VISUAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT (Minor Level)

Esplanade Corridor Safety and Accessibility Improvement Project



Source: ICF

California Department of Transportation

District 3, Butte County

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VISUAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT (Minor Level)

STATE OF CALIFORNIA

Department of Transportation

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Statement of Compliance: Produced in compliance with National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) requirements, as appropriate, to meet the level of analysis and documentation that has been determined necessary for this project.

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List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

ADA Americans with Disabilit	ies Act
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CEQA California Environmental Quality Act

CMC Chico Municipal Code

FHWA Federal Highway Administration

MPH miles per hour

NEPA National Environmental Policy Act

VIA Visual Impact Assessment

Visual Impact Assessment Esplanade Corridor Safety and Accessibility Improvement Project

1.0 Purpose of the Study and Assessment Method

The purpose of this Visual Impact Assessment (VIA) is to document potentially detrimental visual impacts caused by the Esplanade Corridor Safety and Accessibility Improvement Project (proposed project or project) and recommend measures to lessen these impacts. Visual impacts are demonstrated by identifying visual resources in the project area, measuring the amount of change that would occur as a result of the project, and predicting how the affected public would respond to or perceive those changes. This VIA follows the guidance outlined in the publication *Visual Impact Assessment for Highway Projects* published by the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) in March 1981.

2.0 Project Description

The project proposes to create a separated and paved Class I multi-use bicycle / pedestrian path along the Esplanade, connecting downtown; California State University, Chico; Chico Junior and Senior High Schools; a regional hospital; and neighborhoods adjacent to the existing Airport Class I multi-use path at 11th Avenue. The parallel street to the east of the Esplanade, Oleander Avenue, would also receive signage, sidewalk, signal, and stop control improvements between 10th Avenue and Memorial Way. A roundabout would be installed at the intersection of Oleander Avenue and Memorial Way adjacent to Chico Junior High School. Two traffic signals are proposed to be installed at the intersections of Oleander Avenue / 1st Avenue and West Sacramento Avenue / Esplanade.

Existing traffic signals would be outfitted with pedestrian signal crossing equipment (now absent), updated detection equipment, an associated traffic signal timing plan to accommodate the added pedestrian phases, and pedestrian refuge islands where applicable. Appropriate Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) ramps and sidewalks would be added.

The proposed non-motorized "complete streets" improvements, along the Esplanade corridor and on Oleander Avenue, are listed in more detail in the sections below and are shown on the project footprint map (Appendix A).

Pedestrian Improvements

- Install new pedestrian countdown crossing signal heads and pedestrian push button activation at all existing traffic signals on the Esplanade with sufficient crossing timing that meets federal guidelines.
- Add vehicle detection as necessary replacing timed signalization with an on-demand detection system.
- Provide adequate pedestrian crossing refuge islands at unsignalized intersections on the Esplanade.
- Consistently mark pedestrian crosswalks at all crossing locations.
- Prepare enhanced signal timing plan to respond to vehicles, bikes and pedestrian needs.
- Maintain signal progression on the Esplanade during off-peak hours.

ADA Improvements

- Improve connection to the 11th Avenue Airport Class I multi-use path with adequate walkway and ramps, on the southwest, southeast and northeast corners of the intersection.
- Install ADA accessible curb ramps at all crosswalk locations.
- Install missing sidewalks at identified gap closure locations.

Bicycle Facility Improvements

- Install paved Class I multi-use bicycle / pedestrian path on old rail right-of-way (east side) with appropriate safety crossing measures.
- Discourage wrong-way riders on the west side frontage road by adding a shared space pavement design to slow vehicle and bicycle traffic through conflict zones.
- Add marked bicycle route on Oleander Avenue which favors minimal stopping except at 1st Avenue and 5th Avenue.
- Install traffic signals at West Sacramento Avenue / Esplanade and Oleander Avenue / 1st Avenue with bike crossing emphasis.

Junior High School Area Improvements

• Change intersection design at Memorial Way / Oleander Avenue (near Chico Junior High School) to a single-lane roundabout.

General Vehicle Guidance Improvements

- Provide clear and consistent pavement markings at frontage road intersection areas.
- Create the shared space area at crossings of the east-west streets and frontage roads.
- Install traffic signal indications guiding cross traffic to stop "outside" of the frontage road where appropriate.

