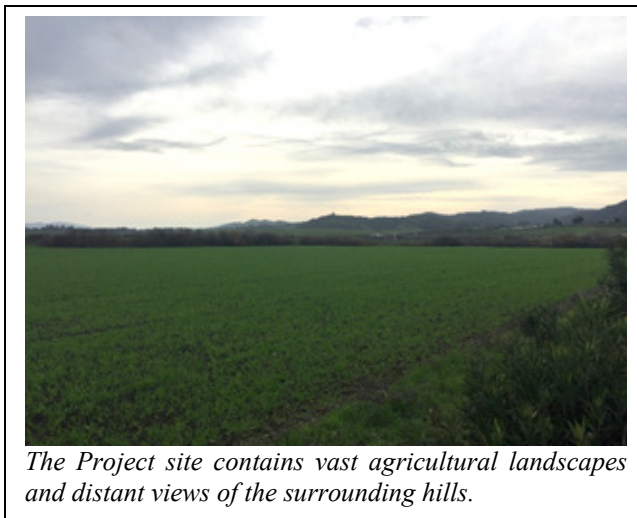


3.1 AESTHETICS AND VISUAL RESOURCES

This section examines the potential for the proposed Avila Ranch Development Project (Project) to create aesthetic and visual impacts as defined by the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) as well as by the City of San Luis Obispo's (City's) regulations, policies, and design guidelines that are used to strengthen and protect its visual quality. Adopted City General Plan policies require that the potential



development and design of the Project must consider potential loss of open space, aesthetic impacts, and remain compatible with nearby visual resources. Data for this section was derived from the review of the City of San Luis Obispo General Plan Land Use and Circulation Element (LUCE) (2014) and Conservation and Open Space (COS) Element (2006); field observations, notes, and site photography of existing resources; analysis of the site's relationship to the surrounding community; and review of the Project Design Guidelines provided in Appendix F (City of Santa Luis Obispo 2014; 2006).

3.1.1 LUCE Update EIR

The 2014 Land Use and Circulation Elements Update Environmental Impact Report (LUCE Update EIR) previously analyzed overall Citywide impacts to aesthetics and visual resources as well as those associated with development of the Project site related to the adoption of the 2014 LUCE. The LUCE Update EIR noted that the Project site's visual character includes distant views of the hills, including the Irish Hills to the west, the Morros to the northwest, South Hills and Santa Lucia Mountains to the north, Islay Hill to the east, and Davenport Hills to the south. The LUCE Update EIR identified potentially significant impacts to aesthetic resources due to the change of visual character of the site and additional nighttime lighting from development of the Project site with up to 700 housing units and 25,000 square feet (sf) of commercial space. However, the LUCE Update EIR concluded that implementation of the City's 2014 LUCE policies, and amendments to existing City policies, would reduce impacts to a less than significant level.

3.1.2 Environmental Setting

3.1.2.1 Regional Visual Character

The Project site is located at the southern City limits, adjacent to industrial and commercial development to the north and west, and agricultural lands in unincorporated areas of the County of San Luis Obispo (County) to the south and east. The San Luis Obispo County Regional Airport (Airport) lies approximately 0.6 mile east and U.S. Highway 101 is approximately 0.45 mile west of the Project site. Because the site is generally level, public views of the site are available from adjacent



The southern portion of the City is mainly agricultural land (much of which is designated for urban use), while the northern portion of the City is mainly urban development.

roadways, particularly Buckley Road, and nearby private properties. Partial distant views of the site are available to motorists passing by on U.S. Highway 101 northbound, but such views of the Project site are generally obstructed by intervening vegetation.



Views of the Project site from Buckley Road and the commercial and industrial development adjacent to the northwestern portion of the site.

The southern portions of the City in the Project vicinity are characterized by undeveloped open land, areas of cultivated agriculture, and commercial and industrial uses. Residential neighborhoods are located to the east and west along the Broad Street and South Higuera Street corridors. Views from the site include industrial and commercial development backed by views of

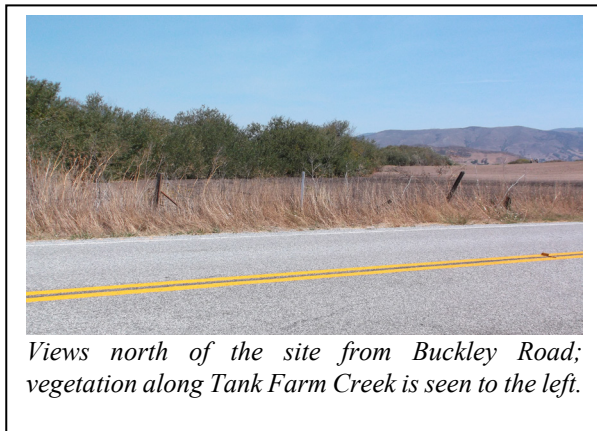
hillsides and mountains to the north and west; and agricultural lands backed by views of hillsides and mountains to the south and east.

3.1.2.2 Visual Character of the Project Site and Surroundings

The 150-acre Project site is situated in the southern portion of the City, northeast of the intersection of Buckley Road and Vachell Lane, and extends approximately 0.75 mile along Buckley Road east of this intersection. The site consists of three adjacent, generally level agricultural parcels and Tank Farm Creek running across the site from northeast to southwest. The site is currently undeveloped and has been historically used for cultivated agriculture and pasture to support grazing. The most prominent visual feature of the site is the northeast-southwest running Tank Farm Creek drainage, which is filled with dense strands of riparian vegetation, including mature willow, cottonwood, and oak trees (see Section 3.4, *Biological Resources*). This riparian corridor traverses the entire area and diagonally bisects the site, forming a boundary between the northwest and southeast agricultural fields that compose the site.

The landscape of the site is framed by mid-range to distant views of the Santa Lucia Mountains and South Hills to the north and northeast, Islay Hill to the east, the Davenport Hills to the south, Irish Hills to the west, and the Morros to the northwest. Adjacent lands to the north and east support a mix of one- to two-story commercial and industrial buildings, including modern offices and open storage yards. Adjacent lands to the south and east are predominantly agricultural and used for both grazing and cultivation. The site is highly visible from Buckley Road and Vachell Lane except in two regions; near the intersection of Buckley Road and Vachell Lane where the vegetation along Tank Farm Creek partially obstructs views of the site; and near the intersection of Vachell Lane and Venture Drive where the Lockheed Martin Corporate Office building obstructs views east from Vachell Lane.

