
3.1 AESTHETICS/VISUAL QUALITY

INTRODUCTION

This section of the EIR identifies potential aesthetic and visual impacts that could result from the proposed project. The visual character of the project site is described, including any unique or character-defining visual resources. Anticipated changes to the visual character and resources of the project site as a result of the project are evaluated, and feasible mitigation measures addressing these impacts are identified as warranted.

3.1.1 ENVIRONMENTAL SETTING

The existing project site is rural in character, consisting of gently sloping, open grassland and hayfields, a walnut orchard, and two residences set back significantly from Fairview Road, the project site is similar in character to the gently rolling topography found throughout San Benito County. The Diablo Range is visible beyond the project site, in the background. Photos of the existing project site are included in **Figures 3.1a and 3.1b**. While topographically elevated relative to lands to the west, the site is not possessive of particularly outstanding or unique visual features, such as trees, rock outcroppings, bluffs or historical buildings or landmarks. This site is also not a component of a designated County scenic resource, or located along a County-designated scenic highway. The principal visual distinction of the site is that it currently marks the eastern Hollister urban area boundary along Fairview Road.

The project site is primarily visible to the motoring public, traveling north and south along Fairview Road at highway speed (**Figure 2.3**). As one travels along Fairview Road, the view of the undeveloped portion of the project site and Diablo Range is interrupted at intervals by the City of Hollister/Sunnyslope County Water District LESSALT pump station, the CDF fire station, the walnut orchard alongside Fairview Road, and the two on-site residences.

Existing nighttime illumination on the project site is very limited, consisting only of yard area spot lighting around the existing residences, and street light illumination in the immediate vicinity of the Fairview Road intersections with Sunnyslope Road and Hillcrest Road. Glare from exterior lighting sources is therefore largely absent from the project site.

This page intentionally left blank.



View of the project site looking east near the intersection of Fairview Road and Sunnyslope Road



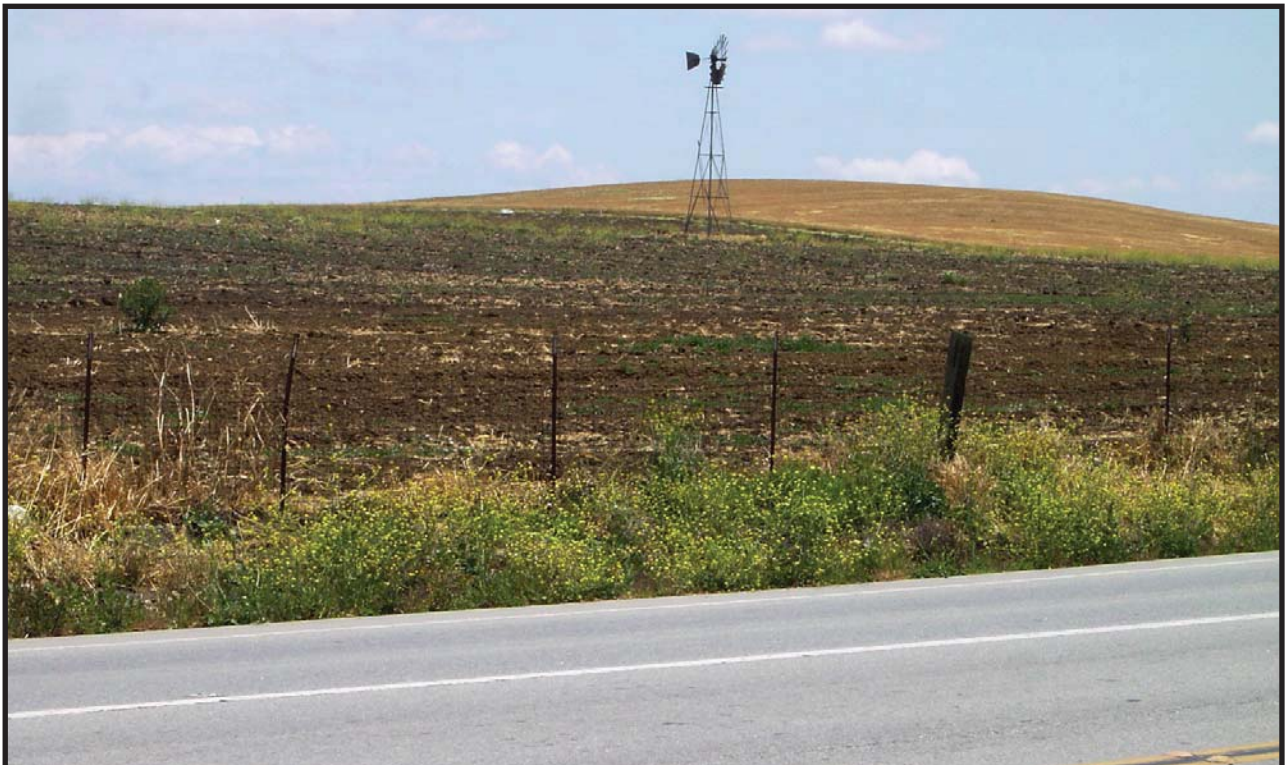
View of the project site looking northeast from the intersection of Fairview Road and Sunnyslope Road

