4.5 AESTHETICS

Introduction

This section of the Draft EIR focuses on the project's potential visual impacts relative both to the project site and surrounding land uses. Information in this section is based primarily on-site visits by the report preparers, photographs and four visual simulations prepared by Environmental Vision.

Environmental Setting

Existing Visual Setting on the Project Site. The 67.7-acre project site is entirely open space at the present time. No developed features are present (see Figure 3.2, showing the "Existing Setting"). The site includes designated unpaved trails and several unauthorized pathways.

The site contains a variety of habitats such as coastal prairie/tarplant habitat, riparian and wetlands, and riparian woodland. The riparian corridors are associated with Arana Gulch Creek and Hagemann Gulch, located on the east and west sides of the site, respectively.

The central portion of the site includes a gently sloping grassy meadow area comprised mainly of non-native grasses and forbs. The meadow makes up the coastal prairie/tarplant habitat management area. Very limited tree cover is found in this central area. Since the site is subject to seasonal rainfall, the coastal prairie/tarplant habitat is characterized by seasonal coloration changes, with grasses turning golden yellow in the summer months and green during the rainy season.

The Arana Gulch Creek, located in the eastern portion of the site, flows into the upper (northern) end of the Upper Harbor. The area along the creek is heavily vegetated and includes marshland, willow riparian forest and emergent wetlands. The wetlands are surrounded by riparian scrub vegetation and non-native eucalyptus groves, which are dominant visual features of the site.

Hagemann Gulch, located in the western portion of the site, includes an intermittent drainage corridor that is heavily vegetated with trees and shrubs, including riparian scrub and oak woodland species. This area comprises one of the steepest portions of the project site.

Views of the Site. The Arana Gulch site is visible from the Upper Harbor to the south and Agnes Street to the north. The site is also visible from Harborview Court, a short cul-de-sac northeast of the site above Capitola Road. From the east, the site is visible from the termini of Mello Lane and Staff Lane with partial, filtered views from 7th Avenue. From the west, partial filtered views are available from Harbor Drive and Frederick Park. The view from Frederick Park is shown in Figure 4.5-2a. Photo viewpoint locations are shown in Figure 4.5-1. In general, the site has relatively low visibility from nearby roads and other public viewpoints because of the heavy vegetation and terrain of Hagemann Gulch on the west and Arana Gulch Creek on the east.

The City of Santa Cruz General Plan (Map CD-3) designates the view from the Agnes Street frontage looking south and east across the property to be an important public scenic viewpoint/panorama (City of Santa Cruz, 1994) (see Figure 4.5-2b).

Views from the Site. The Upper Harbor is visible from a large portion of the project site, including the central meadow area. The northernmost portion of the Upper Harbor is characterized by large paved parking areas with overhead lighting, containers and other uses in the dry storage area and boats and marine related uses, as shown in Figure 4.5-2c. A chain-link fence currently separates the site from the Upper Harbor. Near the culvert where Arana Gulch Creek is undergrounded before flowing into the waters of the Upper Harbor, the vegetation is mainly characterized by heavily disturbed brush and scrub.

Residential uses characterized by low rise, single-family dwellings north of the site are visible from the northern portion and parts of the central, meadow area of the site. Scenic views of the boat slips in the Upper Harbor exist in the central meadow and the south end of the site. There are generally limited views from other parts of the site because of topography and heavy vegetation. The long-range views from the site include scenic views of the mountains when looking north from many points on the site, especially the meadow area.

Impacts and Mitigation Measures

Significance Criteria. The proposed Master Plan would have a potentially significant impact if it would:

- Have a substantial adverse effect on a scenic vista.
- Substantially damage scenic resources, including but not limited to trees, rock outcroppings or historic buildings within a scenic highway.
- Significantly degrade the existing visual character of the site and its surroundings.
- Create a new source of substantial light and glare that would adversely affect day or nighttime views in the area.

Less-Than-Significant Impacts. The following project impacts would be less than significant.