Buckley Road



Views north of the site from Buckley Road; vegetation along Tank Farm Creek is seen to the left.

The Project site is bordered to the south by Buckley Road. Buckley Road is an east-west oriented narrow two-lane rural road (one lane in each direction). The road is approximately 23 feet wide and lacks bike paths or sidewalks. This roadway, along with Vachell Lane, serves as the primary route to and from U.S. Highway 101 and the southern portion of the City. Even though this road is outside

City limits, it is identified as having high to medium scenic value in both the City's Circulation Element and COS Element (City of San Luis Obispo 2014; 2006). From Vachell Lane east towards State Route (SR) 227, Buckley Road generally traverses a visual landscape of agriculture, open space, and airport development views framed by distant hillsides and mountains. Buckley Road is the primary vantage point from which the Project site is visible.

The Project site extends approximately 0.75 mile along Buckley Road and is visible to both eastbound and westbound travelers, as well as from surrounding properties. There are generally no trees or development that obstruct views of the site from Buckley Road adjacent to the site, except toward the western end where the vegetation along Tank Farm Creek partially obstructs views of the site. Views along Buckley Road, in the Project vicinity, consist of agricultural lands backed by the Santa Lucia Mountains and South Hills to the north, Islay Hill to the east, Davenport Hills to the south, Irish Hills to the west, and the Morros to the northwest. Near the intersection of Buckley Road and Vachell Lane, views of riparian vegetation along Tank Farm Creek in the Project site are prominent, and views to the south primarily consist of undeveloped agricultural land backed by more distant hills and trees which screen views of the Thousand Hills Pet Resort.

Vachell Lane

The southwestern portion of the site is bordered by Vachell Lane. Vachell Lane is a two-lane roadway running north-south from Buckley Road to South Higuera Street. The road is approximately 23 feet wide and generally does not support bike paths or sidewalks. The only portions of the road with a sidewalk include the frontage of the Lockheed Martin Corporate Office building and along both sides of the



Views north along Vachell Lane, the Project site, and the adjacent Lockheed Martin Corporate Office building to the right; and the agricultural and commercial uses across the site to the left. Distant views of the Santa Lucia Mountains are visible along this road.

road in the portion northwest of the Project site. As noted above, Vachell Lane serves as one of the primary routes to access U.S. Highway 101 from the Airport and other southeastern portions of the City. It is identified as having high scenic value under both the City's Circulation Element and COS Element.

The southern portion of this road runs along agricultural land with views of the Santa Lucia Mountains and Islay Hill to the east, Davenport Hills to the south, and the Irish Hills to the west. The central portion of the road fronts the modern, two-story Lockheed Martin Corporate Office building to the east and commercial development to the west. The northern portion of this road is surrounded by commercial and light industrial development on both the east and west with partial views of the Santa Lucia Mountains and Islay Hill to the east and Irish Hills to the west. This road also provides partial views of the mountains and the Morros to the north of the site. The transition of visual character from commercial and light industrial to rural-agricultural is evident as one travels along this road from north to south.

Venture Drive



View looking east toward the Project site along Venture Drive. The Lockheed Martin Corporate Office building is located to the right and undeveloped agricultural land to the left.

Venture Drive is a short, two-lane, east-west road that provides access to the parking lot of Lockheed Martin Corporate Office building. It forms a “T” intersection with Vachell Lane immediately west of the Project site and ends at the western boundary of the site. Venture Drive is not classified as having high scenic value; however, this road provides quality views to the north, east, and south of the site, including views of the Santa

Lucia Mountains, Islay Hill, and Davenport Hills. The only development along this road is the two-story Lockheed Martin Corporate Office building.

South Higuera Street

South Higuera Street is located approximately 1,300 feet west of the Project site and serves as the primary arterial connecting the U.S. Highway 101 exit on Los Osos Valley Road to Vachell Lane. South Higuera Street is a four-lane street with a striped Class II bike lane on each side to the north of Los Osos Valley Road, narrowing to a two-lane street to the south of Los Osos Valley Road. Development along South Higuera Street consists of



Views south towards the intersection of South Higuera Street and Vachell Lane. To the right is the nearest residential area to the Project site, along S. Higuera Street.

residential, commercial, and light industrial uses. The nearest residential development to the Project site is located along South Higuera Street, west of its intersection with Vachell Lane. Although this street is mostly developed, partial views of the surrounding hills and mountains are still available.

3.1.2.3 Visual Resources

Visual resources are objects or natural features that are visible on a landscape. These resources contribute to the scenic or visual quality of the landscape. Visual resources on the site include the agricultural and open lands that characterize much of the southern portion of the City, and Tank Farm Creek which runs diagonally across the site. The site supports mid-range views of the Santa Lucia Mountains and South Hills to the north, Islay Hill to the east, Davenport Hills to the south, Irish Hills to the west, and the Morros to the northwest. These hills and mountains provide a dramatic visual backdrop to all views of the site.

3.1.2.4 Scenic Vistas and Scenic Highways

A scenic vista is a view of natural environmental, historic, and/or architectural features possessing visual and aesthetic qualities of value to the community. The term “vista” generally implies an expansive view, usually from an elevated point or open area. No designated scenic vistas occur in the immediate Project vicinity, aside from the “cone of view” from the Irish Hills, as identified in the COS Element.¹ The next nearest identified

¹ The COS Element identifies cones of view in Figure 11: Scenic Roadways and Vistas.

cone of view is over 1.5 miles away from the Project site, along Madonna Road. This cone of view consist of views from mid-way down Madonna Road north to Laguna Lake. However, the site is not visible from any of the designated scenic vistas.

The California Scenic Highway Program, maintained by the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) protects state scenic highway corridors from changes that would diminish the aesthetic value of lands adjacent to highways. According to the California State Scenic Highway Program, the section of U.S. Highway 101 in the Project vicinity is eligible for State Scenic Highway designation, but currently is not officially designated (Caltrans 2015). In addition, the City's General Plan, Circulation Element, identifies this segment of U.S. Highway 101 as having high scenic value (City of San Luis Obispo 2014). There are only distant glimpses of the site from U.S. Highway 101 northbound; the Project site is approximately 0.45 mile east of the highway and vegetation between the roadway and the site obstructs most of the views to the site.

