

3.4 AESTHETICS

The information and analysis in this section is based partially on the Historic Resources Preliminary Potential Visual Impact Assessment Report for the Proposed Project completed by Justin Castells at PaleoWest in December 2019. The assessment includes the results of a field survey of the HTCMP area to better understanding of the general viewsheds of the HTCMP area. This report is included as Appendix D to this Draft EIR. The information and analysis is also based on comparison to the previous HTCMP EIR (City 2011) as well as review of the existing City planning documents.

3.4.1 Existing Environmental Setting

The HTCMP area is located within a relatively flat valley area of the City with views of the surrounding hillsides to the west and south and encompasses the downtown area of San Juan Capistrano. There is a mix of urban land uses within the HTCMP area which contributes to the overall visual character. Views on site consist mainly of those from the streetscape of existing buildings. There are several historic and iconic buildings located in and adjacent to the HTC area. Iconic buildings include the Mission San Juan Capistrano and its surrounding grounds as well as the Mission Basilica. Additional views include views of the Mission entrance from Camino Capistrano and Ortega Highway and views of the Mission Basilica looking in a northerly direction on Camino Capistrano. Additionally, the HTC area offers views of the surrounding ridgelines which are identified within the General Plan, as well as natural open space hillsides to the northwest, west and south of the site. There are several prominent trees including heritage trees located within the streetscapes. Views of the HTCMP area are primarily from the adjacent street system, including the I-5 Freeway to the east, which is elevated and provides views into the HTCMP area.

Visual Character

The visual character of the HTCMP area is a predominantly urban area surrounded by valleys and hills. There is a variety of land uses from commercial and retail uses, including gas stations, restaurants, retailers and professional offices, and church uses. To the south of the HTCMP area is a residential area; and small markets, restaurants, the Junipero Serra School, and two churches are located to the north of the HTCMP area (City 2011). The overall character of the HTCMP area is rich in historic diversity as detailed throughout Section 3.6, Cultural Resources, as a result of early Native American populations and well as the location of European settlement.

Several mature trees are located within the HTCMP area, which intercept views from adjacent streets and add a natural, vertical visual element to the minimal variation in the area's topography. Topography varies within the HTCMP area from approximately 80 to 145 feet above mean sea level (City 2011). San Juan Creek is a natural creek that flows from northeast of the site to the southwest. As the creek flows under the I-5 Freeway it becomes a concrete lined channel where it travels approximately 0.4 miles and forms a confluence with Trabuco Creek south of the HTCMP area. The concrete lined Trabuco Creek Channel parallels Paseo Adelanto.

The downtown portion of the HTC area includes retail uses on both sides of Camino Capistrano, as well as retail, office and associated parking which surrounds the centrally located Historic Town Center Park. There are a number of National Register-designated and locally-designated historic buildings of various styles that add to the historic village-like character of the HTC area. They include the Manuel Garcia Adobe, Domingo Yorba Adobe, Valenzuela Adobe, Judge Richard Egan House, El Adobe Restaurant and the "streamline modern" Esslinger Building (City 2011).

The 1.9 acre Historic Town Center Park, located on the east side of El Camino real south of the historic Bias Aguilar Adobe offers a permanent stage, restrooms, and a turfed event area. The Park contributes to the site context of the Bias Aguilar adobe. This area also contains open space areas including two landscaped plazas of 8,000 square feet along Camino Capistrano at Foster and Yorba Streets and a 2,500 square foot plaza at the railroad depot (City 2011).

The Santa Fe Depot is located north of the Franciscan Plaza public parking structure at the west terminus of Verdugo Street. The old Santa Fe Railroad Depot was first built in 1887 and serves as a unique historical and architectural feature within the HTCMP area (City 2011). It is listed on the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP), California Register of Historical Resources (CRHR) and the City's Inventory of Historical and Cultural Landmarks (IHCL) (City 2018).

Mission San Juan Capistrano and the Los Rios Street Historic District are two significant visual resources within the HTCMP area. The Mission, established in 1776, is listed on the NRHP and the CRHR as well as being listed as the first landmark on the City's IHCL (City 2018). Mission San Juan Capistrano represents not only an important cultural resource within the City but also is one of the most visually and aesthetically important and prominent features in San Juan Capistrano. The Mission gardens, screened from public view by a six foot-plus stucco wall, also provide a private open space opportunity for residents and visiting tourists (City 2011).