Figure 3.1a
Site Photos

This page intentionally left blank.



View of the existing walnut orchard on the project site from the intersection of Fairview Road and Hillcrest Road



View of the project site looking east from the intersection of Fairview Road and Hillcrest Road

Figure 3.1b
Site Photos

This page intentionally left blank.

3.1.2 REGULATORY SETTING

SAN BENITO COUNTY GENERAL PLAN POLICIES

The San Benito County General Plan contains the following policies addressing aesthetics, including preservation of the scenic and rural character of the County.

Land Use Element

Policy 9 The type of development allowed within the residential areas includes residential, agricultural, and open space. Trails, parks, and public facilities, including schools and churches, may be allowed subject to use permits.

Action applicable to the project:

b) Designate the area immediately east of Fairview Road bounded by State Route 25 to the south and Mansfield Road to the north as an Area of Special Study.

Policy 12 The County shall utilize specific zoning tools, such as Planned Unit Developments to allow for clustering and density transfer as a means to provide innovative and diversified development, and to avoid hazardous areas while maintaining the rural character of the County provided that the development design and density is consistent with Policy 9 and actions.

Policy 36 The County should maintain high standards of siting and design in the development of all land uses. Standards and criteria shall be established by the County.

Open Space and Conservation Element

Policy 12 Direct development to urban areas

It will be the County's policy to apply land use controls to ensure that only non-urban uses are located beyond Spheres of Influence and Urban Reserve Areas, except for specific areas designated Rural/Urban, Area of Special Study, Residential Commercial, or Industrial on the General Plan Land Use Map.

Policy 16 Open space around cities

It is the County's policy to preserve a rural atmosphere by directing population growth and public service extensions to infill development and avoiding leapfrog growth.

Policy 18 Protect rural atmosphere and natural resources

General Plan Amendments, Specific Plans, Area Plans and Areas of Special Study that result in a net increase in General Plan buildout (Table 1 of the Land Use Element), shall include methods to conserve open space for natural resources including agriculture, wildlife habitat, and water (i.e. conservation easements and /or other similar resource protection measures). Proposed development areas shall also include measures to protect resources on-site and contiguous to the project with the use of clustering, conservation easements, and other similar programs.

3.1 AESTHETICS/VISUAL QUALITY

Scenic Roads and Highways Element

Policy 1 It is the policy of San Benito County to provide for the protection of certain transportation corridors which are recognized as having unusual or outstanding scenic qualities.

The project site is also designated as an 'Area of Special Study,' described in the General Plan Land Use Element, Land Use Plan as follows:

This designation applies to areas of the County where a combination of the following criteria apply: 1) More concentrated development than is presently allowed may be desirable provided a comprehensive plan for public services and resource conservation is integrated in order of priority into a specific plan, community plan, or area plan. 2) As a result of prior, piecemeal subdivisions, a plan for integrated development and coordination of governmental services and/or community facilities is desirable. 3) The County has identified the area as a potential area for commercial, industrial, and/or residential development.