3.1.2.5 Light and Glare, and Nighttime Lighting

Nighttime lighting conditions vary throughout the City, from heavily lit areas of commercial development to more rural areas with little night lighting. Lighting and glare levels in the Project vicinity are typical for that of rural areas. The majority of light and glare in the Project vicinity is generated by commercial and industrial uses to the north and northeast of the site, including the Lockheed Martin Corporate Office building along Vachell Lane, adjacent to the site. Vehicle headlights, street lighting at intersections and along the streets, building lighting, and distant airport lighting contribute to the existing light setting to the north and east of the Project site; however, there is no lighting along Vachell Lane, Venture Drive, or Buckley Road. As such, there is currently no substantial source of nighttime lighting or glare within the Project site.

3.1.3 Regulatory Setting

A series of City-adopted policies and guidelines are relevant to the following analysis of aesthetics and visual resources. The City of San Luis Obispo General Plan, Zoning Ordinance, and Community Design Guidelines each contain policies that target the aesthetics of land use, site design, and construction. In all cases, the intent of regulation is to reduce negative visual impacts and promote aesthetic quality and compatibility with the existing environment. Please refer also to Section 3.2, *Agricultural Resources*, and Section 3.4, *Biological Resources*, for discussion of policies related to protection of agricultural and biological resources as open space.

3.1.3.1 Federal

No federal policies or regulations related to aesthetics and visual resources would apply to the Project.

3.1.3.2 State

Caltrans Scenic Highway Program

Caltrans defines a scenic highway as any freeway, highway, road, or other public right-of-way that traverses an area of exceptional scenic quality. Suitability for designation as a State Scenic Highway is based on vividness, intactness, and unity. As discussed previously, U.S. Highway 101, located approximately 0.45 mile west of the Project site, is eligible for State Scenic Highway designation; however, it is not currently designated as a scenic highway by the state. The City of San Luis Obispo does identify it to have high scenic value.

Senate Bill (SB) 743

Governor Brown signed SB 743 in September 2013, which made several changes applicable to CEQA for projects located in areas served by transit (Public Resources Code Section 21099). Under SB 743, a project's aesthetic impacts are not considered significant impacts on the environment if: 1) the project is a residential, mixed-use residential, or employment center project, and 2) the project is located on an infill site within a transit priority area. This provision for aesthetic impacts does not include impacts to historic or cultural resources. The Project is located on land currently zoned Business Park/Specific Plan Area, and designated for urban development under the LUCE in a manner substantially consistent with what is being considered under the Project. It is not considered to be a transit priority area and therefore is not exempt from consideration for aesthetic impacts under the CEQA process.

3.1.3.3 Local

City of San Luis Obispo General Plan

As the overarching policy document guiding development in the City, the San Luis Obispo General Plan contains policies to regulate all aspects of physical growth and conservation in the community. Relative to this analysis, the Land Use Element of the General Plan contains policies to ensure that new development is compatible with existing visual context, and the Circulation Element of the General Plan contains policies to ensure new

development does not obstruct views from scenic roads or highways. Additionally, the COS Element includes policies to protect open space and minimize visual impacts on surrounding natural landscape and to protect views and scenic vistas. Pertinent policies from these elements are listed below.

Land Use Element

Policy LU 1.4 Urban Edges Character. The City shall maintain a clear boundary between San Luis Obispo’s urban development and surrounding open land. Development just inside the boundary shall provide measures to avoid a stark-appearing edge between buildings in the City and adjacent open land. Such measures may include: using new or existing groves or windrows of trees, or hills or other landforms, to set the edge of development; increasing the required side-yard and rear-yard setbacks; and providing open space or agricultural transition buffers.

Policy LU 1.8.1 Open Space Protection. Within the City’s planning area and outside the Urban Reserve Line (URL), undeveloped land should be kept open. Prime agricultural land, productive agricultural land, and potentially productive agricultural land shall be protected for farming. Scenic lands, sensitive wildlife habitat, and undeveloped prime agricultural land shall be permanently protected as open space.

Policy LU 2.3.3 Residential Next to Non-residential. In designing development at the boundary between residential and non-residential uses, the City shall make protection of a residential atmosphere the first priority.

Policy LU 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 LU 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 LU 2.3.8 Parking. The City shall discourage the development of large parking lots and require parking lots be screened from street views. In general, parking should not be located between buildings and public streets.

Policy LU 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 LU 2.3.10 Site Constraints. The City shall require new residential developments to respect site constraints such as property size and shape, ground slope, access, creeks and wetlands, wildlife habitats, wildlife corridors, native vegetation, and significant trees.

Policy LU 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.

Policy LU 6.4 Hillside Policies. As noted in the Open Space section of this element and in the COS Element, San Luis Obispo wants to keep open its steeper, higher, and most visible hillsides. Some of the lower and less steep hillside areas; however, are seen as suitable for development, particularly where development is coupled with permanent open space protection of the more sensitive areas.

Circulation Element

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 should be considered as “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 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.

Policy 15.1.3 Public Equipment and Facilities. The City and other agencies should be encouraged to avoid cluttering scenic roadways with utility and circulation-related equipment and facilities.

- A Whenever possible, signs in the public right-of-way should be consolidated on a single low-profile standard;
- B Public utilities along scenic highways should be installed underground;
- C The placement of landscaping and street trees should not block views from Scenic Routes. Clustering of street trees along scenic roadways should be considered as an alternative to uniform spacing; and
- D Traffic signals with long mast arms should be discouraged along scenic roadways.

Conservation and Open Space Element

The COS Element of the City's General Plan identifies both roads adjacent to the Project site, Vachell Lane and Buckley Road, as having high to medium scenic values. As such, the following policies and programs should be considered for evaluation of visual impacts.

Policy COS 8.3.2 Open Space Buffers. Buffers shall be required in the following situations:

- A Between urban development -- including parks and public facilities -- and natural habitats such as creeks, wetlands, hillsides and ridgelines, Morros, scenic rock outcrops and other significant geological features, and grassland communities, to address noise, lighting, storm runoff, spread of invasive, non-native species, and access by people and pets.
- B Between urban development and agricultural operations, to address dust, noise, odors, chemical use, and access by people and pets.
- C Between new development and scenic resources or the greenbelt, to address view blockage, lighting and noise, and visual transition from urban character to rural character.

