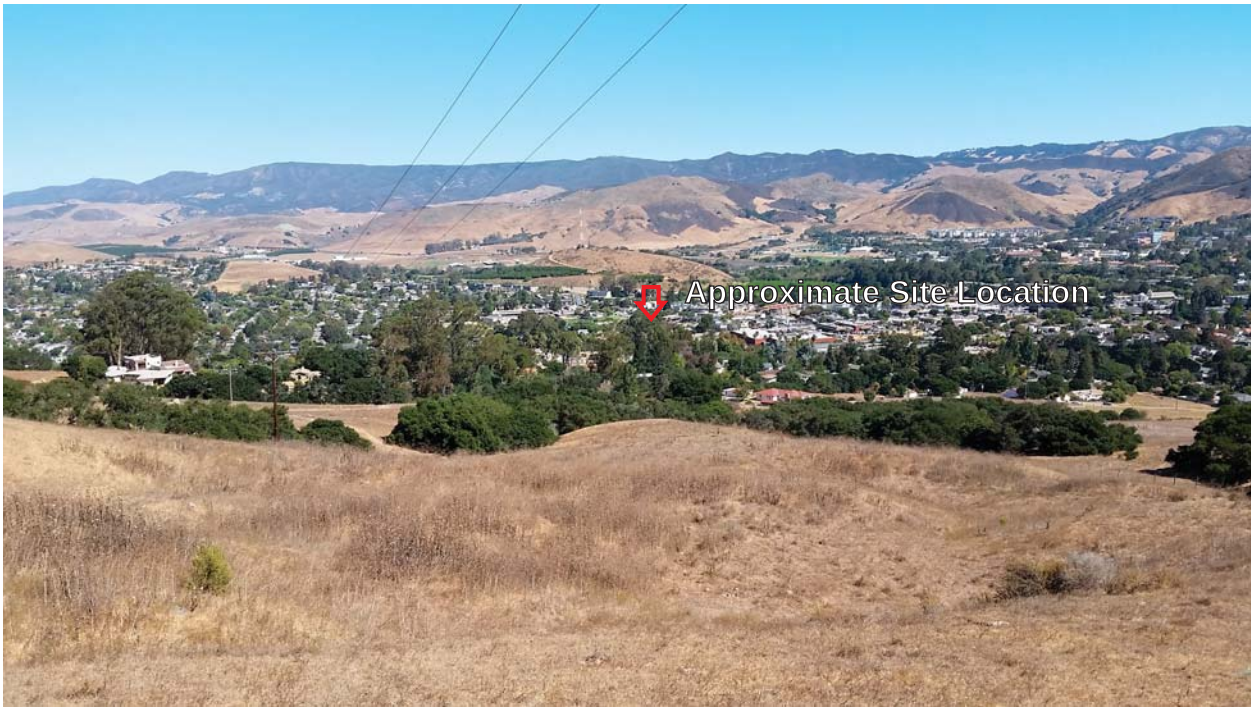
Key Viewpoint 4: Southwest-facing view of project site and surroundings from the north side of Ramona Drive, approximately 130 feet east of Palomar Avenue.

Views of Project Site from Key Viewpoints

Figure 2b



Key Viewpoint 5: Northwest-facing close-up view of project site from east side of Palomar Avenue at Luneta Drive.



Key Viewpoint 6: Northeast-facing view of project area from Cerro San Luis public hiking/bicycle trail.

Views of Project Site from Key Viewpoints

Figure 2c

Methodology and Impact Analysis

Methodology and Significance Thresholds

The assessment of aesthetic impacts involves qualitative analysis that is inherently subjective in nature. Different viewers react to viewsheds and aesthetic conditions differently. This discussion evaluates the existing visual environment against the anticipated level of development with implementation of the proposed 71 Palomar project. CEQA distinguishes between public and private views, and focuses on whether a project would affect the public environment rather than of the environment of particular individuals. Private views, such as those from backyards, front yards, interior living spaces, and private roadways, generally are not analyzed under CEQA and potential impacts to private views would not be environmentally significant.