11th Avenue Connection Improvements

• Enhance connections between the 11th Avenue and the Airport Class I multi-use path.

Other Amenities

- Install pedestrian-scale lighting in the form of full cutoff, energy-efficient LED fixtures restricted to illuminate pathways in order to minimize light "spill over" to adjacent properties.
- Install replacement landscaping within the project footprint.

Typical Signalized Intersection

- Provide a Class I multi-use path in the eastern median.
- Provide textured "mixing zone" at the intersection of southbound frontage and east-west cross streets.
- Eliminate northbound right-turn pocket, where applicable.
- Provide pedestrian refuge islands on medians.
- Update signal timing with adequate crossing time in the east-west directions.
- Refresh striping and add crosswalks, where applicable.

Typical Unsignalized Intersection

- Provide a Class I multi-use path in the eastern median.
- Provide textured "mixing zone" at the intersection of southbound frontage and east-west cross streets.
- Provide pedestrian refuge islands on medians.
- Refresh striping and add crosswalks, where applicable.

ROW Acquisition and Temporary Construction Easements

To construct the roundabout at the intersection of Memorial Way and Oleander Avenue, both temporary (1,200 square feet) and permanent (1,400 square feet) acquisition is needed from undeveloped land on a parcel containing several Butte County department offices (Assessor's Parcel Number 003-180-022). Temporary and permanent acquisitions would be from a small portion of undeveloped land at the northwest corner of the intersection, away from structures, trees and other parcel features.

Construction and Schedule

The project would be constructed in one phase. It is currently anticipated that the proposed improvements would be constructed over an approximate 9-month period starting in early spring of 2022.

Typical construction equipment would include pneumatic jack hammers, excavators, grading equipment, paving equipment, concrete equipment, striping equipment, generators or other similar devices. The maximum grading and excavation depth needed for most of the project is approximately three inches. However for the roundabout, excavation depths of three to four feet may be necessary. All construction noise would be temporary and subject to the noise limits in the Chico Municipal Code (CMC), Chapter 9.38, "Noise Ordinance", which regulates noise generation within the City of Chico. Construction activity noise is typically restricted to the hours of 7:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. on weekdays (10:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. on weekends and holidays), unless otherwise approved by the City Engineer. No night or weekend work is anticipated for the proposed project.

Traffic Management

A traffic management plan would be developed and implemented during construction in accordance with the Caltrans 2018 Standard Specifications and in compliance with the California Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices, Part 6, "Temporary Traffic Control." The Esplanade and Oleander Avenue would remain open during construction; however, the project would temporarily impact traffic patterns with onsite traffic controls (e.g., flagging, pilot car) and episodic, temporary single-lane traffic closures. The proposed project would not permanently close roadways or block access to private or commercial properties.

3.0 Project Location and Setting

The proposed project is located along an approximate 1.25-mile segment of the Esplanade within the City of Chico between Memorial Way and East 11th Avenue; along Oleander Avenue between Memorial Way and East 10th Avenue; along East 10th Avenue between Esplanade and Oleander Avenue; and along Memorial Way between Esplanade and approximately 0.06 miles (335 feet) east of the Memorial Way / Oleander Avenue intersection. The project is in the "Chico, CA" USGS Quadrangle, Sections 22 and 27, of Township 22 North, Range 1 East (Figure 1).

No scenic resources have been identified within the Esplanade corridor through background investigations and scenic resources literature searches. Additionally, there are no designated state scenic highways in the City of Chico (California Department of Transportation 2019).

4.0 Visual Resources and Resource Change

Visual resources of the project setting are defined and identified below by assessing *visual character* and *visual quality* in the project corridor. *Resource change* is assessed by evaluating the visual character and the visual quality of the visual resources that comprise the project corridor before and after construction of the proposed project.