The intent would be to direct development from natural resources and environmentally hazardous areas, to provide for mixed land uses to reduce vehicle emissions, to effectively plan the design, development and financing of services, and to develop open space programs. Increased development density over base density may be awarded based on specified programs. New development will not be allowed within an Area of Special Study until there is full mitigation of public services, infrastructure and facility impacts.

COUNTY DEVELOPMENT LIGHTING REGULATIONS

The project is subject to Title 19, Chapter 19.31 of the County Code, "Development Lighting Regulations." The purpose of this chapter is to encourage lighting practices and systems which will minimize light pollution, glare, and light trespass and curtail the degradation of the night time visual environment. Development projects in the County are required to submit a project lighting plan to the Planning and Building Inspection Department demonstrating conformance with the applicable lighting regulations.

3.1.3 IMPACTS AND MITIGATION MEASURES

STANDARDS OF SIGNIFICANCE

The following thresholds for measuring a project's environmental impacts are based on CEQA Guidelines and other performance standards recognized by San Benito County. For the purposes of this EIR, a significant impact will occur if the project will result in one or more of the following:

- Have a substantial adverse effect on a scenic vista;
- Substantially damage scenic resources including, but not limited to, trees, rock outcroppings and historic buildings within a state scenic highway;
- Substantially degrade the existing visual character or quality of the site and its surroundings;

- Create a new source of substantial light or glare which will adversely affect day or nighttime views in the adjacent area; or,
- Contribute to a cumulative negative aesthetic impact or cumulative effect on the existing visual character of the site and its surroundings.

PROJECT IMPACTS AND MITIGATION MEASURES

Scenic and Visual Resources

Impact 3.1-1 The proposed project will result in the development of rural land that is in the foreground of a view of the Diablo Range to the east of the site as viewed from Fairview Road. Project development would alter the character of the view, as well as obscure views of the Diablo Range from public viewing areas along Fairview Road west of the project site. This is considered a **potentially significant** impact.

A scenic vista is generally described as a clear, expansive view of significant regional features possessing visual and aesthetic qualities of value to the community. The existing view affected by the project is comprised of the Diablo mountain range in the background with the gently rolling topography of the project site in the foreground. Public views are primarily available to motorists traveling along Fairview Road at highway speed.

This view may be of some value to the motoring public. However, long-range views of rolling countryside, foothills and mountains are characteristic of San Benito County, and exist throughout the region. Among these views and features, the Diablo Range has not been identified in the County General Plan as a significant visual feature, or as a component of a significant scenic vista within the County. Further, the scenic quality of the view is already compromised by a number of factors, including the highly limited duration of views by motorists, due to the high speed of travel along Fairview Road, the limited travel time along the project site frontage, and visual interruptions of the view by existing buildings spaced at intervals along the project site frontage.

Additionally, while the view of the undeveloped portion of the project site will be altered as a result of the project, a number of project design features and policies within the Specific Plan have been included to ensure that the view of the project site from Fairview Road will be of high visual quality. This view will be of a landscaped parkway frontage along Fairview Road. Specific Plan provisions addressing this frontage include a minimum 29.5'-wide landscape / bike trail right-of-way section along the east side of Fairview Road, including a meandering 8' to 12'-foot wide Class 1 bike path bordered on both sides by five to six-foot wide landscape strips. Also proposed is a 14-foot wide landscaped median strip dividing Fairview Road, to be included in the roadway widening work associated with the project (see **Figure 3.1-1**).

All three landscape strips will be planted with a combination of trees, shrubs and groundcover to establish a landscaped parkway along the project frontage. Trees, shrubs and groundcover will be selected and planted in accordance with Specific Plan landscape guidelines found within Section 7.2 addressing species, size, and planting patterns.