The Los Rios Historic District is one of the oldest neighborhoods in Orange County with homes over 215 years old, many relocated historic homes and a diverse canopy of mature trees. The O'Neill Museum, several historic private residents and several structures that provide specialty retail, restaurant, and commercial services line the Los Rios District (City 2011).

The Los Rios Park and Ito Nursery provide open space and visual relief within the HTCMP area. Los Rios Street connects residents of the San Juan Villas to these open spaces and parks and to the downtown. The character of this area consists of a rural road lined by mature trees; it provides a calm environment where pedestrians, bicyclists, horses and automobiles mix comfortably.

San Juan Elementary School, a part of the Capistrano Unified School District (CUSD), is located north of Spring Street. The school encompasses a series of permanent and temporary one-story administration and classroom structures along Spring Street with additional educational and playground facilities located further north within the limits of the school site.

The City lists Spring Street (From El Camino Real to its easterly terminus at the 1-5 Freeway), Los Rios Street (from Del Obispo Street to Mission Street), El Camino Real (from Zanja to Forester Street), and Camino Capistrano (from Ortega Highway to Del Obispo) on its IHCL; they are designated as "City Historic Streets." The Stroschein House, an historic single-family residence located at the southeastern corner of El Camino Real and Spring Street and constructed in 1927, is listed on the IHCL and was also listed on the NRHP in 2009 (City 2011).

Visual Resources

Several mature ornamental and native trees are present in the interior of the HTC area. Trees that have a trunk diameter at breast height of thirty-six (36) inches or greater and are a specimen of the following species: *Schinus molle* (California pepper), *Quercus* spp. (oak), *Cedar* spp. (cedar), *Eucalyptus globulus* (blue gum eucalyptus), *Juglans* spp. (walnut), *Olea europaea* (olive), *Platanus* spp. (sycamore), *Populus*

spp. (cottonwood), are considered to be heritage trees under the City of San Juan Capistrano's Heritage Tree Ordinance (Section 9.2-349[1]) (City 2011). Per the Municipal Code, removal of a heritage tree would require a tree removal permit, and the overall objective is to identify and preserve heritage trees within the City.

Other scenic resources in the City are views of the hillsides and ridgelines surrounding the City. The major north-south roadways in the City provide view corridors and include views of the hills to the north, west and south, which are designated "major ridgelines" in the City's General Plan. Distant views of these hills are afforded from locations throughout the Project site, including from Ortega Highway, Camino Capistrano and Del Obispo (City 1999).

The City's Inventory of Historical and Cultural Landmarks (IHCL) lists 40 properties, six districts and four streets within the City. A number of these historic properties and streets are located within the HTCMP area. Historic resources are discussed in more detail above and in Section 5.5 Cultural Resources. Four historic districts within the HTCMP area include the Mission Refuse Area, Mission Cemetery, River Street (within the Los Rios Historic District), and the Los Rios Historic District (City 2018).

Viewsheds

Figures 3-1 and 3-2 present existing views of the HTCMP area from four locations. The views were selected as representative views of the existing conditions because they show the visual character and scenic resources of the HTCMP area from public views and roadways.

View #1: Buildings located on Camino Capistrano, facing south from Mission San Juan Capistrano

View #2: Buildings located on Camino Capistrano, facing north from Forster Street

View #3: Mission San Juan Capistrano, facing west from Ortega Highway and Del Obispo Street

View #4: Los Rios Historic District facing north

Figure 3-1: Viewsheds within the Project Area



View of buildings located on Camino Capistrano, facing south from Mission San Juan Capistrano



View of buildings located on Camino Capistrano, facing north from Forster Street

Figure 3-2: Viewsheds within the Project Area



View towards Mission San Juan Capistrano, facing west from Ortega Highway and Del Obispo Street



View of Los Rios Historic District facing north

3.4.2 Impacts and Mitigation

Impact 3.4-1: Would the Project have a substantial effect on a scenic vista?

