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MEMORANDUM

To: California Department of Transportation, District 5 Office

From: Emily Creel, SWCA Environmental Consultants

Via: Luke Schwartz, City of San Luis Obispo Public Works

Date: April 26, 2019

Re: **Prado Road Bridge Widening Project Visual Impact Assessment / SWCA Project No. 27314**

INTRODUCTION

This memorandum provides the rationale for the values given for each question in the Federal Highway Administration's (FHWA) Visual Impact Assessment (VIA) Scoping Questionnaire for the Prado Road Widening Project (project). This information was requested by the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans or DOT) in the Preliminary Environmental Study Guidance letter to the City of San Luis Obispo Public Works (City).

ENVIRONMENTAL COMPATIBILITY

1. Will the project result in a noticeable change in the physical characteristics of the existing environment?

(Consider all project components and construction impacts - both permanent and temporary, including landform changes, structures, noise barriers, vegetation removal, railing, signage, and contractor activities.)

High level of permanent change (3)	Moderate level of permanent change (2)	Low level of permanent or temporary change (1)	No noticeable change (0)

High level of permanent change (3): The City, with funding from the FHWA and oversight by Caltrans, proposes to replace the existing Prado Road Bridge (Bridge Number 49C-107) structure at the same location and alignment. The City has determined that the existing Prado Road Bridge over San Luis Obispo Creek needs to be widened to eliminate a current roadway constriction at the bridge and accommodate future traffic needs in the section of Prado Road between U.S. Route 101 (U.S. 101) and South Higuera Street. The purpose of the proposed project is to widen the Prado Road Bridge with associated intersection improvements to accommodate current and planned future traffic demands. Additional goals of the proposed project are to provide bicycle and pedestrian facilities across the bridge

and associated modifications to the adjacent Class 1 trail (the Bob Jones City-to-Sea Trail [Bob Jones Trail]), including a north-south extension of that trail under Prado Road.

The new bridge would be substantially wider than the existing structure, which would be widened from approximately 27 feet to 104 feet to accommodate additional through lanes, turn lanes, bike lanes, and sidewalks. The proposed bridge would generally be compatible in size with the proximate Prado Road/South Higuera Street intersection but would be substantially wider than the existing Prado Road width on both sides of the bridge. Although the widened structure would not represent a new land use at this location, the project will substantially increase the amount of transportation infrastructure in the area, resulting in a more urbanized visual character.

2. Will the project complement or contrast with the visual character desired by the community?

(Evaluate the scale and extent of the project features compared to the surrounding scale of the community. Is the project likely to give an urban appearance to an existing rural or suburban community? Do you anticipate that the change will be viewed by the public as positive or negative? Research planning documents, or talk with local planners and community representatives to understand the type of visual environment local residents envision for their community.)

Low compatibility (3) **Moderate compatibility (2)** **High compatibility (1)**

High compatibility (1): Prado Road is a critical component of the City's Circulation Element, shown as an arterial route west of U.S. 101 and as a highway/regional route east of U.S. 101. The Prado Road Bridge over San Luis Obispo Creek was built in 1957 and is located approximately 1,400 feet east of U.S. 101 on the western segment of the signalized intersection of Prado Road and South Higuera Street. This bridge is a significant constriction point along Prado Road as it is 26 feet wide and the corridor is over 60 feet wide both west and the east of the bridge; therefore, existing views of the bridge reflect an incompatibly sized structure. The City desires to widen the bridge crossing to meet current and future expected public travel needs, including adding pedestrian sidewalks and shoulders, which would increase compatibility with surrounding transportation infrastructure to some degree.

The general setting is commercial and includes an existing trailhead for the Bob Jones Trail (a pedestrian and bicycle trail in the area). The bridge currently serves vehicular and pedestrian traffic but has no sidewalks or shoulders.

The existing structure is somewhat degraded and does not provide a particularly interesting view. The proposed bridge structure would be built at grade and would not protrude into the skyline. The bridge will be designed to integrate with the existing trailhead of the Bob Jones Trail and the Community Art display at the site, and the ultimate design of the bridge will be compatible with visual character desired by the community, including development of bike lanes, sidewalks, and a Bob Jones Trail extension.

3. What level of local concern is there for the types of project features (e.g., bridge structures, large excavations, sound barriers, or median planting removal) and construction impacts that are proposed?

(Certain project improvements can be of special interest to local citizens, causing a heightened level of public concern, and requiring a more focused visual analysis.)

High concern (3)	Moderate concern (2)	Low concern (1)	Negligible project features (0)

Low concern (1): As discussed previously, Prado Road is a critical component of the City's Circulation Element, and the Prado Road Bridge is currently posing a significant constriction point along Prado Road, as it is 26 feet wide and the corridor is over 60 feet wide both west and the east of the bridge. The City is currently also in the planning phase for development of a new northbound ramp intersection and overcrossing at U.S. 101 and Prado Road, so the community is aware of the expansion of transportation facilities along Prado Road. The proposed overcrossing and ramp intersection was a component of the recently approved San Luis Ranch Specific Plan project, which has undergone substantial public review and comment over the last several years.