- D** Urban development or uses located adjacent to the Urban Reserve Line to provide a transition to open space or greenbelt areas. Transition areas should add to the preservation of open space lands or resources. At a minimum, a 50-foot transition area (preserved in essentially a natural state) shall be provided within the project along the project boundary with the Urban Reserve Line, unless the transition area is defined elsewhere in this Element.

Policy COS 9.1.1 Preserve Natural and Agricultural Landscapes - B. Any development that is permitted in natural or agricultural landscapes shall be visually subordinate to and compatible with the landscape features. Such development shall:

- 1) Avoid visually prominent locations such as ridgelines, and slopes exceeding 20 percent.
- 2) Avoid unnecessary grading, vegetation removal, and site lighting.
- 3) Incorporate building forms, architectural materials, and landscaping that respect the setting, including the historical pattern of development in similar settings, and avoid stark contrasts with its setting.
- 4) Preserve scenic or unique landforms, significant trees in terms of size, age, species or rarity, and rock outcroppings.

Policy COS 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 COS 9.1.3 Utilities and Signs. In and near public streets, plazas and parks, features that clutter, degrade, intrude on, or obstruct views should be avoided. Necessary features, such as utility and communication equipment, and traffic equipment and signs should be designed and placed so as to not impinge upon or degrade scenic views of the Morros or surrounding hillsides, or farmland, consistent with the primary objective of safety. New billboard signs shall not be allowed, and existing billboard signs shall be removed as soon as practicable, as provided in the Sign Regulations.

Policy COS 9.1.4 Streetscapes and Major Roadways. In the acquisition, design, construction or significant modification of major roadways (highways/regional routes and arterial streets), the City will promote the creation of “streetscapes” and linear scenic parkways or corridors that promote the City’s visual quality and character, enhance adjacent uses and integrate roadways with surrounding districts.

Policy COS 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 COS 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 COS 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 COS 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.

Policy COS 9.3.6 View blockage Along Scenic Highways. Determine that view blockage along scenic roadways is a significant impact.

Airport Area Specific Plan

Goal 5.7 Unobstructed public views of key scenic resources features from major planning area roadways Guideline A. To the degree feasible, new development should be sited to take advantage of available views of distant scenic resources, as well as onsite or adjacent creeks, wetlands, and other open space features as amenities for workers and visitors.

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 2015). 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).

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 subjects are relevant to this Project analysis.

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, all of which apply to this Project. 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 details qualities such as energy and resource conservation, lighting, storage, trash/recycling enclosures, landscaping, parking, and public art, among other items.

Section 7.1 Creekside Development. The City’s Design Guidelines focus partially on development near creeks and riparian corridors. Guidelines for such development outline the City’s expectations concerning necessary setbacks from creek banks and the maintenance of public visual access to scenic creeks and corridors.

3.1.4 Environmental Impact Analysis

3.1.4.1 Thresholds of Significance

In accordance with Appendix G of the 2016 State CEQA Guidelines, the Project would result in a significant impact to aesthetics and visual resources if it 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; or
- d) Create a new source of substantial light or glare which would adversely affect day or nighttime views in the area.

3.1.4.2 Impact Assessment Methodology

Impacts to visual resources and overall Project aesthetics were assessed through field observations, notes, and site photography of existing resources; analysis of the site’s relationship to the surrounding community; review of the City’s existing policy framework for protection of visual resources; and review of the Project Design Guidelines (Appendix F). The LUCE Update EIR served as a basis of evaluation; analysis of aesthetic resources build upon the conclusions of the LUCE Update EIR and remained consistent. Key Viewing Areas (KVAs) were chosen for the site based on their location within high viewer exposure from public viewing locations near sensitive receptors along Buckley Road, Vachell Lane, Venture Drive, and Horizon Lane. Photographs of the site from the KVAs are included along with discussion of impacts to views from each KVA.

To evaluate potential visual impacts, two primary factors were considered, visual impact susceptibility and visual impact severity, both of which are described below.

Visual Impact Susceptibility

Visual impact susceptibility is the degree to which existing visual resources could be impacted by development of a project. Three factors are considered in the evaluation of visual impact susceptibility: visual quality, viewer exposure, and viewer sensitivity. Together, these factors combine to create a statement of the likelihood that the existing landscape/site would be impacted by the project. Each of these factors is used to rate visual impact susceptibility. As a general guideline, a visual impact susceptibility rating of *low* is achieved if two or more of the three contributing factors are rated *low*. A visual impact susceptibility rating of *high* is achieved if two or more of the three contributing factors are rated *high*. A visual impact susceptibility rating of *moderate* is achieved for all other combinations of the three contributing factors.

- **Visual Quality** is a measure of the overall impression or appeal of an area, as determined by the particular landscape characteristics. In this case, the quality is judged by the views of the Islay Hill and natural mountains and hills around the Project site. Variety, vividness, coherence, uniqueness, harmony, and pattern contribute to three visual quality classifications, *indistinctive* (low), *common* (moderate), and *distinctive* (high). Visual quality is studied as a point of reference to assess how compatible a given project would appear in relation to the established features of the setting.
- **Viewer Exposure** describes the degree to which viewers are exposed to views of the landscape. Viewer exposure considers the number of viewers, the duration of the view and the proximity of viewers to the subject landscape.
- **Viewer Sensitivity** is a measure of the level of interest or concern of viewers regarding an area's visual resources. It is closely associated with viewers' expectations for the area. Viewer sensitivity reflects the importance placed on a given landscape or urban area based on the human perceptions of the intrinsic beauty or aesthetic quality of the existing landforms and adjacent structures.

Visual Impact Severity

Visual impact severity refers to the degree of the negative effect of pertinent project characteristics on the existing landscape. In some cases this may include loss of onsite visual features and landmark structures. A determination of visual impact severity is made through evaluation of the *visual contrast*, *project dominance*, and *view impairment* resulting from a proposed project.