In addition to the frontage landscaping, the project will include a continuous sound wall along the Fairview Road frontage where the proposed residences back onto the street frontage. The Specific Plan contains design guidelines for this wall, addressing materials, colors, and articulation. The wall is intended to be screened with landscaping, and will therefore be of a

3.1 AESTHETICS/VISUAL QUALITY

simple design, but will nonetheless incorporate modest surface detailing, a cap course, and columns or pilasters to mark ending points and jogs in direction for recessed sections. Specific Plan policies addressing the design of this wall include:

- Masonry walls shall be constructed of prefabricated concrete panels or site built, hand laid masonry blocks.
- Wall materials shall have a textured face such as cast patterns, split faced, comb-faced or stucco finished.
- Pilasters or columns shall be used in enhanced wood fences at each side of Neighborhood vehicular entrances and pedestrian paseos to visually define openings, and at each angle point (change in direction) to enhance wall aesthetics.

The proposed frontage improvements for Fairview Road are required by the Specific Plan to be constructed concurrently with the development of each subdivision fronting on Fairview Road (Section 8.2.2, Project Financing Plan).

To ensure that the proposed soundwall and landscaped parkway are constructed in accordance with the applicable policies found within the Specific Plan, the following mitigation measure is included:

MM 3.1-1 The parkway landscaping and soundwall along Fairview Road shall be implemented as shown within Figure 3.3-1, and in accordance with all applicable policies within Section 7.2 of the Specific Plan. Further, the timing of implementation shall be in accordance with Section 8.2.2 of the Specific Plan.

While the view of the project site would be altered, with implementation of the above measure, these alterations would result in an attractively landscaped parkway. The alteration is therefore considered to be a **less than significant impact with mitigation incorporated**.

Change in Rural Character

Impact 3.1-2 The project will result in substantial change in the visual character of the project site. This is considered a **potentially significant impact**.

The project site is rural and agricultural in character, comprised of gently rolling topography, and used for hay cultivation and a walnut orchard. The project will result in the development of the project site with suburban uses, which will significantly change the visual character of the site and its immediate surroundings.

The Specific Plan contains a number of features and policies intended to support implementation of suburban development of high visual quality, including:

Topography

The existing rolling topography of the site will be preserved, in accordance with Policy 5.3, Soils and Grading Protection Policy number 4, which states:

The general configuration of the natural topography shall be preserved in the development process to the extent feasible. The existing hill forms may be graded to permit conventional building techniques, but the overall hill form shall be retained. Construction techniques including, but not limited to, contour grading, individual building pads and retaining walls are encouraged as a means of preserving natural topography.

Landscaping

As discussed above, a landscaped parkway will be constructed along the frontage of the project site. Within the interior of the project, the roadways and parkways will be planted with a combination of trees, shrubs and groundcover to create an attractive appearance, and equipment and service areas will be screened with walls and landscaping. The guidelines addressing roadway, parkway and screening landscaping are found in Section 7.2 of the Specific Plan, and include:

- Provide identity for the Plan Area and emphasize specific locations and features.
- Establish and reinforce the sense of pedestrian scale in areas intended for pedestrian use.
- Avoid landscaping that would create "hiding" places within the streetscape and open space areas.
- Screen walls and fencing and utility equipment, preferably with natural screening.
- Filter contaminants in urban runoff before the water reaches natural water courses.
- [Provide] plant materials and planting configurations that are attractive and easy to maintain.
- Conserve water through use of drought-tolerant and native plantings and water conserving irrigation systems.

Further, landscape specifications within Section 7.2 the Specific Plan include the following:

Primary Street Trees

Primary trees shall provide:

- A broad shade canopy over the street.
- A sense of order and cadence along the street.
- Seasonal color accent.
- Scale and definition to the streetscape edge.
- Primary street trees shall be:
 - The dominant element in the street scene.
 - Deciduous, broadleaf species.
 - Native to the area to the extent possible.
 - Drought-tolerant when established.
 - Spaced according to size, an average of 30 feet to 40 feet apart.
 - Planted from a minimum 15 gallon container.
 - Planted in a regular linear fashion, set back from the curb far enough to accommodate their ultimate growth (and/or at a sufficient distance appropriate to the particular species and to allow for future trimming of mature trees, [and] to provide vertical clearance for truck traffic along the street).
- Appropriate tree species should be selected to fit the spatial requirements of the street planter strips. Where necessary, root barriers, deep watering tubes, and other means to discourage root intrusion should be utilized.

