

3.1 Aesthetics

The purpose of this section is to analyze potential aesthetics impacts that could occur from the proposed project. This analysis identifies and evaluates key visual resources in the project area, determines the degree of visual impacts that could occur from project implementation, describes the potential aesthetic effects of project development on the existing landscape, and analyzes the compatibility of the proposed project on scenic resources pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) requirements.

3.1.1 Environmental Setting

Existing Conditions

Visual Characteristics

The project site consists of two non-contiguous generally undeveloped parcels of land located in the Santa Ana Mountains and bordered by the Cleveland National Forest to the north, south, and west. Portions of the Cleveland National Forest land that are visible from the project area include undeveloped open space areas of steep slopes and ridges covered in dense chaparral and trees with some dirt roads.

Phase 1 (south parcel) is a vast 389.6-acre parcel that consists of gently sloping terrain in the southern portion of the parcel and steep, rugged terrain in the northern portion of the parcel. The majority of Phase 1 (south parcel) is undisturbed and contains views of dense chaparral, densely vegetated hills, and scattered patches of oak woodland. Long Canyon Creek crosses the southwest corner of the parcel, which is a dry creek bed most of the year. Due to the dense vegetation, and steep, rugged terrain many areas of the site are not closely visible; however, the Phase 1 (south parcel) provides large expansive views of natural topography, vegetation, and open space.

Disturbance areas are generally located in the northeastern portion of the south parcel and includes a network of dirt roads and trails, some cleared areas, one abandoned residence with a shed containing a water well and cistern. Therefore, views within Phase 1 (south parcel) contain rural abandoned disturbances. However, due to the distance between the disturbed areas and Ortega Highway, which is over 2,300 feet to the east, the currently disturbed areas within the Phase 1 (south parcel) are not visible from the highway.

Phase 2 (north parcel) contains views of gently sloping terrain in the northeast portion of the parcel and steep, rugged terrain in the remainder of the parcel. The majority of the parcel is undisturbed and supports dense chaparral with large rock outcroppings and areas of oak woodland. Long Canyon Creek crosses the northeast corner of the parcel and an unnamed stream bisects the center of the parcel from north to south. One residence is located just east of the boundary of Phase 2 (north parcel). Therefore, views of the Phase 2 (north parcel) is largely undeveloped vegetated open space, and views of rural residential development are adjacent to the parcel. Similar to the views within Phase 1 (south parcel), due to the dense vegetation, and steep,

rugged terrain many areas of the site are not closely visible; however, the Phase 2 (north parcel) provides large expansive views of natural topography, vegetation, and open space.

Existing disturbance areas within Phase 2 (north parcel) are generally located in the southern portion of the parcel and includes a network of dirt roads and trails, and a residence in the southwest corner of the parcel, near two water wells and several water storage tanks (one of them 8,000 gallons).

The southwestern portion of the Phase 2 (north parcel) also contains the previously used private McConville Airstrip (FAA Identifier CA42), which provides views of a gravel graded sloped surface that is approximately 1,000 feet long. A hangar/maintenance structure, bunker, and a shed are located adjacent to the private airstrip. In addition, several areas within Phase 2 (north parcel) are being used to store numerous dilapidated vehicles and debris piles. Due to the distance between the disturbed areas on Phase 2 (south parcel) and Ortega Highway, which is over 2,240 feet to the east, the currently disturbed areas are not visible from the Highway.

Scenic Vistas and Corridors

Public viewpoints near the project site include views from various areas in the Cleveland National Forest of the project site. Views of the project area can be seen from higher elevations areas to the north, such as near the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) EL Cariso Hotshot Station. In addition, the Cleveland National Forest Blue Jay Campground is located to the north of Phase 1 (south parcel). However, this campground area is located at a lower elevation than the project site and there are no views available of the project site from this campground. Views of the project site can also be seen from vehicles traveling along Long Canyon Road.

Ortega Highway (SR-74) is identified by the California Scenic Highway Mapping System (Caltrans, 2016) as an Eligible State Scenic Highway – not officially designated. Ortega Highway lies diagonally east of the project site (between 2,240 and 2,970 feet east of the project area) and provides regional access to Long Canyon Road, which is the route to the entrance of the project area. **Figures 3.1-1** and **3.1-2** provide representative views of the project area from Ortega Highway.

Ortega Highway provides access to the scenic ridge tops in the Santa Ana Mountains and is designated as a viewscape corridor by the Orange County General Plan, which is the more protective of two General Plan designations that are assigned to areas surrounding State Scenic Highways as described in Section 3.1.2, “Regulatory Setting,” below. Specifically, a viewscape corridor highway is one that traverses a corridor in which unique or unusual scenic resources and aesthetic vistas are found. Additionally, the Orange County General Plan states that special care must be paid to avoid damaging the scenic resources within a viewscape corridor. Furthermore, the General Plan Resources Element states that the foothills abutting the Cleveland National Forest boundary (which is the location of the proposed project) possess outstanding scenic qualities.