Proposed project features are similar to those that currently exist, except that the structure would be significantly widened predominantly to the south of the structure. Development and construction impacts could heighten public concern, as project implementation would result in restricted access of Prado Road and the Bob Jones Trail. Construction work will be scheduled to provide one lane of traffic in each direction during peak travel times and on weekends. During non-peak hours, or during night work, Prado Road may be temporarily closed to facilitate work performed at abutments, placement of the precast girders, and relocation of utilities. Notice will be provided to adjacent businesses during periods of full closure. Effort will be made to minimize the impact to bicycle and pedestrian traffic during construction; however, the Bob Jones Trail will be impacted during the resetting of the bicycle and pedestrian bridge over San Luis Obispo Creek. The widening would also require minor relocation (by approximately 20 feet) of a piece of cultural artwork at the corner of Prado Road and South Higuera Street.

Construction impacts would be limited in duration and no substantial permanent visual construction impacts are expected. Planned improvements at Prado Road Bridge and the Prado Road/South Higuera Street intersection have been discussed and identified as necessary in several publicly circulated environmental documents and at several public meetings in the City; therefore, the proposed improvements have been previously vetted by the public as mitigation needed for other development projects in the City. The level of concern for the project features is anticipated to be low and the proposed construction impacts are typical for this type of project.

4. Is it anticipated that to mitigate visual impacts, it may be necessary to develop extensive or novel mitigation strategies to avoid, minimize, or compensate for adverse impacts or will using conventional mitigation strategies, such as landscape or architectural treatment adequately mitigate adverse visual impacts?

Project redesign needed (3)	Extensive mitigation likely (2)	Mitigation likely (1)	No mitigation likely (0)

Mitigation likely (1): Minor construction-related visual impacts such as those discussed under Question 3 above, shall be mitigated by restoration within and adjacent to San Luis Obispo Creek and in all areas of disturbance. No novel or extensive mitigation measures are necessary.

5. Will this project, when seen collectively with other projects, result in an aggregate adverse change (cumulative impacts) in overall visual quality or character?

(Identify any projects [both state and local] in the area that have been constructed in recent years and those currently planned for future construction. The window of time and the extent of area applicable to possible cumulative impacts should be based on a reasonable anticipation of the viewing public's perception.)

Cumulative impacts likely: 0–5 years (3)	Cumulative impacts likely: 6–10 years (2)	Cumulative impacts unlikely (1)

Cumulative impacts likely in 6-10 years (2): The City's Circulation Element reflects the future extension of Prado Road to the east to connect to Broad Street as a Highway/Regional Route between U.S. 101 and Broad Street. The Circulation Element also reflects the extension of Prado Road to the west as an overcrossing or new interchange with U.S. 101 and planning for this project is underway. The existing bridge is completely surrounded by existing commercial and industrial development, and changes to the character of the immediate project area would be primarily related to the increase in size of transportation infrastructure. This area of the City is expected to experience future growth and development that would also change the overall visual quality of the area into a more urbanized use. The bridge expansion is proposed in part to accommodate that anticipated growth. Increased usage and development along Prado Road could eventually change the overall character of the area into a more urbanized use, but these impacts would be long term.

VIEWER SENSITIVITY

1. What is the potential that the project proposal may be controversial within the community, or opposed by any organized group?

(This can be researched initially by talking with the state DOT [Department of Transportation] and local agency management and staff familiar with the affected community's sentiments as evidenced by past projects and/or current information.)

High potential (3)	Moderate potential (2)	Low potential (1)	No potential (0)

Low potential (1): The project proposes widening and replacing the functionally obsolete Prado Road Bridge that currently acts as a constriction point along Prado Road. Bridge replacement is necessary to facilitate planned and approved future development projects and is identified in the City's local circulation plans. The project would minimize temporary effects on the Bob Jones Trail and improve bike and pedestrian access along the structure.

The bridge is located in a generally developed area in the city of San Luis Obispo, and as discussed above, the community is aware of the expansion of transportation facilities along Prado Road through substantial public outreach on the San Luis Ranch project and planned Prado Road overcrossing and northbound ramp intersection. There was an organized group that opposed the Prado Road Extension and it's possible they could oppose the widening of the bridge because it facilitates the eventual extension of Prado. However, the City is conducting community outreach to keep potentially interested or affected community members informed of the project and process. Based on the ongoing community outreach, the City believes that the potential for opposition is low.

2. How sensitive are potential viewer-groups likely to be regarding visible changes proposed by the project?

(Consider among other factors the number of viewers within the group, probable viewer expectations, activities, viewing duration, and orientation. The expected viewer sensitivity level may be scoped by applying professional judgment, and by soliciting information from other DOT staff, local agencies and community representatives familiar with the affected community's sentiments and demonstrated concerns.)