Visual Character

The visual character of the proposed project will be compatible with the existing visual character of the project corridor. The project proposes to enhance mobility, connectivity and safety with pedestrian, ADA, bicycle, and vehicle improvements, however the overall visual character of the area would not change. The proposed project would maintain the linear definition and form along the Esplanade. The colors throughout the active corridor are a composition of light and dark vegetation (reds, yellows, oranges, and greens) interspersed with a hospital, schools, residential homes, apartments and commercial businesses of all colors,



Source: ICF

Figure 1. Project Vicinity



Source: ICF

Figure 2. Project Aerial

and roadway and intersections of varied greys. The vegetative character of the project area is formed from mature canopied trees with shrubs and ground-short level landscaping. A mix of smooth to rough textures run throughout. No additional buildings or massive structures are planned that would impact the existing form or scale of the project area. The combination of vegetation, trees, buildings, and roadways create a diverse variety of visual patterns along the travel path. While a new roundabout at Oleander Avenue and Memorial Way will break the existing linear travel pattern, the overall project would remain consistent with the form, line and color of the existing roadways within the project area. The project will maintain the continuity and textural pattern of the corridor's urban tree-lined visual character (Figure 3 – Figure 12).

Visual Quality

The visual quality of the existing Esplanade corridor will not be altered by the project. The Esplanade corridor within the project limits is lined with mature canopied trees, creating a vivid and memorable travel experience along their linear path. While there are mature trees throughout the project area, they are most vivid and dominant along the Esplanade. To a lesser degree, the same can be said of Memorial Way, Oleander Avenue and 10th Street, where the plantings are not as frequent or dominant. The history of the linear tree plantings along the Esplanade date back to 1898 when city founder, John Bidwell, planted six rows of trees that defined the public travel lanes. The physical layout of the boulevard has evolved since then. In the 1950's it was reconfigured from a two lane street bordered by side streets to a multiple-roadway boulevard. In the 1990's right-turn lanes were installed where rail beds had once been.

The current land uses will remain the same and the integrity of the visual features in the project area will remain intact. The corridor land use will remain a mixture of urban uses, along with the visual hardscape and vegetative features that are currently associated with these uses. Visual changes will include the mass related to signage, sidewalks, signals, stop control improvements, the roundabout and a Class 1 multi-use bicycle / pedestrian path. Adding a Class 1 multi-use bicycle / pedestrian path to the corridor enhances the unity of both the immediate area, as well as the region by providing visual connectivity for all users between the nearby downtown and destinations along the corridor.

Resource Change

Changes to visual resources, as measured by changes in visual character and visual quality will be low. The proposed improvements in the project area would be constructed with similarly existing design elements. The average project area changes which include ground-level improvements and above-ground elements, will contribute minimal additional visual mass. Along the Esplanade, the greatest visual impact will occur at roadway intersections where tree removal is planned but the existing visual continuity will remain dominated by mature canopies. The roundabout at the corner of Memorial Way and Oleander Avenue will break the existing linear traffic pattern of the roadway, but land use will not change and impacts to the surrounding visual hardscape and vegetation will be minimal. Ground-level changes such as the bike path will provide greater visual unity by tying the corridor to the surrounding community.



Inset Source: ICF

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910 Main Street, Suite D, Red Bluff, CA 96080 (530) 528-8272 • www.tehamaenviromental.com Figure 3. Southbound Esplanade Approaching Memorial Way

Tree-lined mature canopy boulevards between transportation intersections define the Esplanade's visual pattern and design quality.







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TEHAMA ENVIRONMENTAL SOLUTIONS, INC.

910 Main Street, Suite D, Red Bluff, CA 96080 (530) 528-8272 ●www.tehamaenviromental.com Figure 5. Southbound Esplanade Approaching East Lincoln Avenue

Impacts of tree removal (eastern planter) partially mitigated by center median landscaped trees (southbound view). Tree Removal Signalized Improvements >> Photo Point



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910 Main Street, Suite D, Red Bluff, CA 96080 (530) 528-8272 • www.tehamaenviromental.com Figure 6. Northbound Esplanade Approaching West 6th Avenue

Intersection planned for unsignalized signalized improvements. Trees identified for removal.



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Figure 8. Westbound Memorial Way Approaching Esplanade

A roundabout would be installed at the intersection of Oleander Avenue and Memorial Way adjacent to Chico Junior High School. Full Roundabout

Photo Point



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910 Main Street, Suite D, Red Bluff, CA 96080 (530) 528-8272 • www.tehamaenviromental.com Planned stop controls for east and west bound traffic and sidewalk gap closures.