Effects on a Scenic Vista. Because the proposed built project elements (except the bridge over Hagemann Gulch and the retaining wall near Arana Gulch Creek) are at ground level (e.g., pathway, railings and retaining wall), the long-range views of the hills would not be impacted. Scenic views of the Upper Harbor would not be affected by the project, and proposed trail alignments have been designed to capitalize on these views. In addition, the City-designated important view from the Agnes Street frontage looking south and east across the project site would not be affected by the ground-level Arana Meadow Trail.

Both the Canyon Trail and the Coastal Prairie Loop Trail would pass within the vicinity of the Historic Live Oak Ranch, but would result in minimal visual intrusion. Grading would not be required in proximity to the Ranch. Placement of the 8-foot-wide multi-use trail at grade within the grassland meadow would screen most of the trail from view. Existing trees obscure views from the Ranch to the trails. (This historic property is discussed in further detail in Section 4.10,

Figure 4.5-1: Photo and Simulation Locations

Figure 4.5-2: Views of Site

Cultural Resources, of this EIR.) Therefore, the project would not have a substantial adverse effect on a scenic vista.

Effects on a Scenic Highway. The project site is not visible from or within the viewshed of a scenic highway. Therefore, the proposed project would not substantially damage scenic resources visible from a scenic highway.

Light and Glare Impacts. The Master Plan does not include any plans for lighting at this time. In the future, if any safety issues arise, the City may consider placing low-level, down-shielded lighting near the Hagemann Gulch Canyon Trail entrance and the multi-use trail within the Port District property. No reflective elements are included as part of the project site. Therefore, the project would not create a new source of substantial light and glare that would adversely affect views in the area.

Degradation to Existing Visual Character. The visual quality of the site would be improved by closing selected existing unauthorized pathways (which are uneven in width in places due to erosion) in order to protect habitat areas, strengthening and cleaning up some existing unpaved trails, and removing illegal camping uses from the riparian areas. Similarly, habitat restoration and long-term resource management included as part of the project would improve the visual quality of the site by helping to restore and maintain what are currently degraded habitat areas. Therefore, the Master Plan would help to protect the scenic resources of a coastal area, consistent with the California Coastal Act (California, 2005).

Four visual simulations of multi-use trails proposed as part of the Master Plan have been prepared for this analysis (see Figures 4.5-3 to 4.5-6). The four locations for the simulations were selected to provide a representative sample of the built features of the project (see Figure 4.5-1). Each of the simulations is described below.

Figure 4.5-3 (Viewpoint 1). This figure shows the proposed bridge over Hagemann Gulch and part of the proposed Canyon Trail, looking west from the center of Arana Gulch. The bridge and railings at this location represent one of the most prominent built features of the proposed project. This 8-foot wide section of trail would be paved for bicycle and wheelchair access. The railings for the bridge would be made of steel pipe with a galvanized finish to match the neutral tones of the paved pathway. The simulation illustrates that the bridge would not significantly degrade the site's visual character due to its scale, color and design and existing vegetation.

From the west side of the bridge, the bridge would not be highly visible from either the Church parking lot at Broadway or adjacent residences because of the thick trees and vegetation surrounding the open space area.

Figure 4.5-4 (Viewpoint 2). This figure shows a view of the Canyon Trail, looking north near its junction with the Coastal Prairie Loop Trail. This paved multi-use trail would also be 8 feet in width and constructed of neutral-colored paving material. The existing informal, unpaved pathway at this location would be revegetated and abandoned.

Figure 4.5-5 (Viewpoint 3). This figure shows a view of the paved Creek View Trail, looking north, just north of its junction with the unpaved Coastal Prairie Loop Trail. This paved multi-use trail would also be 8 feet in width and constructed of neutral-colored paving material. For Viewpoints 2 and 3, no significant degradation of the site's visual character would occur. The trail paving color would blend into the summer grass color and would follow the natural terrain at ground level.