The project site was observed and photographically documented in its surrounding context from various public viewpoints in the area, as shown on Figures 1 and 2a through 2c. It should be noted that views of the project site and general project area other than those shown on the Figures 2a through 2c were explored, including views from public viewpoints (roadway right-of-way) along Serrano Heights Drive. However, views from other areas did not provide any visibility of the project site or general project area. As such, photographs from those areas were not informative to the analysis and are not included herein.

Pursuant to Appendix G of the State CEQA Guidelines, potentially significant aesthetic impacts would occur if development of the project site would:

a. *Have a substantial adverse effect on a scenic vista;*
b. *Substantially damage scenic resources, including, but not limited to, trees, rock outcroppings, open space, and historic buildings within a local or state scenic highway;*
c. *Substantially degrade the existing visual character or quality of the site and its surroundings; and/or*
d. *Create a new source of substantial light or glare which would adversely affect day or nighttime views in the area.*

In this analysis, only public views were evaluated against the above criteria and views from private residences are not discussed herein.

Impact Analysis

a. The project site is in a suburban area of the City characterized by residential and commercial development amongst natural features such as mature trees, and Cerro San Luis and Bishop Peak. The project site is visually dominated by the 34-foot-tall historic Sandford House and associated outbuildings, and an abundance of mature trees. The site retains a semi-natural character due to this abundance of mature trees and vegetation. The project site is aesthetically prominent from adjacent roadways due to the existing historic structure and trees onsite. However, according to Figure 3 of the General Plan Circulation Element and Figure 11 of the General Plan Conservation and Open Space Element the site is not within a City designated scenic vista and, therefore, is not visually prominent from these areas. When viewed from various other public viewpoints in the vicinity of the site, including public trails on Cerro San Luis and surrounding roadways, the project site blends in with the surrounding uses and vegetation and does not stand out as visually prominent or unique (Refer to Figures 2a through 2c). The project would involve the removal of trees and structures, as well as development of multi-family residential buildings, and relocation of the Sandford House on the project site. From the public trails on Cerro San Luis and roadways south of the site, northward views of the site with development of the project, which would include views of the rooftops of the proposed apartment buildings, would conform to views of the

surrounding suburban area. From these area, the two-story apartment buildings with two stories of subterranean parking (Buildings A and B) proposed for the northern portion of the site would appear relatively level with Buildings C through F proposed for southern and western portions of the site, the relocated Sandford House, and western adjacent off-site two-story apartments. From roadways to the north, southward public views of the site with development of the project would remain mostly obstructed by existing surrounding development and vegetation, and similar to views of the surrounding developed area. As such, the project would not result in a significant adverse effect on a scenic vista and this potential impact would be less than significant.

b. The project is not located along any State designated scenic routes. According to the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) California Scenic Highway Mapping System (2011), the closest officially designated State scenic highway to the project site is State Route 1. The project site is located approximately 0.4 mile west of State Route 1 and is not visible from the highway (Refer to Figure 2a). As such, the project would not damage any scenic resources within a scenic highway and there would be no impact.