Secondary and accent trees shall be:

- Planted in informal fashion as determined by space and tree species, set back from the curb far enough to accommodate their ultimate growth (and/or at a sufficient distance

3.1 AESTHETICS/VISUAL QUALITY

appropriate to the particular species, to allow for future trimming of mature trees and to provide vertical clearance for truck traffic along the street).

- Appropriate tree species should be selected to fit the spatial requirements of the street planter strips. Where necessary, root barriers, deep watering tubes, and other means to discourage root intrusion should be utilized.
- Distinctive in form and/or color.
- Complementary to the form of the dominant street trees.
- Planted from a minimum 15 gallon container.
- Spaced according to size, an average of 30 feet to 40 feet apart.

Shrubs

Shrubs shall be:

- Planted in irregular masses or in a linear fashion.
- A minimum one gallon container.
- Selected according to size, color, texture, and seasonal interest.
- Placed to not obstruct important pedestrian or vehicular sightlines or threaten the safety of pedestrians.
- Native and drought-tolerant to the extent feasible.

Boundary and Sound Walls/Fences

As discussed above, the project will include a continuous sound wall along the Fairview Road frontage where residences back onto the street frontage that is required to be attractively designed. The project will also be visible to the public from Hillcrest Road, Sunnyslope Road, Park Center Drive, and Orchard Valley Road. Enhanced wood fences or masonry walls are required to be constructed where lots back or side onto these streets. Specific design guidelines for the proposed walls and fences are included in the Specific Plan, as discussed above.

Plan Area Entry Features

The Specific Plan includes provisions addressing the design of the project entry features to ensure a high quality appearance. Examples of these provisions include:

- Entry feature landscaping shall include deciduous foreground trees selected for flowering or fall color habit, accent shrubs and groundcovers. Decorative paving may be used to provide a small plaza area next to the sidewalk.
- Subdivision entries shall include median entry islands with landscaping consistent with the adjacent entry feature.

Parking Lot Landscaping Features

The landscape character of the street corridors is proposed to be extended into the parking areas in any commercial areas and the school to visually integrate the public areas and enhance the visual quality of the circulation network. The following are examples of guidelines that are proposed to apply to all development within the project:

- Shade trees shall comprise the majority of all trees planted within the parking areas of the Neighborhood Commercial center. Trees should provide a 50 percent shade canopy within 15 years of planting.

- Shrubs selected for use adjacent to automobiles should be resistant to exhaust, radiator fluids, and the reflected heat of hardscaped surfaces. In parking areas, shrubs should be massed in groups, be water conserving, and require low maintenance.

Architecture

The Specific Plan includes provisions to ensure that the project will incorporate high-quality architectural design. Design guidelines are included for both the residential and commercial portions of the project, and are described below.

Neighborhood Commercial Design Guidelines

The proposed 65,000 square foot Neighborhood Commercial center will be a highly visible component of the project, and is intended to be visible and accessible both to residents of the project as well as those living in the surrounding community. The Specific Plan Neighborhood Commercial Design Guidelines are comprehensive, and address building site design, architectural style, colors, materials, utility and refuse enclosures, screening of service areas, loading areas, and roof-top equipment; and signage. The Specific Plan also addresses site features, requiring provision of pedestrian paths, enhanced paving, plaza areas, shade trees and street furniture (**Figure 3.1-2**). The requirement for shade trees to provide a 50 percent shade canopy within 15 years of planting will mitigate the appearance of a monotonous, flat parking lot serving the commercial area.

