

## VISUAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT MEMORANDUM

### US 101/Palo Comado Canyon Road Interchange Improvement Project

#### PM 33.0/34.4

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969, as amended, establishes that the federal government will 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 (FHWA), 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.

Likewise, 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 Visual Impact Assessment (VIA) was prepared to fulfill the requirements established by NEPA through a process developed by the FHWA in conjunction with the American Society of Landscape Architects, and also to fulfill the requirements of CEQA. This VIA will address the following:

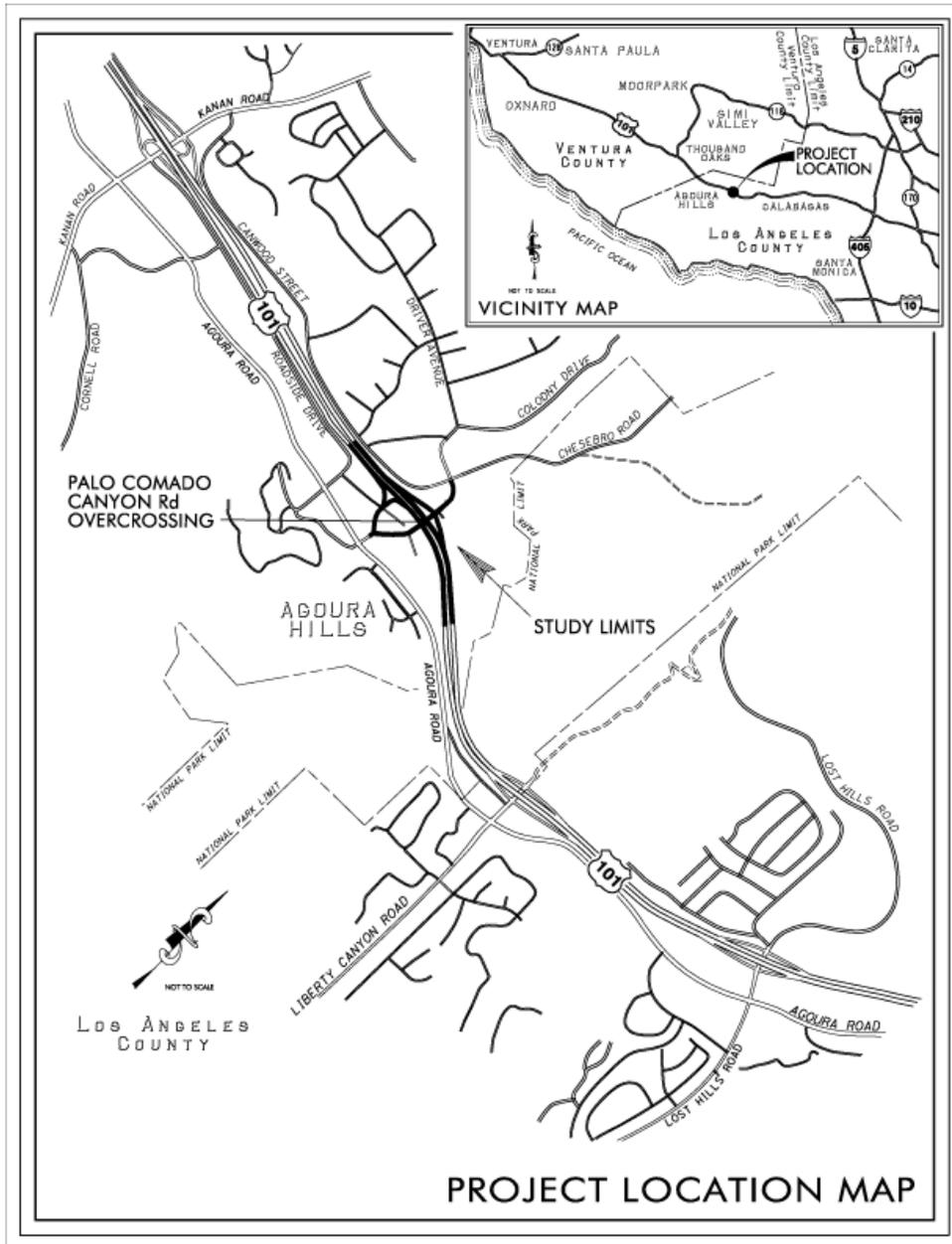
- Define the visual environment within the project site and its vicinity;
- Quantify the visual resources within the project site and its vicinity; and
- Estimate viewer response to the visual resources within the project site and its vicinity.