The General Plan Community Design Element serves to protect and enhance the image of the community by addressing 1) the protection of the natural hillsides and various views created by the hillsides; 2) the protection and enhancement of other natural features (e.g., major creeks and floodplains); 3) the preservation and enhancement of the historical character of the community; 4) the harmonious incorporation of new development into existing public and private development; and 5) the maintenance of the community's "small-village, rural atmosphere." Scenic vistas as viewed in the context of the Community Design Element consist of public viewpoints that provide expansive views of a natural landscape or historic character of the area. Examples include, but are not limited to:

- Views from the arterial streets (Camino Capistrano, Del Obispo Street, Ortega Highway) that traverse the Project area.
- Views of Mission San Juan Capistrano from Ortega Highway.
- Views of the hillsides and ridgelines.

The Project area is currently largely developed in nature. The visual character of the Project area would change over time due to future development and redevelopment of land uses resulting in a thriving and diverse HTC area with a greater intensity of uses. The buildings associated with these uses would comply with the FAR, setback, and height restrictions identified in Chapter 2 – Project Description, which may result in a change in building height and scale within the Project area. Some foreground views would be blocked by the addition of new buildings or taller buildings within the Project area; however, distant views of the surrounding hillsides to the west, north and south would still be afforded from the Project area and surrounding roadways. Thus, the addition of buildings to the HTC area, including the potential for taller hotel buildings, would have the potential to impact a scenic vista including views from the arterial streets, views of Mission San Juan Capistrano, and views of the surrounding hillsides and ridgelines.

Views of the Project area from the east are largely obstructed by I-5. Since I-5 is elevated, views from the I-5 Freeway are presently characterized by the downtown urbanized area with a variety of land uses, associated parking lots and mature ornamental trees, combined with a view of the surrounding foothills in the background and can be considered visually pleasing by many viewers traveling the freeway. The Proposed Project would provide a framework for new infill development and redevelopment that would be in character with the existing and surrounding development through application of the City's Architectural Design Guidelines.

Surrounding land uses and roadways to the north and south are all at a similar elevation as compared to the Project area. Therefore, existing views do not extend far beyond the onsite buildings and/or Project area boundaries. Views of the Project area from the north and west will remain largely unchanged since the Proposed Project does not propose a change in land uses, from what is outlined in the General Plan, within these areas. However, the implementation of elements of the Proposed Project including greater allowable FAR, greater building height for hotel buildings, and the removal of the potential for mixed use development within the Project area would result in a change from what was previously analyzed in the HTCMP EIR. Views of the Project area looking north by travelers along Camino Capistrano and the Metrolink Amtrak railroad would also remain similar since they are at similar elevations as the Project area. Similarly, the implementation of elements of the Proposed Project including greater allowable FAR,

greater building height for hotel buildings, and the removal of the potential for mixed use development within the Project area would result in a change from what was previously analyzed in the HTCMP EIR. The increase in allowable FAR would have the potential to increase the density of units or uses within the HTC area; however, the increase in FAR would not have a material impact on a majority of sensitive views. In addition, the change in height allowance would only apply to three story hotel buildings within the HTC area; and the potential for an increase of 10-feet in building height for three-story hotel buildings in the HTC area would not make a material difference of a majority of sensitive views. The provision of setback requirements for new construction adjacent to historic buildings is also intended to self-mitigate for impacts of both future hotel buildings and any other projects adjacent to historic structures. In addition, distant views of the hillsides and ridgelines in the background would be maintained.

During construction, the presence of construction equipment and in-process site development have the potential to impact scenic vistas on a temporary basis. Due to the potential construction impacts that may occur, mitigation measures AES-1 and AES-2, provided below, will help guide future development projects in the Project area. Therefore, the Proposed Project would not have a significant effect on a scenic vista with incorporation of mitigation measures.

Impact 3.4-2: Would the Project substantially degrade the existing visual character or quality of public views of the site and its surroundings? If the Project is in an urbanized area, would the Project conflict with applicable zoning and other regulations governing scenic quality?