Mixed Use Design Guidelines

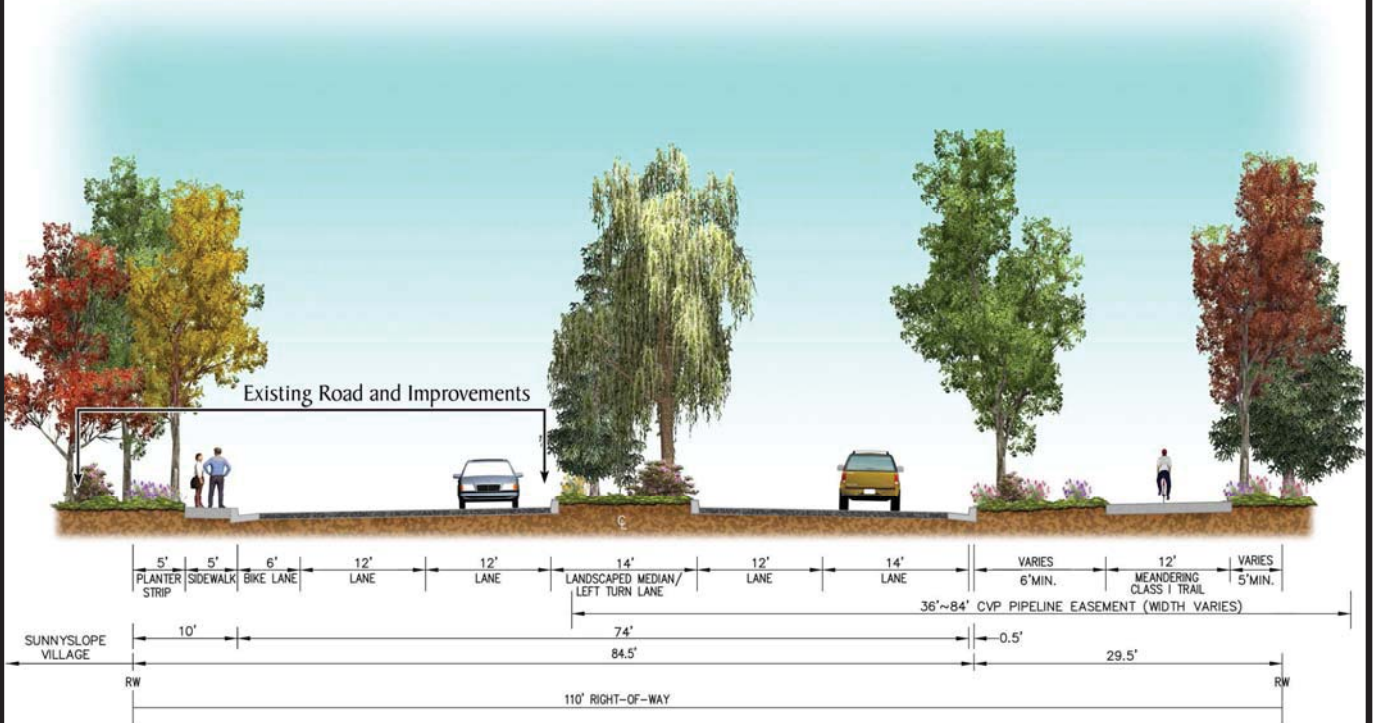
A mix of commercial and residential uses are permitted within the RM-SR (Residential Multiple) zone of the project. A number of design guidelines are included in the Specific Plan to ensure mixed uses are appropriately integrated and designed to provide a traditional downtown appearance that is more urban in character than the proposed single-family residential areas of the project. The applicable design guidelines emphasize pedestrian scale and relationship of the buildings to the sidewalks, ground-floor retail and office uses on the first floor with residential uses above, compatibility of commercial with residential uses, appropriate design and massing, as well as several private and common open space areas for residents.

Residential Design Guidelines

Design of the residences within the project will be guided by the Specific Plan Residential Design Guidelines. Primary views of the residences will be internal from the project site, due to the proposed parkway landscaping and sound wall along Fairview Road. Guidelines address architectural styles, materials, massing and scale, fencing, lighting and screening of equipment. Examples of planned residential architecture are shown in **Figure 3.1-3**.