The study will then identify and assess changes to visual resources that are associated with project implementation. It will also measure viewer response to those changes in order to determine the degree of potential visual impact associated with the proposed project.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) and the City of Agoura Hills (City) propose to construct improvements at the US 101/Palo Comado Canyon Road Interchange (PM 33.0/34.4) in the city of Agoura Hills, Los Angeles County. The project would include widening Palo Comado Canyon Road and the Palo Comado Canyon Road Overcrossing over US 101 and modifying the interchange ramps in order to improve traffic circulation, safety, and bicycle/pedestrian access (see **Figure 1**).

Figure 1: Project Vicinity & Location Maps



**Existing Facility**

The US 101/Palo Comado Canyon Road Overcrossing structure was built in 1963. It provides two 12-foot lanes and 4-foot shoulders in each direction. A 5-foot sidewalk is provided on the west side of the overcrossing. The minimum vertical clearance is 15.1 feet, which is located in the northeast corner of the structure over the northbound US 101 outside lane. The interchange is configured with tight diamond (L-1) ramps on the northbound side and hook ramps (L-6) on the southbound side.

## ***Project Description***

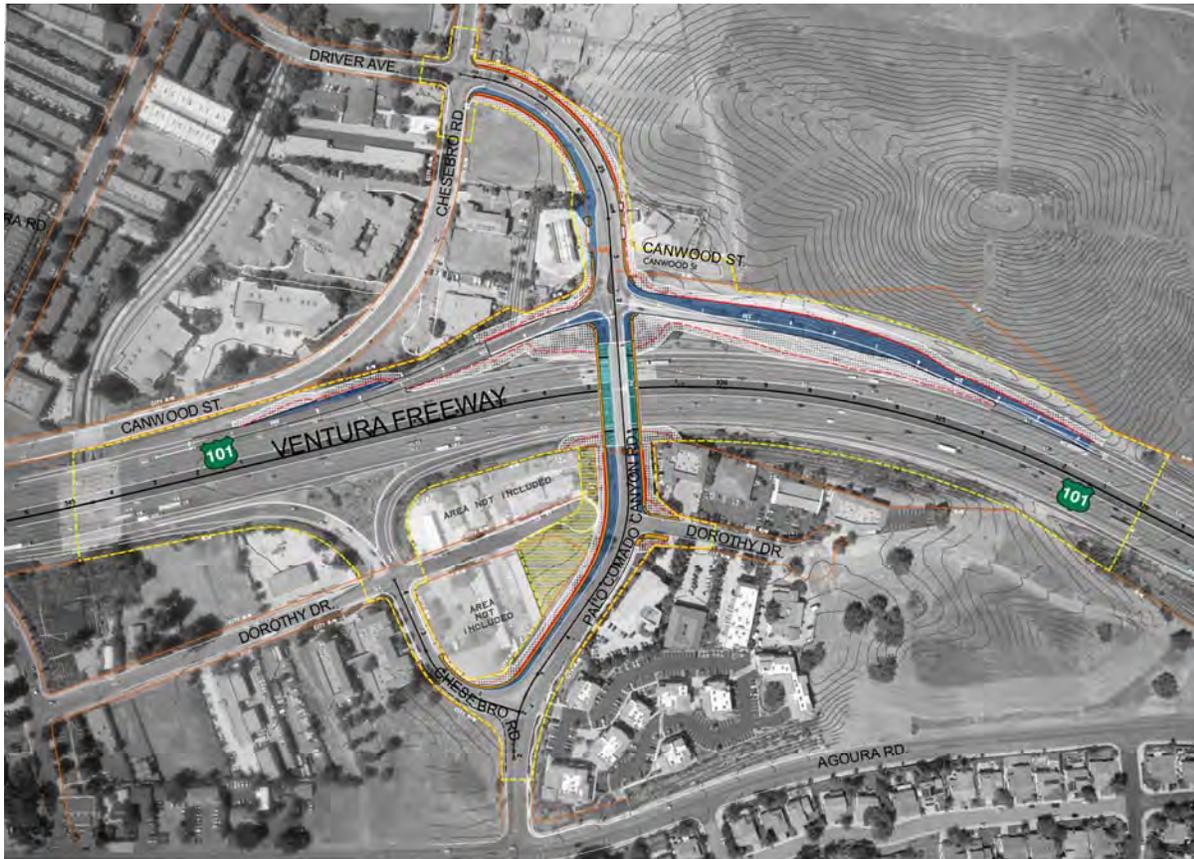
The proposed project (Project) would include widening the entire length of Palo Comado Canyon Road, between Driver Avenue to the north and Chesebro Road to the south, from two to four lanes (see **Figure 2**). Within these limits, the Palo Comado Canyon Road Overcrossing would be widened from one lane in each direction to two lanes in each direction, along with a dedicated left-hand turn lane, for a total of five striped lanes. Retaining walls would be installed along portions of these roadways in order to accommodate the widening. A Class II bike lane and sidewalks would be provided on both sides of the overcrossing. Implementation of the Project would reduce existing and forecasted traffic congestion, improve traffic circulation, improve safety, and eliminate operational deficiencies.