c. The project site is currently developed with the historic Sandford House and associated outbuildings, and contains 55 mature trees. These mature trees are not recently planted or recently germinated from seed, within the last 15 years, and make up the majority of trees present and the vast majority of canopy on site. From the adjacent roadways and viewpoints, the abundance of trees gives the site a somewhat natural appearance amongst single- and multi-family residential development surrounding the site (Refer to Key Viewpoints 2, 4, and 5 on Figures 2a through 2c). The project would include development of multi-story apartments with a maximum height of 35 feet, with associated landscaping and parking on the project site. The proposed development would involve more intense structural development on the site than existing conditions, and proposes the removal of most of the existing mature trees from the site. According to the landscape plan, the project would involve planting of over 30 new landscape trees throughout the proposed apartment development and the retention of two existing trees near the southeast corner of the site along Palomar Drive, one tree in the northeast corner of the site and one existing tree in the southwest corner of the site. Despite retaining some of the existing mature trees on the site, the proposed development and overall amount of trees removed would result in a less natural appearance of the site when compared to existing conditions as newly landscaped trees would be scattered throughout and would be shorter in height than the proposed 35-foot structural development unlike the existing trees which are large, dense, and block existing structures from view. The project, as proposed, would also involve moving the historic Sandford House, which possesses high aesthetic quality, from the central area to the southeast portion of the site. This would result in the Sandford House being closer to the adjacent roadways, less obstructed by trees, and, thus, more visually prominent in the neighborhood. Although the project would change the aesthetic character of the site, it would not significantly degrade the character as it would include high-density residential development with a maximum height of 35 feet consistent with adjacent high-density development to the east, north, and west of the site would retain the visually prominent Sandford House. Additionally, the project includes design elements such as peaked roof lines, separate structures to break up the massing of the proposed multi-level residential structures, inclusion of over 30 landscaped trees, four existing trees, and other landscape features, and agrarian style architecture to complement the Sandford House. With these design and landscape features, the project would comply with City General Plan policies aimed at preserving scenic views and the character of prominent visual features within the City, as well as the City's Community Design Guidelines which are intended to ensure that future development is consistent with the City's expectations relating to the quality and character of site and building design, and to protect scenic resources and views, from public rights-of-way. However, the project would require a final determination of project consistency with the Community Design Guidelines by the ARC. As such, the

project would not result in significant degradation of the visual character of the site and its surroundings, and this impact would be less than significant impact.

d. The project would result in development of a site that contains minimal existing sources of artificial light and where existing lights are shielded by vegetation on and around the site. Existing sources of nighttime lighting in the vicinity of the site include streetlights along Palomar Avenue and Luneta Drive, spillover lighting from surrounding single- and multi-family residential development, and light from the headlights of vehicles traveling on the surrounding roadways. Development of the project site would result in an increase in ambient nighttime lighting through the increased residential development and associated exterior lighting and interior lighting spillover. This would include parking garage and security/safety lighting, and fixtures associated with the proposed structural development. In addition, windows, exterior building materials, and surface paving materials used for the proposed development may generate glare that could affect surrounding residential uses.

The project would be required to conform to the Night Sky Preservation Ordinance (Zoning Regulations Chapter 17.23, discussed under *Regulatory Setting*), which sets operation standards and requirements for lighting installations. The project would also be required to comply with the City's Community Design Guidelines as well as City General Plan Policies 9.2.1 and 9.2.3 which include provisions for preventing light intrusion to preserve safety, and outdoor lighting stipulations to avoid light and glare impacts. The project applicant would also be required to provide an overall lighting plan that demonstrates that the project complies with the requirements of City of San Luis Obispo Ordinance No. 17.18.030, which prohibits lighting or illuminated devices that would create glare which results in a hazard or nuisance on other properties (City of San Luis Obispo, Zoning Regulations). This plan would be reviewed by the ARC prior to issuance of building permits. Adhering to these existing regulations and ordinances, as well as the City's Community Design Guidelines, would ensure that exterior lighting and finish is designed to minimize impacts on neighboring properties and other light and glare sensitive uses. As such, impacts associated with the creation of new sources of light and glare would be less than significant.

Cumulative Impacts

The project, in combination with approved, pending, and proposed development in San Luis Obispo, would contribute to increasing urbanization of the northern portion of the City. Consistent with long-term buildout under the General Plan, the project would be required to adhere to the design standards of the City General Plan and City Building Standards and would be subject to discretionary review by the Planning Commission and/or City Council, as well as final design review by the ARC. As determined in the Land Use and Circulation Elements (LUCE) Update Environmental Impact Report (2014), all development consistent with current land use designations and that adheres to the LUCE Update policies would result in less than significant aesthetic impacts. Therefore, although the visual character of the City could incrementally change as development intensity increases within areas already designated for such development, this change is consistent with the General Plan vision for the urban environment and impacts to visual quality would not be cumulatively considerable. The overall aesthetic impact of cumulative development in the project vicinity would be less than significant.

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