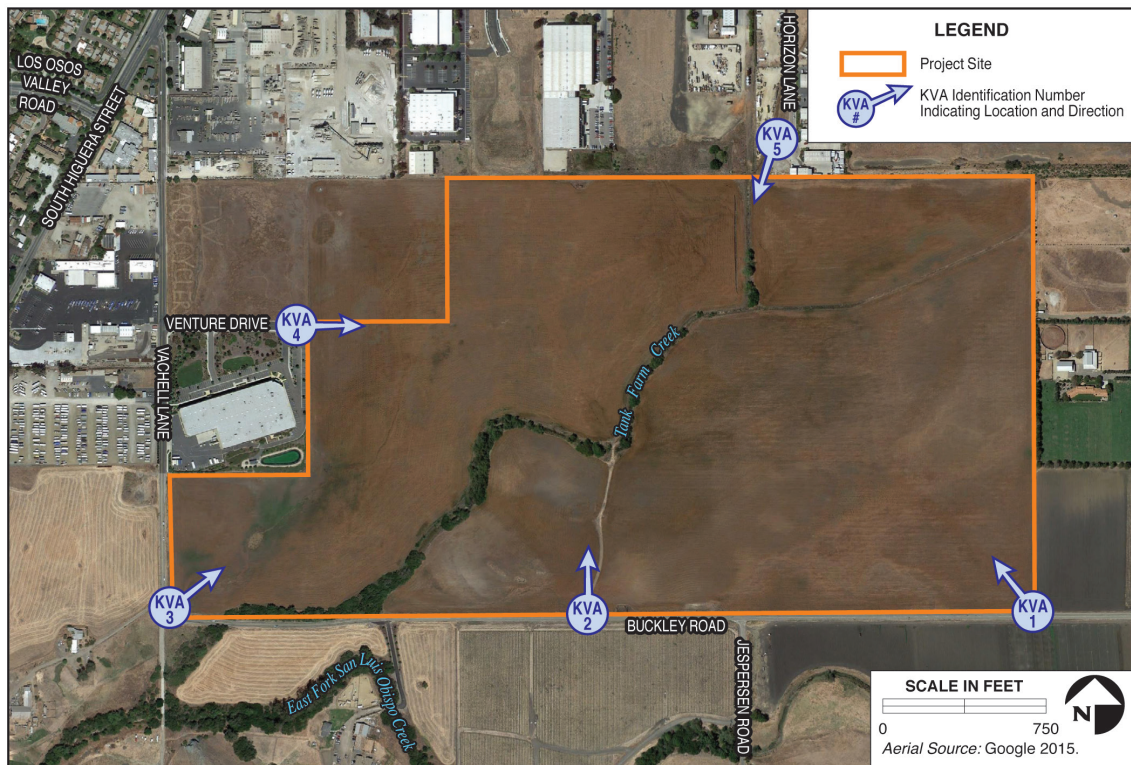
- **Visual Contrast** refers to a potential project's consistency with the visual elements of form, line, color, and texture already established in the landscape. Other elements that are considered in evaluating visual contrast include the degree of natural screening by vegetation and landforms, placement of structures relative to existing

vegetation and landforms, distance from the point of observation, and relative size or scale.

- **Project Dominance** refers to the project’s relationship to other visible landscape components in terms of vertical and horizontal extent. A project's scale and spatial relationship to the existing landscape can be categorized as subordinate, co-dominant, or dominant.
- **View Impairment** refers to the extent to which a project’s scale and position result in the blockage of higher quality visual elements by lower quality elements.

Key Viewing Areas

The potential impacts of the Project on the visual quality of the Project site and surrounding area include those arising from the loss of agricultural land and disruption of view corridors. Five KVAs were selected for analysis in the Project vicinity (see Figure 3.1-1). Photographs of KVAs are used to analyze how the development may affect views and/or visual resources. The KVAs are described below.



KVA Location Map

FIGURE 3.1-1

Key Viewing Area 1: Views of Project site looking northwest along Buckley Road

This KVA represents northwest views of the Project site along Buckley Road from the southeastern corner of the Project site. Uninterrupted views of the Irish Hills and the Morros are especially prominent. Motorists, residents of the region, and visitors along Buckley Road have full view of these visual resources, as well as of the entire Project site.



KVA 1: The Irish Hills and natural hillsides in the region provide a scenic backdrop to the agricultural uses onsite site looking northwest from Buckley Road.

Key Viewing Area 2: Views of Project site looking north along Buckley Road

This KVA represents views north across the Project site along Buckley Road, approximately at a midway point of the Project site. This location shows the quality of views of the Santa Lucia Mountains, South Hills, and agricultural lands for the travelers of Buckley Road.



KVA 2: Travelers along Buckley Road have uninterrupted views across the site's agricultural land to the natural South Hills and Santa Lucia Mountains to the north.

Key Viewing Area 3: Views of Project site looking northeast from the intersection of Buckley Road and Vachell Lane

This KVA represents views northeast across the Project site from the intersection of Buckley Road and Vachell Lane. This KVA provides quality views of the Santa Lucia Mountains, Islay Hill, and the agricultural fields of the Project site. In addition, views of Tank Farm Creek are prominent from this KVA. From this KVA the Lockheed Martin Corporate Office building, adjacent to the west of the Project site, is visible and partially obstructs views of the mountains.



KVA 3: Travelers along the intersection of Buckley Road and Vachell Lane have scenic views of the Santa Lucia Mountains and Islay Hill backing the agricultural land of the site.

Key Viewing Area 4: Views of Project site looking east from Venture Drive

This KVA represents views east across the Project site from the end of Venture Drive and from the Lockheed Martin Corporate Office building. This location shows the quality of



KVA 4: The Santa Lucia Mountains provide a scenic backdrop to the agricultural land of the Project site, for the employees at the Lockheed Martin Corporate Office building.

the views of the Santa Lucia Mountains and Islay Hill backing the agricultural land of the site. This location is proposed to be connected to the new road proposed by the Project.

Key Viewing Area 5: Views of Project site looking south from dead-end of Horizon Lane

This KVA represents views south across the Project site from Horizon Lane. This location shows the quality of views of the Davenport Hills for the employees who work in the region. The new road across the Project site is proposed to connect to Horizon Lane along this KVA.



Short-Term Construction Impacts

Evaluation of construction impacts focuses on the short-term visual impacts resulting from Project construction, the presence of equipment and material storage, as well as alteration of the existing landscape by excavation and earthmoving.

Long-Term Visual Impacts

Long-term Project impacts focus on the visual impacts resulting from Project operation and the permanent presence of new structures and development. It should be noted that existing views can change over time. For example, trees that currently screen a project site could be burned during wildfire events or die from old age or disease. However, new landscaping could be installed and maintained to be part of the long-term landscape character of the area.