- Sidewalk Gap Closures ----> Photo Point





Figure 12. Northbound Frontage At East 11th Avenue and Trail Connection

ENVIRONMENTAL SOLUTIONS, INC.

910 Main Street, Suite D, Red Bluff, CA 96080 (530) 528-8272 • www.tehamaenviromental.com Class I multi-use bicycle / pedestrian path (on old rail right-of-way) connection to existing bike trail.

Signalized Improvements with Connection to Trail Sidewalk Gap Closures

5.0 Viewers and Viewer Response

Viewer Sensitivity

Public outreach surveys show strong local community project awareness and interest. Summary comments from the public outreach process included, "Don't touch the trees," and the "Public loves the historic nature of the Esplanade." (W-Trans 2016). Multiple comments disliked the idea of roundabouts in the Esplanade corridor, a project feature that has since been eliminated. Sensitivity to a roundabout was mixed between visual and functionality concerns. The project is anticipated to have a moderate-high level of viewer sensitivity.

Neighbors

Neighbors directly adjacent to the project area are anticipated to have a moderate-low level of viewer exposure and a moderate-high level of viewer sensitivity because they live or work near the project site and are accustomed to existing corridor views and passing traffic. It is anticipated that the highest neighbor sensitivity would be towards intersection views where most of the above-ground improvements, the roundabout and tree removals would occur. Neighbor sensitivity may improve along Oleander Avenue where sidewalk gap closures are planned. Neighbors adjacent to the project area would have short durations of exposure from temporary construction activities. In the long-term, viewer sensitivity would return to its current condition as the changes would be similar in design to the existing roadways.

Roadway Users

Roadway users include local commuters traveling to and from work, shoppers and recreational travelers in vehicles. Traffic speeds along the corridor would decrease from the range of 23-24 miles per hours (mph) to approximately 20-21 mph due to added pedestrian signal timing delays. The slight change in average travel speeds would have a low exposure and sensitivity to the scenery views. Roadway user's sensitivity to the roundabout at the intersection of Oleander Avenue and Memorial Way would be moderate based on the new configuration of the roadway, but it is not located within the historically sensitive Esplanade Boulevard and no tree removals are needed for the roundabout. Roadway users would be most sensitive to vegetation removal traveling the Esplanade's northbound lane, closest to the removals. Southbound Esplanade visual impacts would be partially reduced by the center median screening vegetation, located between the users and the impacted vegetation. Other non-roadway users, including pedestrians, bicyclists and other recreationalists would have a moderate-low visual corridor exposure. A low level of sensitivity from this group is anticipated as the improvements would provide increased safety and connectivity within the area where functional benefits would outweigh visual sensitivity. No roadways within the project area are designated as scenic highways and construction activities will not block a scenic vista (California Department of Transportation 2019). In the short-term, viewer sensitivity would increase with construction of the roadway improvements. In the long-term, viewer sensitivity would return to its current condition as the changes would be similar in design to the existing roadways.

Viewer Response

Viewer Response is assessed as a combination of viewer exposure and sensitivity. For more sensitive corridor users, changes to visual resources would be lessened by maintaining the existing aesthetic features within the project area while adding additional safety features and replanting impacted areas with vegetation. Based on these characteristics, neighbors and roadway users will not be affected by the proposed project. It is anticipated that the average response of all viewer groups will be moderate-low due to their limited time exposure, minimal mass increase and preservation of corridor form and function.

6.0 Visual Impact

Visual impacts are determined by assessing changes to the visual resources and predicting viewer response to those changes. Based on Resource Change and Viewers and Viewers Response discussed previously, changes to visual resources as a result of the proposed project are anticipated to be moderately-low.

No-Build Alternative

The proposed project alternative is a No-Build Alternative. Under this alternative, the proposed project would not be constructed. The Esplanade corridor within the project limits would still have complex multimodal mobility, connectivity, safety, and accessibility deficiencies. It and Oleander Way would lack sufficient pedestrian and bicycle travel mode facilities and car / bicycle collision rates would remain extremely high. Curb ramp designs would still not meet ADA design requirements. Under this alternative, the purpose and need of the proposed project would not be met and no impacts to visual resources or viewer groups would result.