The Project area is predominately developed and is surrounded by existing development. As previously described, the Proposed Project is intended to amend and remove any discrepancies between the adopted City of San Juan Capistrano General Plan and HTCMP. The Proposed Project would also result in allowing greater FAR within the HTC area as well as increased building height for hotels in the HTC area. Since the HTCMP and associated FBC are being repealed as part of the Proposed Project, the General Plan itself will continue to encourage similar architectural styles, forms, and massing with the existing and surrounding development, therefore creating a cohesive visual character within the Project area. Individual site-specific projects will be subject to public discretionary review through the Commission review process for compliance with those City Guidelines including design policies and provisions specific to development within the Project area. These review processes would evaluate future projects on a project-by-project basis to determine whether significant impacts would occur under CEQA.

As indicated in the Historic Town Center Master Plan EIR (November 2011), implementation of the HTCMP would result in the removal of numerous mature ornamental trees resulting from the previously proposed street extensions. However, under the Proposed Project, these trees would not be removed, and tree replacement would not be warranted. However, as discussed in Section 5.4, Biological Resources of the 2011 EIR, any future site-specific project that proposes the removal of a tree must comply with the City's Tree Removal Permit Ordinance (Municipal Code, Section 9-2.349). The visual character of the Plan Area with numerous mature trees would largely remain the same, yet fewer impacts would occur under the Proposed Project pertaining to trees due to the street extensions not occurring under the Proposed Project.

Further, all future projects in the Plan Area would conform with the City's Architectural Design Guidelines and individual site-specific projects will be subject to public discretionary review through the Commission review process for compliance with those City Guidelines including design policies and provisions specific to "Downtown Commercial" development. In summary, conformance with the City's Architectural Design Guidelines would ensure less than significant visual character impacts.

During construction of future projects within the Project area, construction activities could result in a potentially adverse impact due to a temporarily disturbed condition on the site, including stockpiling, noise barriers, or demolition. Overall, construction impacts would be temporary in nature, but impacts would be minimized through implementation of mitigation measures AES-1 and AES-2, outlined below.

Implementation of the Proposed Project is not only expected to "not degrade the existing visual character or quality of the Project area and its surroundings" but it would maintain the existing visual character and quality of the Project area and its surroundings by establishing and enforcing protection of the visual character of the Project area.

Mitigation Measures

AES-1: Prior to the issuance of grading permits for site specific development, the project applicant shall prepare a Construction Staging Plan that identifies that location(s) of staging areas, including equipment and vehicle storage areas, stockpile areas, etc. These areas shall be located as far away from the existing view corridors as practical. In addition, the Construction Staging Plan shall also identify the manner in which the staging and equipment storage would be screened (e.g., temporary fencing, landscaping, berms, or a combination of these and other methods) subject to the approval of the Public Works Director and Development Services Director, to ensure that the temporary visual impacts would be minimized within the viewshed.

AES-2: Prior to the issuance of grading permits for site specific development that includes the construction of noise barriers (e.g., berms or sound walls) the project applicant shall prepare plans (i.e., soundwall plans, berm grading plans, landscaping plans, etc.) that demonstrate that landscaping and setbacks would provide a visual buffer between noise barriers and surrounding viewsheds to the Development Services Director or their designee for review and approval; who may refer such plans to the Design Review Committee for review.

Refer to mitigation measure MM CUL-1 in Section 3.7 for additional measures related to the protection of historic resources.

3.4.3 Cumulative Impacts

Development occurring in the vicinity of the Project area, would have the potential to alter scenic resources and change the visual character and quality of the general area. The Project area is located in an urbanized portion of the City and development changes to the aesthetic environment are ongoing. New development and redevelopment of the Project area would further develop the urban character of the Project area through potential demolition or renovation of existing structures and construction of new structures. Future site-specific development projects within the Project would be of quality design in conformance with the City's Architectural Design Guidelines and site design review. Chapter IV of the Architectural Design Guidelines provides design concepts and direction for all commercial projects, encourages high quality and innovative design solutions, and recognizes the importance of storefront visibility as well as parking and circulation design to the success of commercial enterprises. These Guidelines take into account architectural design, pedestrian access, and scale, as well as preservation of natural site amenities such as trees and hillside views. Compliance with the City's Architectural Design Guidelines and the site design review process is a City-wide requirement; however, with the Project area-specific guidelines such as setback restrictions, future projects within the Project area would be reviewed

within the strict guidelines of the HTCMP and HTC areas. As a result, the Proposed Project has a less than significant cumulative impact on the visual character and scenic resources within the City.