3.1.4.3 Project Impacts and Mitigation Measures

The Project would result in the following visual impacts. Table 3.1-1 below provides a summary of these impacts.

Table 3.1-1. Summary of Project Impacts

Aesthetics and Visual Resources Impacts	Mitigation Measures	Residual Significance
VIS-1. Implementation of the Project would result in impacts to the existing scenic resources present at the site, particularly due to conversion of agricultural land to urban development, loss of mature native trees along Tank Farm Creek, and impairment of distant views of the Santa Lucia Mountains, Islay Hill, and Irish Hills from adjacent public roads.	None required	Less than Significant
VIS-2. The Project would result in a change in the existing visual character of the site with the change of the rural character to a commercial and residential neighborhood.	None required	Less than Significant
VIS-3. Construction of the Project would create short-term disruption of the visual appearance of the site for travelers along Buckley Road, Vachell Lane, and Venture Drive.	MM VIS-3	Significant but Mitigable
VIS-4. The Project would introduce a major new source of nighttime light, impacting the quality of the nighttime sky and increasing ambient light.	None required	Less than Significant

Impact VIS-1 Implementation of the Project would result in impacts to the existing scenic resources present at the site, particularly due to conversion of agricultural land to urban development, loss of mature native trees along Tank Farm Creek, and impairment of distant views of the Santa Lucia Mountains, Islay Hill, and Irish Hills from adjacent public roads (Less than Significant).

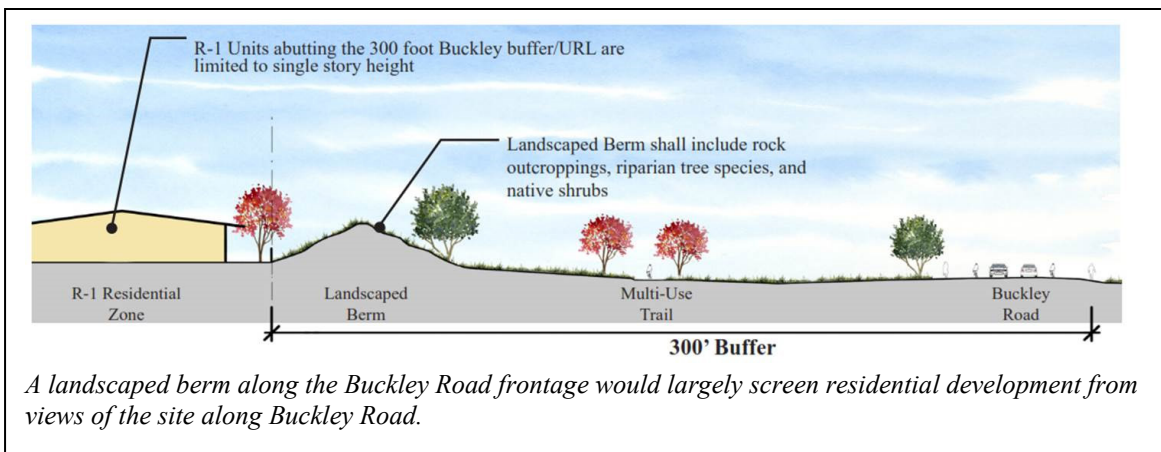
Project development would convert 150 acres of agricultural landscape and open space to a mix of more urban-suburban uses, including 68.23 acres of mixed density residential uses, 16 acres of developed parkland, and 3.34 acres of commercial development; however, 55.3 acres of the site (37 percent) would remain in undeveloped open space. Proposed Project landscaping and development would modify existing views of the Santa Lucia Mountains to the north, Islay Hill to the east, Davenport Hills to the south, Irish Hills to the west, and the Morros to the northwest, which are currently visible across the site (see KVA 1 to KVA 5). The obstruction of views would be most noticeable to travelers along Buckley Road and Vachell Lane as the effects on view blockage from the Project would

be most pronounced to travelers in close proximity to the site. Development of the Project would result in the loss of the large and uninterrupted agricultural landscape that currently occupies the site.

As previously mentioned, the City’s Circulation Element and COS Element, identifies both Buckley Road and Vachell Lane as having high to medium scenic value. Development of the Project site would substantially alter the views and associated scenic values along these roadways through transitioning what is currently an undeveloped landscape of rural character into one with a more urban-suburban aspect. However, Project design along Buckley Road is intended to preserve the quality of views along this road, specifically from KVA 1 to KVA 3, by including a 300-foot-wide open space buffer along the north side of this road and by height limitations on development along this site boundary. The buffer would include natural open space (e.g., creek and wetlands) and agricultural areas that would provide a transition to the agricultural uses adjacent to the site and buffer views of new development from Buckley Road. Adjacent to residential uses, the northern end of this buffer would also support a landscaped berm from Vachell Lane to the proposed Jespersen Road, averaging 7 feet in height, which would screen or partially obstruct views of new residences. In addition, design guidelines would limit homes adjacent to the landscaped berm to a single story, unless it can be demonstrated that a two-story R-1 residence can conform to City noise regulations. The height limit for these residences would preserve the views of the surrounding mountains and hills. The restoration of Tank Farm Creek would enhance the view of the creek along Buckley Road.

Visual Susceptibility Analysis

Visual Quality – The Project would alter the existing scenic views of the Santa Lucia Mountain and South Hills to the north, Islay Hill to the east, Davenport Hills to the south,



and the Morros and Irish Hills to the west. Buckley Road is identified as having high to medium scenic value in the City's Circulation Element and COS Element; and existing views of all the natural hillsides mentioned above, mixed with views of a variety of agricultural lands and open spaces results in a *moderate to high* visual quality rating.

Viewer Exposure – The Project site is highly visible to travelers along Buckley Road and Vachell Lane as well as employees at adjacent businesses such as Lockheed Martin Corporate Office building and other businesses adjacent to the north of the Project site. Buckley Road and Vachell Lane are both identified as having high or high to medium scenic value. Both roadways provide primary access routes to the Airport and other destinations in the southeastern portions of the City and carry 4,000 to 5,000 vehicle trips daily. Based on the number of viewers and the close proximity of viewing points to the Project site, viewer exposure is given a *high* rating. Viewer exposure would remain *high* after Project implementation, with multiple elements of the Project, including trees, landscaping, and buildings, directly visible to travelers moving in both directions on both Buckley Road and Vachell Lane.