Proposed Project

Under the proposed project, the project would incorporate "complete streets" features and provide safer connectivity for all users between the downtown and destinations along the corridor. Operational deficiencies would be addressed and ADA design requirements would be met. Anticipated short-term visual impacts during the construction phase include ground disturbance, and other construction activities. Project construction would expose surfaces, construction debris, equipment, and truck traffic to nearby viewers. Construction vehicles and construction materials would be visible from neighbors and roadway users in the project vicinity. Temporary impacts due to project construction will be short-term and would cease after project completion. Trees and vegetation would be removed throughout the corridor to accommodate the improvements, but new design plans and areas disturbed by construction activities, where possible, would be replanted with new landscaping. The proposed project's impact on visual character and quality is expected to be minimal. The improvements would incorporate designs that are aesthetically similar to the existing corridor elements. Changes to viewer response would result through the corridor improvements; however visual impacts from the proposed project would be minor, due to limited change in visual character and visual quality.

CEQA Required Issues

The City of Chico General Plan does not identify any scenic vistas within the City. The project would not construct any buildings or structures that would block long-range views or interfere with scenic vistas outside of the city limits. The project would not have a substantial adverse effect on a Federal Wild and Scenic River. There are no designated state scenic highways in the City of Chico (California Department of Transportation 2019). There are no scenic preserves or contracts in the project site vicinity.

The project will alter the current visual conditions; however, the overall character of the area will not be substantially degraded. The project connectivity and safety design improvements are similar to the existing visual roadway elements. The project is consistent with the General Plan's complete street and scenic road goals where, "Well-designed streets accommodate multiple modes of transportation and exhibit identifiable design elements that complement the character of adjoining properties.", and to "...ensure that streets accommodate vehicle, transit, bicycle, and pedestrian travel." (Chico 2030 General Plan).

The project requires removing vegetation, including up to 19 trees within the project area. The trees to be removed are within the planter east of the Esplanade's northbound lane. Tree removal is necessary for the ADA, safety and multi-use bicycle / pedestrian path improvements. Where the design allows, landscaping will be replaced. Much of the site's historic visual character is defined by a linear pattern of tree-lined

boulevards between hardscaped transportation intersections. This pattern will remain unchanged. The greatest visual impact will occur at roadway intersections where tree removal is planned but the visual continuity along the tree-lined boulevard will remain dominated by mature canopies. None of the impacted trees are listed in the City of Chico Heritage Tree Program.

The foothills are not visible from the project site. Construction and equipment associated with the proposed project would temporarily change surrounding views, however these impacts are temporary and therefore not considered significant. While visual impacts will occur, there will not be a substantial degradation to the defining visual pattern, character or quality of the site and its surroundings.

The project will install pedestrian-scale lighting that will adhere to existing CMC standards with lighting fixtures that possess full cutoff features and downward orientation to minimize offsite glare and spillage. Compliance with all applicable CMC requirements and standards will be verified by City of Chico staff.

7.0 Avoidance and Minimization Measures

The inclusion of aesthetic features and avoidance measures are either already part of the project or are already required by code or policy. Together these design features and codes will help generate public acceptance of the project and minimize the visual impacts addressed in this assessment. As such, no additional avoidance or minimization measures are recommended.

8.0 Conclusions

The proposed project would result in a Resource Change that is considered low, and the average response of all viewer groups would be moderate-low. The project would provide pedestrian, ADA, bicycle and general vehicle safety and circulation improvements but requires removing vegetation including up to 19 trees within the project limits. The loss of mature trees would lower the existing visual quality and character of the Esplanade corridor. However, the proposed project would not substantially degrade the visual character or quality of the site and its surroundings. Much of the site's historic visual character is defined by a linear pattern of tree-lined boulevards between hardscaped transportation intersections. This pattern will remain unchanged. The greatest visual impact will occur at roadway intersections where tree removal is planned, but the visual continuity along the tree-lined boulevard will remain dominated by mature canopies. The project includes elements that will help protect the existing corridor aesthetics such as installing pedestrian-scale full cutoff lighting to minimize light "spill over," and replanting landscaping within the project limits.

9.0 References

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