Visual Impact Assessment of the proposed Highway 101 San Jose Creek Bridges Project

On Route 101 in Santa Barbara County
In the City of Goleta at the
San Jose Creek Bridges

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Caltrans District Five Landscape Architecture Department – February 2019

This study assesses the visual impacts which may result from the proposed bridges replacement along Highway 101 at San Jose Creek in the City of Goleta. The primary purpose of this report is to determine if a change in the visual environment would occur, the extent of that change, and whether that change would likely be perceived as a positive or negative one. This analysis attempts to identify the specific cause of potential change, and if a change in character is identified it is compared to viewer's expected sensitivity.

The National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 as amended (NEPA) establishes that the federal government use all practicable means to ensure all Americans safe, healthful, productive, and aesthetically (emphasis added) and culturally pleasing surroundings (42 U.S.C. 4331[b][2]). To further emphasize this point, the Federal Highway Administration in its implementation of NEPA (23 U.S.C. 109[h]) directs that final decisions regarding projects are to be made in the best overall public interest taking into account adverse environmental impacts, including among others, the destruction or disruption of aesthetic values.

The California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) establishes that it is the policy of the state to take all action necessary to provide the people of the state "with…enjoyment of aesthetic, natural, scenic and historic environmental qualities" (CA Public Resources Code Section 21001[b]). This report analyzes and discloses potential project affects consistent with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) definitions and guidelines.

Project Proposal

The proposed project, located 9 miles west of Santa Barbara in the City of Goleta on Highway 101, involves complete replacement of San Jose Creek bridges. The bridge structures have formed an alkali-silica reaction which cannot be arrested and has no effective means of treatment. The scope of work will include replacement of both bridge spans, widening of shoulders to 10-feet, raising the southbound bridge profile to match the existing northbound profile, adding rock slope protection (RSP) under the bridges and upgrading the creek bed channel walls to prevent them from being undermined.

The 93-foot-long structures have structure depths of 2'-6" and 1'-6". Under the bridges, the side slopes are concrete lined with a natural bottom creek bed. The bridge carries an average of more

than 60,000 vehicles per day. The existing bridges have three 12-foot lanes in each direction, 8-foot wide inside shoulders, and an approximately a 6-foot median.

The existing double median barrier at the bridge will be removed and replaced in kind to match height and aesthetic coloring and new landscaping will be placed between the replaced median barriers without impact to the existing adjacent landscape planting and irrigation systems. The existing concrete lining on the slopes of the creek channel under the bridges and at both the northbound and southbound ends (about 50 feet each way) will be removed and replaced with rock slope protection (RSP) side slopes. A lift of soil will be placed on top of the creek bed RSP to provide a natural bottom.

Visual Setting

The project is located on Highway 101, in the City of Goleta, California. The project is located in a suburban/urban environment and the visual context of the project includes both natural and built elements. Views from the project site include the vegetation along San Jose Creek, the inland hills, as well as surrounding urban and suburban development.

Through the project limits Highway 101 is a six-lane classified freeway. The highway median is planted and the roadsides are well-vegetated. Calle Real, an important local collector road parallels Highway 101 to the north.

Project Impacts

Appendix G of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) Guidelines requires that the following issues be considered in determining the level of project impacts:

Will the project:

a. Have a substantial adverse effect on a scenic vista?

Scenic vistas in the project vicinity include views of the distant views of the inland mountains, and the natural creeks and slough. From the project site San Jose Creek is the most visually dominant scenic element because of its close proximity to the bridge. The inland hills are also primary contributors to the scenic vista but are less visually dominant because of intervening vegetation, topography and viewing distance.

The proposed bridge would cause a minimal effect on views of scenic vistas in the area. As seen from Highway 101, the primary public viewpoint, the project would affect views for a relatively short duration. The creek and distant hills would remain visible and would continue to contribute to the scenic vista.

The bridges would be constructed with minor modifications to the alignment and deck profiles. However these changes to the new bridge structures would not reduce or block views of the surrounding scenic vistas. As a result, the project would have little to no adverse effect on the

existing scenic vistas, including but not limited to views of the creek way and views of the inland mountains.

b. Substantially damage scenic resources, including, but not limited to, trees, rock outcroppings, and historic buildings within a state scenic highway?

This question is not applicable to the project since Highway 101 through the project limits is not classified as an Officially Designated State Scenic Highway.

c. Substantially degrade the existing visual character or quality of the site and its surroundings?

The existing visual character of the project area is based primarily on its proximity to San Jose Creek and the inland hillsides visible in the distance. The surrounding suburban development and the freeway itself also contribute to the overall character of the site and its surroundings.

Although the existing San Jose Creek bridges are visible in the immediate project vicinity, they not architecturally unique nor do they establish a particularly memorable style in support of a high quality visual setting. Project elements above the bridge deck such as bridge and roadside railing, median barrier would be visible, however these type elements are already seen on the existing bridge structures and adjacent roadside and their replacement would not add new or unexpected visual elements. This minor visual change would not be unexpected in the immediate highway context, which includes bridge structures and other utilitarian elements.

Any vegetation removal associated with the project would be fully planted and established. As a result, any work in and near the creek would over time be fully revegetated and result in a natural visual condition.

The relatively intact visual character of the setting would not be substantially reduced by the proposed changes.

d. Create a new source of substantial light or glare which would adversely affect day or nighttime views in the area?

The project proposes no new lighting or sources of glare and would have no related effect on day or nighttime views.