High sensitivity (3) **Moderate sensitivity (2)** **Low sensitivity (1)**

Low sensitivity (1): The project is located in an urbanized area and the existing structure is somewhat degraded and does not provide a particularly interesting view. It would be directly visible by a high number of viewers from Prado Road and South Higuera Street; however, due to the extent of urban development in the project vicinity, the existing degraded condition of the bridge, the provision of bike and pedestrian improvements, and the extent of public disclosure of transportation improvements in this area in the past, sensitivity is expected to be low. The project has been publicly vetted as a mitigation requirement for recently approved large development projects in the city, and the City is conducting community outreach to keep potentially interested or affected community members informed of the project and process. Therefore, the City anticipates that view sensitivity related to the project would be low.

3. To what degree does the project's aesthetic approach appear to be consistent with applicable laws, ordinances, regulations, policies or standards?

Low compatibility (3) **Moderate compatibility (2)** **High compatibility (1)**

High compatibility (1): The project is identified in the City's Circulation Element as a future project. It is a necessary improvement for meeting traffic and circulation goals of the City and is expected to be largely consistent with policies and goals of applicable planning documents.

4. Are any permits going to be required by outside regulatory agencies (i.e., Federal, State, or local)?

(Permit requirements can have an unintended consequence on the visual environment. Anticipated permits, as well as specific permit requirements - which are defined by the permitter, may be determined by talking with the project environmental planner and project engineer. Note: coordinate with the state DOT representative responsible for obtaining the permit prior to communicating directly with any permitting agency. Permits that may benefit from additional analysis include permits that may result in visible built features, such as infiltration basins or devices under a storm water permit or a retaining wall for wetland avoidance or permits for work in sensitive areas such as coastal development permits or on federal lands, such as impacts to Wild and Scenic Rivers.)

Yes (3) **Maybe (2)** **No (1)**

Yes (3): Implementation of the project would require approval of permits for work within San Luis Obispo Creek, including, at a minimum, a streambed alteration agreement from the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, Section 404 and 401 permits from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and Regional Water Quality Control Board under the Clean Water Act, and a biological opinion from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's National Marine Fisheries Service. None of these permits are likely to have unintended effects on the visual environment.

5. Will the project sponsor or public benefit from a more detailed visual analysis in order to help reach consensus on a course of action to address potential visual impacts?

(Consider the proposed project features, possible visual impacts, and probable mitigation recommendations.)

Yes (3) **Maybe (2)** **No (1)**

Maybe (2): The City has determined that the existing Prado Road Bridge over San Luis Obispo Creek needs to be widened to eliminate a current roadway constriction at the bridge and accommodate future traffic needs along Prado Road through its intersection with South Higuera Street. Although the project does not propose a new or substantially different land use, the massing of transportation infrastructure would be significantly increased at the project site, resulting in a more urbanized visual character. The City is conducting community outreach to keep potentially interested or affected community members informed of the project and process. A more detailed visual analysis may be helpful to reach consensus on the most appropriate course of action to address potential visual impacts.

DETERMINING THE LEVEL OF VIA

The total score from the questionnaire is an indicator of the appropriate level of VIA to perform for the project. This score, in combination with the project team's collective professional judgments, determines the level of VIA that is sufficient and reasonable. The level of VIA is largely based on the following ranges of total scores:

- **Score 6–9:** No noticeable physical changes to the environment are proposed and no further analysis is required. Print out a copy of this completed questionnaire for your project file or Preliminary Environmental Study (PES).

- **Score 10–14:** Negligible visual changes to the environment are proposed. A brief Memorandum addressing visual issues providing a rationale of why a technical study is not required.
- **Score 15–19:** Noticeable visual changes to the environment are proposed. An abbreviated VIA is appropriate in this case. The assessment would briefly describe project features, impacts, and any avoidance and minimization measures. Visual simulations would be optional. Go to the Directions for using and accessing the Minor VIA Annotated Outline.
- **Score 20–24:** Noticeable visual changes to the environment are proposed. A fully developed VIA is appropriate. This technical study will likely receive public review. Go to the Directions for using and accessing the Moderate VIA Annotated Outline.
- **Score 25–30:** Noticeable visual changes to the environment are proposed. A fully developed VIA is appropriate that includes photo simulations. It is appropriate to alert the Project Development Team to the potential for highly adverse impacts and to consider project alternatives to avoid those impacts. Go to the Directions for using and accessing the Advanced/Complex VIA Annotated Outline.

Total Project Score

Total Project Score is 16: Therefore, an abbreviated VIA is considered the appropriate level of VIA documentation for the project.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

- Total project score is 16, indicating that an abbreviated VIA is considered the appropriate level of VIA documentation for the project;
- This conclusion is based on the results of the questionnaire and the project team's professional judgment;
- Implementation of the project is anticipated to result in minor temporary visual impacts during construction, including the staging of equipment, flagging of construction areas, and stockpiling of construction materials and demolition debris along Prado Road and in the vicinity of the bridge;
- All of the temporary impacts will be mitigated for through restoration of the project site and immediate surrounding vicinity;
- Implementation of the project is anticipated to result in an increase in the massing and noticeability of transportation infrastructure, resulting in a more urbanized visual character in the project area; and
- A more detailed visual analysis may be helpful to reach consensus on the most appropriate course of action to address potential visual impacts.