The Project would maintain the existing layout of the interchange ramps; however, the northbound on- and off-ramps would be slightly re-configured to provide an additional lane on the northbound off-ramp at the Palo Comado Canyon Road intersection. The intersection of the northbound ramps and Palo Comado Road would be signalized, while the remaining intersections would remain un-signalized.

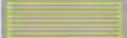
Overhead electric and telephone lines would be either relocated or undergrounded in some areas to accommodate the Project, and portions of the street light systems would be relocated along Palo Comado Canyon Road. The existing storm drain system would remain in place. New storm drain inlets would be installed along the modified northbound off-ramp and on-ramp. A new storm drain inlet system would be added to accommodate the widening of Palo Comado Canyon Road south of the overcrossing.

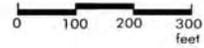
A noise barrier (soundwall) has been identified as a potential noise abatement measure and may be installed along the northern portion of Palo Comado Canyon Road at Cheseboro Road (see **Figure 3**). The noise barrier is considered part of the Project in this study so that all potential impacts resulting from the Project are measured. A final decision regarding construction of the noise abatement will be made upon completion of the project design. Design of the soundwall would include context-sensitive solutions, such as concrete formwork, in keeping with the surrounding neighborhood.

Figure 2: Build Alternative



Legend:

	New Pavement Section		Possible Limits of Disturbance		Cut & Fill Line
	Widened Bridge Section		Possible Staging Area		Retaining Wall
	Widened Bridge Bent		Grading Limits		New Sidewalk



**Figure 3: Noise Barrier Location\***



\* Construction of the noise barrier will be determined upon completion of the project design.

## II. EXISTING VISUAL SETTING

### ***Landscape within the Project Vicinity***

The landscape within the Project area can be defined as a combination of landscape components which differentiates it from other landscapes. This section will discuss the landscape components within the Project area in order to provide a frame of reference for future discussion regarding potential impacts to the area's landscape resulting from the Project.

### **Landform**

Overall, the landform in the Project area is characterized by the Transverse Mountain Range, an east/west trending range which includes the Santa Monica Mountains, as well as adjacent canyons, rolling hills, and valleys. The city of Agoura Hills is situated in the foothills of the Santa Monica Mountains along the western edge of Los Angeles County in the Conejo Valley. US 101 moves traffic along the foothills of the Santa Monica Mountains in an east/west direction through the Project area. The Project site is situated among a variety of topographic features, including the east/west trending Simi Hills, which is part of the Transverse Mountain Range.