Viewer Sensitivity – Current views of the site from Buckley Road and Vachell Lane are of high to medium quality, and views across the site provide employees of nearby businesses with uninterrupted views of the natural hillsides located to the south and east. Development of the site has the potential to disrupt these views. These factors result in a viewer sensitivity rating of *moderate to high*.

Based on consideration of visual quality, viewer exposure, and viewer sensitivity, a visual impact susceptibility rating of *moderate to high* has been concluded.

Visual Severity Analysis

Visual Contrast – Currently, most of the Project site consists of open agricultural land mostly bounded to the north and west by commercial and industrial development and developed lands along Vachell Lane, South Higuera Street, Suburban Road, and Tank Farm Road. Development of the Project would substantially alter the visual character of the Project site from rural to urban-suburban. However, the inclusion of a 300-foot-wide open space buffer along Buckley Road would help protect unobstructed views of distant hills and preserve some of the open space or agricultural foreground views from Buckley Road, reducing the severity of changes in views from KVAs 1 through 3 and minimizing visual contrast between agricultural landscapes along Buckley Road and development within the Project site. However, development along Vachell Lane would not be set back from the

Project's western boundary and new R-2 residences up to two stories in height would potentially obstruct views of the hills to the east.

Considering its relationship to both built and natural visual resources, the Project would result in a *moderate to high* level of overall visual contrast.

Project Dominance – Development of urban-suburban uses under the Project would result in loss of open agricultural land characteristic of the vicinity. The Project would be a relatively dominant feature given the distance to adjacent commercial and light industrial uses from KVAs along Buckley Road. However, the proposed 300-foot-wide buffer and associated landscaped berm would reduce or limit such visual dominance. Views from KVAs 1 through 3 would be of partially obstructed mid-range views of residences well set back and partially screened, while views of new Project development from KVAs 4 and 5 would be more prominent, but generally more consistent with the urban character of light industrial and commercial development surrounding these KVAs. Considering existing views and development patterns, the Project would result in a *moderate to high* level of Project dominance.

View Impairment – The development of the Project would displace open scenic agricultural land and impair high quality scenic resources available across the site. Existing views of agricultural land framed by views of mountains and hillsides along Buckley Road, Vachell Lane, and Venture Drive would be replaced by 720 new residences, commercial development, roads, parking, and other infrastructure, along with developed parks and undeveloped open space. Project Design Guidelines would require establishment of a 300-foot-wide buffer along Buckley Road and maximum height standards of one-story for all future residences along the buffer. This buffer and height limitation would preserve the majority of existing views of the distant mountains. Tank Farm Creek would be restored and an open space buffer would be designed along the creek, preserving its visual quality. With regard to proposed building and landscape design, the Project would result in a *moderate to high* level of view impairment.

Analysis of both visual susceptibility and visual severity concludes that development of the Project has a moderate to high potential of causing visual impact. As mentioned above, views from KVA-1 to KVA-3 would be modified; however, the inclusion of the open space buffer and compliance with policies such as Policy LU 1.4, Urban Edges Character, and Policy 15.1.2, Development along Scenic Routes, would ensure impacts are minimized. Views from KVA-4 and KVA-5 would be partially obstructed by the new development and vegetation design to screen off the Project. However, roadway connections are

proposed for the Project along these KVAs, so views of Islay Hill from Venture Drive and Davenport Hills from Horizon Lane would partially be maintained. In addition, as stated in the LUCE Update EIR, the Project as a whole is subject to review by the City staff, as well as the Architectural Review Committee to ensure compliance with the City's applicable design guidelines and conclude that the Project would result in minimal impacts to scenic resources. Therefore, consistent with the conclusion of the LUCE Update EIR, adherence to City policies and regulations as addressed through Project design would ensure that impacts associated to scenic resources would be *less than significant*.

Impact VIS-2 The Project would result in a change in the existing visual character of the site with the change of the rural character to a commercial and residential neighborhood (Less than Significant).

As previously described, the Project vicinity is primarily characterized by agricultural and undeveloped open lands, with light industrial and commercial development to the north and west. The Project would facilitate development of 720 residences on approximately 68.23 acres, along with 15,000 sf of commercial development, 23.03 acres of developed urban parks, roads, bicycle paths, and other urban infrastructure, and retention of 55.30 acres of open space. Collectively, this would substantially alter the visual character of the majority of the site from rural-agricultural to urban-suburban development. Although this would be a major transformation of the site, the Project would include open space setbacks along the southern and eastern boundary. The setback fronting the central and eastern region of Buckley Road would be utilized for agricultural purposes to provide a transition into the agricultural land uses surrounding the site.

To address this change in character, the Project would include guidelines to maintain the visual quality of the site, including buffers adjacent to the site's southern and eastern boundaries. The landscape design would be oriented to reflect both the natural and agricultural landscape of San Luis Obispo by providing drought tolerant vegetation and trees along the buffer and maintaining agricultural operation in central and eastern regions of the open space buffer. This landscape design would provide an adequate transition from the new residential and commercial development to its adjacent agricultural lands.

In addition, the architectural character for development in Avila Ranch is intended to represent the agricultural heritage associated with southern San Luis Obispo as well as architectural styles typically found within the City. The Project design guidelines establish standards to ensure all residential development includes only the following architectural styles; Agrarian, California Bungalow, Contemporary Craftsman, or Mission. Each

neighborhood would have a mix of styles, with one or two dominant, in order to provide architectural interest that contributes to community character. The design guidelines also provide standards for scale, mass, color and other features to maintain variability within neighborhoods. To ensure a good transition, the Project would fully articulate building façades and use architecturally compatible treatments throughout development.

The open space buffer at the site boundaries and Tank Farm Creek, along with the Project Design Guidelines for all residential and commercial architectural design would adhere to the policies in the City's LUCE Update and would maintain a high visual quality of the site. Such policies include Policy LU 1.4, Urban Edges, which requires development to maintain a clear boundary between urban development and undeveloped open space; and Policy COS 2.3.7, Natural Features, which requires residential developments to preserve natural site features such as views and creeks. The architectural and landscape design guidelines are intended to maintain the agricultural character of the area and to protect and improve the visual quality; such guidelines assure compliance with Policy COS 9.1.5, View Protection in New Development. Limiting the height of structures and providing vegetation to screen new development are other features that would assure compliance with multiple policies in the General Plan. In addition, the development would be in accordance to the City's Community Design Guidelines. Therefore, as determined by the LUCE Update, adhering to City policies and regulation, as well as the architectural and landscape design guidelines, would ensure impacts related to change in existing visual character are *less than significant*.