This page intentionally left blank.

110' ARTERIAL STREET FAIRVIEW ROAD



Source: Ruggeri-Jensen-Azar & Associates



Figure 3.1-1
Fairview Road Section

This page intentionally left blank.



Figure 3.1-2
Commercial and Mixed Use Architecture

This page intentionally left blank.



Figure 3.1-3
Residential Architecture

This page intentionally left blank.

Design Review The Specific Plan requires that all development within the Plan Area be subject to design and site plan review by County staff, to ensure consistency with the Specific Plan design guidelines. The process for review and approval is outlined in Section 8.1.6 of the Specific Plan.

To ensure that the above-described design and site plan processes are implemented throughout the life of the project, the following mitigation measure is included:

MM 3.1-2 The project developer shall comply with all design guidelines found in Section 7 of the Santana Ranch Specific Plan (Design Guidelines). Compliance with Section 7 shall be subject to review and approval by County staff in accordance with Section 8.1.6 of the Specific Plan.

Implementation of the above mitigation measure will ensure that the overall design of the project will be of high quality, thereby resulting in **less than significant impacts** to the visual character of the site as a result of the project, with mitigation incorporated.

Light and Glare

Impact 3.1-3 The proposed project will introduce new sources of glare that could adversely affect properties in the area. The impacts of increased direct and residual light and glare are **potentially significant**.

The project will result in the development of the Plan Area with residences, potential mixed uses, a Neighborhood Commercial center, and other community facilities. This development will include outdoor lighting for streets and parking areas, as well as for the community and neighborhood parks proposed for the project. This lighting has the potential to result in light and glare impacts to the nearby existing residences, as well as to future residents of the project.

Exterior lighting within the proposed Neighborhood commercial center will be hooded and directed downward to avoid direct illumination of adjacent residential properties, in accordance with Lighting Guidelines in the Specific Plan, Section 7.4 Neighborhood Commercial and Other Non-Residential Design Guidelines. The Specific Plan does not specifically address lighting in the neighborhood and park areas of the project. However, all project exterior lighting is required to be reviewed through submittal of a lighting plan to the Planning and Building Inspection Department prior to release of building permits. The lighting plan is required to conform to the applicable provisions in the Development Lighting Regulations of the County (Title 19, Chapter 19.31 of the County Code). These provisions include, but are not limited to:

- Outdoor floodlighting by flood light projection above the horizontal plane is prohibited;
- All exterior light fixtures are required to be shielded to direct light downward toward the intended area of illumination, except for certain low-wattage fixtures; and
- Streets, parking areas and recreational facilities are limited to the use of glare shielded, low-pressure sodium lighting fixtures.

To ensure that the project complies with the Specific Plan design guidelines with regard to exterior lighting, as well as with the County's Development Lighting Regulations, the following mitigation measure is included:

MM 3.1-3 The project developer shall be required to submit an exterior lighting plan for all development review approval requests pursuant to Section 8.1.6 of the Specific

3.1 AESTHETICS/VISUAL QUALITY

Plan. Said lighting plan shall demonstrate conformance with the Specific Plan design guidelines with regard to exterior lighting as stated within Section 7.4, Neighborhood Commercial and Other Non-Residential Design Guidelines, Lighting (Specific Plan, p. 7-32), as well as with Title 19, Chapter 19.31 of the County Code.

Implementation of the above mitigation measure will minimize the potential for light and glare impacts from the project, by requiring submittal of a project lighting plan demonstrating conformance with applicable policies and standards. Light and glare impacts associated with the project are therefore anticipated to be **less than significant with mitigation incorporated**.

CUMULATIVE IMPACTS AND MITIGATION MEASURES

Cumulative Visual Effect

Impact 3.1-4 The project, in combination with other past, present and reasonably foreseeable, probable future projects along the Fairview Road corridor, may result in a cumulative aesthetic impact to the existing rural visual character of the corridor. This impact is considered to be **potentially significant**.