## Landcover - Water

Intermittent streams that drain Cheseboro Canyon and Palo Comado Canyon converge near the Project area and are conveyed via an open concrete-lined box culvert beneath US 101 just east of the Project site. No views of surface waters are readily visible from within the Project limits.

## Landcover - Vegetation

The Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area wraps around the city to the north and south, extending to the eastern boundary. These areas remain undeveloped and contain oak woodlands, grasslands, scrub, and some limited riparian habitats. These vegetated areas are visible from some areas within the Project site due to the fact that the undeveloped ridgelines are situated high above the Project's roadways. Within the Project area, vegetation is limited to non-native ornamental landscaping associated with the surface streets, residential and commercial development throughout.

## Landcover – Built Environment

Because of the substantial amount of open space, such as parklands and ridgelines that exists within the Project vicinity, the built environment is considered semi-rural; however, within the Project area, most of the low-lying hills and valleys are covered with man-made development, which includes residential and commercial land uses, and transportation facilities. The transportation facilities within the Project area include US 101 and heavily traveled surface streets. Though US 101 is typically a north/south highway, it runs in an east/west direction within the Project area. The built environment is the dominant view within the Project area because man-made development exists within the Project limits (transportation facilities) and surrounds the Project site on every side (residential and commercial development).

## ***Landscape Units***

In order to understand the visual effects of a proposed project, the area's landscape (described above) can be divided into landscape units. Landscape units can be as large or as small as necessary; the unit size depends upon the continuity of existing landscape. Each unit can be thought of as an "outdoor room". The "outdoor room" should be perceived as a complete visual environment with distinct visual characteristics (mountains, waterways, vegetation, etc.) that differentiate it from others.

Projects which include several miles of roadway might require the creation of numerous landscape units due to the fact that the existing landscape often changes, thus the perceived "outdoor room" must be redefined. Because of the proposed Project's limited scale, and because no atypical visual features are present, this report analyzes the entire Project area as a single landscape unit.

## ***Viewing Locations***

Three viewing locations (VL) were selected to best communicate the Project's components and any potential to change visual character. These viewing locations are listed below. A map of these locations, along with an illustration of existing and post-construction views, are included in **Attachment A**.

- **VL1** - US 101 northbound off-ramp;
- **VL2** - Southbound Palo Comado Canyon Road at the US 101 intersection; and
- **VL3** - Northbound Palo Comado Canyon Road at the Chesebro Road intersection.

### **III. VIEWER SENSITIVITY AND RESPONSE**

The purpose of this section is to measure the viewer response to the potential changes in visual character resulting from the proposed Project. A change in visual character cannot be determined as "good" or "bad" until it is compared with the viewer response to that change. Public opinion regarding the existing visual character of the landscape, and the proposed Project that would affect its character, are the basis for measuring the contrast in the visual character.

#### **Planning Guidelines**

US 101 is part of the federal highway system. It is classified as an urban principal arterial freeway which provides international, interstate, interregional, and intra-regional travel and goods movement. The Project primarily includes improvements to local streets outside of the state and federal highway system, and is therefore subject to review and approval from local agencies, such as the City of Agoura Hills and the County of Los Angeles.

#### **Los Angeles County**

The Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors amended the North Area Plan to add community development standards for grading and ridgeline development in the Santa Monica Mountains (North Area). The ordinance provides protection to lands containing "significant" ridgelines, which is defined as a ridgeline that is highly visible and which dominates the landscape. Both the Simi Hills and Santa Monica Mountains are designated as "significant" under the ordinance.

The North Area Plan designates US 101 as a scenic route because it has unobstructed views of significant ridgelines, natural rolling hills, and oak woodlands. Similarly, Chesebro Road is designated as a route with scenic quality for many of the same reasons. The Project area is located above and adjacent to US 101; portions of Chesebro Road are included within the project area.