Impact VIS-3 Construction of the Project would create short-term disruption of the visual appearance of the site for travelers along Buckley Road, Vachell Lane, and Venture Drive (Significant but Mitigable).

Construction of the Project would occur over six phases, which is anticipated to be completed over an estimated period of 10 years. Construction operations of the Project would result in unpleasant aesthetics of the site during this period. Operation and parking of large machinery, mass grading, removal of low hills, fill stockpiling and filling of low lying areas of the site, soil excavation, construction lighting, and other construction activities would create disruptive scenes that would substantially alter the existing visual character of the site. Throughout construction of the Project, these activities would result in stark visual contrast to existing views and surrounding rural landscape for travelers along Buckley Road, Vachell Lane, and Venture Drive. Despite these potential impacts,

construction operations would be in phases and visual resources would be impacted for the duration of each construction phase, ranging from one to three years each.

Additionally, the Project would implement standard construction-related Best Management Practices (BMPs) for the site that would reduce potential impacts to aesthetic resources caused by these activities. Examples of standard construction-related BMPs include hydro-seeding and revegetation of disturbed areas, and staging of construction equipment in a designated location to reduce potential eyesores caused by storage of equipment onsite near scenic viewsheds. In addition to BMPs, Phase 1 construction includes the installation of new vegetation along the landscape berm from the western end of Buckley east about 1,100 feet. New vegetation would include drought tolerant vegetation along with trees such as Desert Willow, Mexican Palo Verde, and Coulter pine among others. Such new vegetation along with the riparian vegetation in Tank Farm Creek would partially screen Phase 1 construction.

The visual changes created by the presence of construction equipment, disruption of site landscape, and unfinished structures would alter the visual character of the site during the 10-year construction period. While this impact would be short-term within each phase, construction would be visible from roadways bordering the Project site over a period of up to 10 years, resulting in adverse impacts to visual character. Existing vegetation along Tank Farm Creek would add partial screening of construction activities and Project landscaping would begin to screen some development from public viewing areas; however, the alteration of visual character during construction would continue to be highly visible in some areas, including Buckley Road.

Therefore, with the implementation of BMPs and short-term duration of construction activities for all phases, impacts to aesthetic resources associated with construction during Project development are considered *significant but mitigable*.

Mitigation Measure

MM VIS-3 The Applicant shall include the development of the entire landscape and open space buffer outside of the URL within Phase I of the construction period. Vegetation within the buffer would provide partial screening of ongoing construction.

Plan Requirements and Timing. The Development Plan and landscape plan shall indicate installation of the entire open space buffer within Phase

1. The Applicant shall complete the installation of the open space buffer prior to the issuance of grading building permits for Phase 2.

Monitoring. The City shall ensure compliance within the Development Plan and landscape plan.

Residual Impact

Implementation of MM VIS-3 would ensure that vegetation along the buffer is in place prior to initiation of Phase 2 construction of the site, to provide partial screening of the ongoing construction. During Phase 1, which spans over approximately 3 years, construction within the southwestern portion of the site would be largely visible from Buckley Road. However, this partial screening along with construction related BMPs and adherence to General Plan goals and policies would reduce this impact, resulting in less than significant residual impacts.

Impact VIS-4 The Project would introduce a major new source of nighttime light, impacting the quality of the nighttime sky and increasing ambient light (Less than Significant).

The Project site is designated for urban development, but is within the rural fringe of the City; as such it is not subject to intensive existing sources of light and glare. The Project would result in the development of open agricultural lands that do not currently include any substantial sources of artificial light that degrade the existing views of the nighttime sky. Development of this site would alter current lighting conditions by substantially increasing the amount of exterior lighting fixtures and light produced on the Project site, which would affect nighttime views in the area. Nighttime lighting in the vicinity is minimal and focused to the urban area to the northwest of the site. As a result, development of 720 homes and 15,000 sf of commercial development would result in a substantial increase in nighttime lighting in the Project site.

The Project is designed to provide adequate illumination levels to aid the transitioning of urban to rural uses while also providing an appropriate illumination level for public safety. The lighting for the Project is intended to maintain the current low lighting levels that differentiate between existing urban and rural land uses within the area. In accordance, the Project Design Guidelines state that exterior lighting would be in compliance with the City's Community Design Standards, the Airport Area Specific Plan (AASP), and the City's Night-Sky Preservation Ordinance. Lighting fixtures would be properly shielded and directed downward to avoid light spill and glare. As identified by the LUCE Update,

adhering to the existing regulations and ordinances, as well as the suitability of the Project Design Guidelines, would ensure that increased lighting resulting from the Project is reduced and less than significant.

Even though the Project Design Guidelines and adherence to City policies and regulations would ensure that new exterior lighting is reduced, the increased development and vehicle lighting in the vicinity would result in substantial change in ambient nighttime light compared to its current state. The Project would introduce artificial lighting to a 150-acre area that currently does not possess any artificial light source. However, as mentioned above, the Project vicinity is generally comprised of agricultural, commercial, and light industrial uses, which are not considered to be light-sensitive land uses. Therefore, since night visual exposure in the vicinity is low and adherence to the City policies and regulation would insure that the existing low levels of lighting are maintained, impacts associated with the creation of new sources of exterior lighting would be less than significant.

3.1.4.4 Cumulative Impacts

The Project, in combination with approved, pending, and proposed development in San Luis Obispo, would contribute toward creating a defined transition from the rural environment towards the south of the City to the urban environment to the north 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 Architectural Review Committee. As concluded by the LUCE Update EIR, all development shall adhere to the LUCE Update policies to result in less than significant impacts. Therefore, although the visual character could incrementally change as development intensity increases, such change is consistent with the General Plan vision for urban environment and impacts to visual quality would not be considered cumulatively considerable. The overall aesthetic impact of cumulative development in the Project vicinity would be *less than significant*.

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