The Santana Ranch project will result in the conversion of the project site from rural uses to suburban uses. Other planned projects along the Fairview Road corridor include:

- **Gavilan College San Benito Campus** This project involves the construction of a 3,500 full-time equivalent (FTE) student college facility, as well as approximately 285 residential units and 35,000 square feet of retail space, on 137-acre site at the northeast corner of Fairview Road and Airline Highway.
- **Award Homes Subdivision** 595 single family homes and 100 apartment units are proposed for this project on the west side of Fairview Road, south of St. Benedict's Church and east of Calistoga Drive within the City of Hollister.

It is also anticipated that, over time, the Fairview Road corridor will be further developed, consistent with its Special Study Area designation.

The proposed project, in combination with past, present and probable future projects, will therefore result in the gradual conversion of the rural visual character of the Fairview Road corridor to a more urban character, representing a potentially significant cumulative impact. Due to the size of the proposed project, the incremental contribution of the project to this potentially significant cumulative impact could also be potentially significant. This corridor, however, has been previously designated by the County as an Area of Special Study. As discussed previously, the purpose of this designation is to identify areas of the County suitable for higher intensity development, in order to discourage scattered, uncoordinated development in the more rural areas of the County, thereby helping maintain the overall rural character of the County.

The Fairview Road corridor has not been designated as a County scenic route. Therefore, the proposed project, in combination with anticipated future development along the Fairview Road corridor, will not result in cumulative impacts to any County-designated scenic resources. While public views of the project site and Fairview Road corridor are available, these views are primarily available to motorists on Fairview Road, and are compromised by intervening structures along the roadway. Further, the Specific Plan contains design guidelines and design features

that will result in the development of a landscaped corridor of high visual quality along the project's Fairview Road frontage. Therefore, while the gradual development of the roadway corridor will result in changing the visual character of the corridor from rural to suburban, it is not anticipated this change in visual character will result in a significant negative visual impact.

As the roadway corridor becomes developed with planned and reasonably foreseeable future projects, additional exterior light and glare will result, which could, in addition to light and glare generated by the proposed project, result in cumulative light and glare impacts to the area. The proposed project, however, will be required to comply with the County's Development Lighting Regulations, which require implementation of measures to minimize glare and light spillage onto adjacent properties (**Mitigation Measure MM 3.1-3**). Other cumulative projects along Fairview Road will also be required to comply with this requirement. The project, in combination with reasonably foreseeable probable future development, will therefore not result in significant cumulative light and glare impacts to the area.

Finally, future development projects within the Fairview Road Area of Special Study are required to submit a project specific plan for review and approval by the County, similar to the proposed Santana Ranch Specific Plan. It is anticipated that future specific plans, similar to the proposed Specific Plan, will be required to include architectural design controls, landscaping along the Fairview Road corridor and within project boundaries, and other visual amenities to ensure that the corridor will be of high visual quality. Therefore, while it is anticipated that change will occur, this change will not necessarily be negative or adverse, providing that design controls are enforced and existing General Plan policies addressing project aesthetics and character are implemented, as required in **Mitigation Measures MM 3.1-1** through **MM 3.1-3**, above.

For the reasons outlined above, the project's incremental aesthetic impacts, in combination with other past, present and reasonably foreseeable, probable future development along the Fairview Road corridor, are anticipated to be **less than significant with mitigation incorporated**.

3.1 AESTHETICS/VISUAL QUALITY

REFERENCES/DOCUMENTATION

County of San Benito. *General Plan, Land Use Element (1992), Open Space and Conservation Element (1995), and Scenic Roads and Highways Element (1980)*.

County of San Benito. *Development Lighting Regulations*. Chapter 19.31, County Code.

County of San Benito. *Santana Ranch Draft Specific Plan*, November 2009.

Governor's Office of Planning and Research, State of California. *Guidelines for Implementation of the California Environmental Quality Act*, as amended. 2009.