#### ***Viewer Groups***

For the purpose of this report, two viewer groups were considered for the evaluation of viewer response; those with views from the road and those with views of the road.

## Viewers from the Road

This viewer group is defined as those traveling on US 101 or along adjacent surface roads (on- and off-ramps, frontage roads, overcrossings, etc.), whether by way of vehicle, bicycle, or as a pedestrian. For motorists traveling along US 101 within the Project area, the dominant view is of the heavily developed roadway corridor in the foreground. Distant views of ridgelines and hillsides can also be seen by these viewers. Viewers along these roadways include private property owners, commuters, consumers, and those seeking recreational opportunities at nearby parklands.

The awareness of these viewers of the visual resources is varied and dependent on their specific activity. Those using US 101 are not as likely to be aware of specific changes to the project area because it is elevated above the roadway corridor. Conversely, local residents using surface streets, such as Palo Comado Canyon Road, are the most sensitive to changes regarding visual resources due to their familiarity with, and personal investment in, the area.

## Viewers of the Road

This viewer group is comprised of individuals who can see any portion of the project from off-site locations. In the case of this Project, viewers of the Project area are limited to those within nearby residential and commercial developments. Views of the project area are generally limited to individuals traveling along the roadway corridors, to nearby residential and commercial development, or to parklands elevated above the Project site.

## **IV. VISUAL IMPACTS**

In order to measure the effects of potential changes resulting from the proposed Project, a Visual Quality Evaluation (VQE) was prepared, which compares the visual quality of the existing conditions as well as post-project conditions. For the purpose of this report, a numerical rating between 1 and 7 was assigned to each of the three viewpoints chosen. The lowest value was assigned a rating of 1, while 7 represents the highest value. The numerical difference between existing and proposed conditions provides a measurement for the change which is likely to occur as part of the project. This numerical difference is compared to the expected sensitivities of previously-discussed viewer groups in order to determine an overall level of visual impact.

The numerical rating system is based on evaluative criteria using the following components:

- **Vividness:** The extent to which the landscape is memorable. This is associated with the distinctiveness, diversity, and contrast of visual elements. A vivid landscape makes an immediate and lasting impression on the viewer.
- **Intactness:** The integrity of visual order in the landscape and the extent to which the existing landscape is free from non-typical visual intrusions.
- **Unity:** The extent to which visual intrusions are sensitive to and in visual harmony with the existing landscape.

The three viewpoints selected are rated and discussed below:

**VL1 - US 101 Northbound Off-Ramp**

This viewpoint captures the proposed changes to the US 101 overcrossing and intersection improvements from a distance, and retaining walls on the north side of the US 101 off-ramp.

	<b>Vividness</b>	<b>Intactness</b>	<b>Unity</b>	<b>Results (V=I=U/3)</b>
<b>Existing</b>	2	2	2	2
<b>Post-Project</b>	2	2	2	2

**Analysis of Visual Changes:** Viewer location #1 was given a low rating for existing visual quality, primarily due to the overwhelming presence and character of the built environment, as well as the absence of unity with the surrounding landforms (such as hillsides). The primary view consists of US 101 and the roadway and overcrossing structure, as well as cut slope to the north. Not one category in the rating system received a higher score than another. With implementation of the Project, there would be no change to the existing visual quality from this viewpoint.

**VL2 - Southbound Palo Comado Canyon Road at the US 101 Intersection**

This viewpoint captures the proposed intersection improvements and widening of Palo Comado Canyon Road.