Figure 4.5-6 (Viewpoint 4). This figure shows the Creek View Trail from a high point just north of the Upper Harbor where Arana Gulch Creek flows into a culvert and the waters of the Upper Harbor (cross sections of this portion of the proposed Creek View Trail are shown in Sections D-H in Figures 3-7 and 3-8 in Chapter 3, Project Description). Due to the steep topography, this portion of the trail would require a 140-foot length of retaining wall. A steel pipe railing with vertical pickets and a galvanized finish would run along the length of the retaining walls. Another 240-foot section of the pathway would require retaining walls on both sides of the trail (see Section E, Figure 3-8). The retaining walls would be made of split-faced, uncolored concrete block. For the portion of the trail adjacent to the existing roadway in the Upper Harbor, a separate 5-foot-wide concrete sidewalk would be provided for pedestrians adjacent to the eight-foot wide multi-use trail.

In most trail locations throughout the site, grasses and other vegetation would help obscure the trail, making it minimally visually intrusive. For this reason, the paved multi-use trails would not be prominent visual features from most vantage points within Arana Gulch. However, some grading would be necessary near the Upper Harbor area and the proposed retaining walls. Disturbance of vegetation on these slopes and topographical changes during construction could result in short-term visual impacts at this location. However, revegetation and restoration proposed as part of the Master Plan, in combination with revegetation measures for construction-period impacts outlined in Mitigation Measure BIO-6 in Section 4.2, Biological Resources, of this report, would reduce these impacts to less-than-significant levels. No additional mitigation would be necessary.

Potentially Significant Impacts. The project would have the following potentially significant impacts.

Impact AESTHETICS-1: Construction of the Creek View Trail and the paved multi-use trail with associated retaining walls and railing over Arana Gulch Creek north of the Upper Harbor (Figure 4.5-6, Viewpoint 4) would change the visual character of the open space area. (PS)

Views of the paved trail from surrounding areas to the north and east would be screened by existing vegetation from within the Arana Gulch area. However, the trail, retaining walls and railing would be clearly visible from the Upper Harbor, and from some portions of the southern end of Arana Gulch. The introduction of a human-made structure into the natural landscape of the Arana Gulch open space area would result in a change in visual character; however, the siting, design and scale of the proposed pathway elements would be compatible with open space uses, and would be appropriate for future planned recreation uses. The trail is as narrow as pos-

Figure 4.5-3: Visual Simulation No 1

Figure 4.5-4: Visual Simulation No. 2

Figure 4.5-5: Visual Simulation No. 3

Figure 4.5-6: Visual Simulation No. 4

sible, designed for wheelchair, pedestrian and bicycle use, with materials that complement the natural landscape. Nevertheless, it should be ensured that the coloring, if any, of the concrete blocks comprising the retaining walls are as neutrally-colored as possible.

> *Mitigation Measure AESTHETICS-1: City staff shall work with the project engineer to determine, through the use of samples checked at the project site, if uncolored block would be the most neutral color for the retaining walls so as to provide maximum blending with surrounding natural features, and thus minimize visual impact. Use of colored blocks in earth tones should be considered. Implementation of this mitigation measure would make this impact less than significant. (LTS)*

Cumulative Impacts. The introduction of human-made structures (i.e., paved trails, bridge and railings, and retaining walls) into the landscape of Arana Gulch would result in a change in visual character. However, the siting, design and scale of the proposed elements would be compatible with existing and future recreation uses. The visual effect of the Hagemann Gulch bridge would be minimized by appropriate bridge design, and the fact that the bridge would be largely screened from view by existing vegetation.

Since the proposed project would require changing land use designations for the site to remove the possibility of any residential or community facility development in the future, the overall visual character of the site would remain natural and not become urbanized. None of the cumulative projects (see Chapter 6) are in the viewshed of Arana Gulch. Therefore, there would be no cumulative visual impacts from the proposed project.

References

California, State of, 2005. California Coastal Act, Public Resources Code, Division 20.

City of Santa Cruz, 1994. *General Plan and Local Coastal Program: 1990-2005*. October.