	<b>Vividness</b>	<b>Intactness</b>	<b>Unity</b>	<b>Results (V=I=U/3)</b>
<b>Existing</b>	2.75	3.5	3	3.08
<b>Post-Project</b>	2.75	3.25	3	3

**Analysis of Visual Changes:** Viewer location #2 receives a low rating for existing visual quality, though it is slightly higher than VL1 due to the uniform view of hillsides to the south. Intactness earns the highest rating because from this elevated viewpoint, very few of the surrounding residences and businesses are visible. Therefore, a more intact view of the surrounding landforms is available. However, the roadway itself is the most prominent aspect of this view, giving it a low vividness rating. Because it contrasts with the surrounding hillsides, it receives a low score for unity.

Implementation of the Project would minimally reduce the overall rating because the widened roadway and installation of street lights would marginally reduce intactness. It should be noted that the removal of existing ornamental landscaping as part of the widening of the Palo Comado Canyon Road overcrossing would increase the visibility of hillsides to the south. This was considered a benefit to intactness from this viewing location, which was included in the scoring.

**VL3 - Northbound Palo Comado Canyon Road at the Cheseboro Road Intersection**

This viewpoint captures proposed roadway improvements, as well as the proposed retaining wall and soundwall along Palo Comado Canyon Road.

	<b>Vividness</b>	<b>Intactness</b>	<b>Unity</b>	<b>Results (V=I=U/3)</b>
<b>Existing</b>	3	4.5	3.5	3.67
<b>Post-Project</b>	3	4	3	3.3

**Analysis of Visual Changes:** Viewer location #3 receives the highest rating in all categories under existing conditions primarily due to the visibility of uniform natural landforms and vegetation, because of the semi-rural built environment which provides more visual harmony than VL1 and VL2, and because of the high sensitivity of this viewer group. Implementation of the Project may include the installation of a soundwall along the northbound lanes of Palo Comado Canyon Road.

Construction of a soundwall would slightly diminish the overall intactness and overall unity of the viewpoint because it would minimally reduce views of existing vegetation, and it would reduce the visual harmony between the built and natural environments. Likewise, the installation of sidewalks would reduce the semi-rural look and feel from this viewing location. Therefore, the overall rating of this viewpoint would be slightly reduced under post-project conditions.

**V. SUMMARY OF VISUAL IMPACTS**

The existing visual quality within the Project area is moderately low. The view quality is primarily based upon the built environment present within the Project area, which contrasts with surrounding landforms and open space. Residents and other local viewers are likely to be the most sensitive to changes regarding visual resources due to their familiarity of and personal investment to the area.

As a result of the proposed Project, minor changes in visual resources would occur within the Project limits. These slight changes are primarily due to the increase in built environment (the addition of paved surface, retaining walls, and soundwalls), which reduce overall vividness and unity. The Project would have the greatest impact on viewing location #3 because the proposed roadway improvements would slightly diminish the semi-rural character, and the installation of a soundwall would reduce views of existing vegetation, therefore reducing overall visual harmony.

## **VI. RECOMMENDED MITIGATION**

The following mitigation measures would reduce visual impacts resulting from the Project so that substantial changes in overall visual quality would not occur.

- Grading activity will be performed in a manner that minimizes disturbance to the natural landscape and terrain by such design techniques as locating development in the least sloping areas of the site.
- Landscaping that may be removed as a result of soundwall construction will be replaced.
- Aesthetic treatment of the soundwall and retaining walls will be reviewed and approved by Caltrans District 7.

## **VII. PHOTO SIMULATIONS**

The photo simulations provided in **Attachment A** depict the visual character of each viewer location discussed in this report. In each circumstance, a simulation of existing conditions and post-construction conditions is provided for the purpose of comparison.



**ATTACHMENT A**  
**PHOTO SIMULATIONS OF EXISTING AND PROPOSED CONDITIONS**

Photo Key – Viewing Locations



VL1 - US 101 Northbound Off-Ramp



**Existing Condition**



**Proposed Condition – “With Project”**

VL2 - Southbound Palo Comado Canyon Road at the US 101 Intersection



**Existing Condition**



**Proposed Condition – “With Project”**

VL3 - Northbound Palo Comado Canyon Road at the Cheseboro Road Intersection



**Existing Condition**



**Proposed Condition – “With Project”**