Figure 3.1-1. View Looking Northwest Toward the Project Site from Ortega Highway



Figure 3.1-2. View Looking Southeast Toward the Project Site from Ortega Highway

SOURCE: Hunsaker & Associates, 2014

The Preserve at San Juan
Figures 3.1-1 and 3.1-2
Views of the Project Site
from Ortega Highway

Light and Glare

Currently, the project site generates a very minimal amount of light and glare as it is largely undeveloped and/or unoccupied. The nighttime lighting environment consists of residential lighting from one occupied residence in the southwest corner of the Phase 2 parcel, one occupied residence in the southwest corner of the parcel, vehicle headlights along Long Canyon Road and Ortega Highway, and scattered lighting from rural residential uses near the project site and in El Cariso Village, which is approximately 1,500 feet east of the Phase 2 (north parcel).

Regulatory Setting

State Scenic Highway Program

The State Scenic Highway Program, created by the California Legislature in 1963, was established to preserve and protect scenic highway corridors from change that would diminish the aesthetic value of lands adjacent to highways. A highway is designated under this program when a local jurisdiction adopts a scenic corridor protection program, applies to Caltrans for scenic highway approval, and receives notification from Caltrans that the highway has been designated as a scenic highway. When a city or county nominates an eligible scenic highway for official designation, it defines the scenic corridor, which is land generally adjacent to and visible to a motorist on the highway. As described above, Ortega Highway is an Eligible State Scenic Highway – not officially designated (Caltrans, 2016). Ortega Highway lies diagonally east of the project site (between 2,240 and 2,970 feet east of the project area) and provides regional access to Long Canyon Road, which provides access the project driveways.

County of Orange General Plan

Land Use Element

The Land Use Element of the Orange County General Plan, last updated in 2015, contains the following policy that is relevant to the proposed project:

Policy 9: Enhancement of Environment – To guide development so that the quality of the physical environment is enhanced.

Resources Element Open Space Component

The Open Space Component of the Resources Element provides preservation measures to assure scenic views. The Component identifies the Cleveland National Forest as unique, as there are few counties that possess national forests located near urban areas. Additionally, the component sets forth that maintaining a buffer between Cleveland National Forest. Specifically, the following goal, objective, and policy are relevant to the proposed project:

Goal 1: Retain the character and natural beauty of the environment through the preservation, conservation, and maintenance of open space.

Objective 1.1: To designate open space areas that preserve, conserve, maintain, and enhance the significant natural resources and physical features of unincorporated Orange County.

Policy 1.1: To guide and regulate development of the unincorporated areas of the County to ensure that the character and natural beauty of Orange County is retained.

Transportation Element Scenic Highways Plan Component

The Scenic Highways Plan Component of the General Plan identifies the County's scenic highway routes, and designates Ortega Highway as a viewscape corridor, the more protective of two definitions assigned to areas surrounding State Scenic Highways, and consist of a route that traverses a corridor that contains unique or unusual scenic resources and aesthetic values. This designation is provided to minimize the impact of the highway and land development upon the significant scenic resources along the route. Transportation Element goal, objectives, and policy that is relevant to the proposed project are listed below.

Goal 1: Preserve and enhance unique or special aesthetic and visual resources through sensitive highway design and the regulation of development within the scenic corridor.

Objective 1.1: Protect and enhance the County's beauty, amenities and quality of life within the unincorporated areas.

Objective 1.2: Add to the pleasure of its residents and visitors by enhancing scenic routes.

Objective 1.4: Preserve established Scenic Highways in order to protect the existing scenic qualities of these corridors.

Objective 1.5: Develop the roadway portion of the scenic corridors in a manner that recognizes the natural scenic resources of the corridor and is sensitive to them to the maximum extent feasible.

Objective 1.6: Require sufficient setback from the scenic corridor, where feasible, for the purpose of preserving the corridor's scenic qualities.

3.1.2 Thresholds of Significance

The *CEQA Guidelines* Appendix G provides guidance for assessing the significance of potential environmental impacts. Relative to aesthetics, a project could have a significant effect on the environment if it would:

- 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; or
- Create a new source of substantial light or glare which would adversely affect day or nighttime views in the area.

As described in Chapter 1.0, *Introduction*, Notice of Preparations and Initial Studies were prepared and circulated for public review in both 2013 and 2014; the following comments related to aesthetics topics were received:

- Describe the background of the concept for the proposed project, and how will it fit into the existing views in the project area.

- Describe potential impacts Existing views of wild animals.
- Describe potential impacts related to light pollution.

3.1.3 Methodology

The significance determination for the visual analysis is based on consideration of the following: (1) the extent of change related to project visibility from key public vantage points; (2) the degree of visual contrast and compatibility in scale and character between project elements and the existing surroundings; and (3) project conformance with public policies regarding visual and urban design quality. The impact analysis presented below utilizes visual simulations prepared by Hunsaker & Associates that demonstrate the build-out conditions of the proposed project from key public vantage points. The viewpoint locations are identified in **Figure 3.1-3**.

In addition, nighttime lighting impacts would be significant if they would interfere with or intrude into sensitive land uses, which include wildlife, private residences, and public access areas, or if they impacted views in the area. Glare impacts would be significant if they result in daytime interferences with activities at sensitive land use areas as well as public roadways where drivers can be temporarily blinded by glare, thus causing a safety concern.

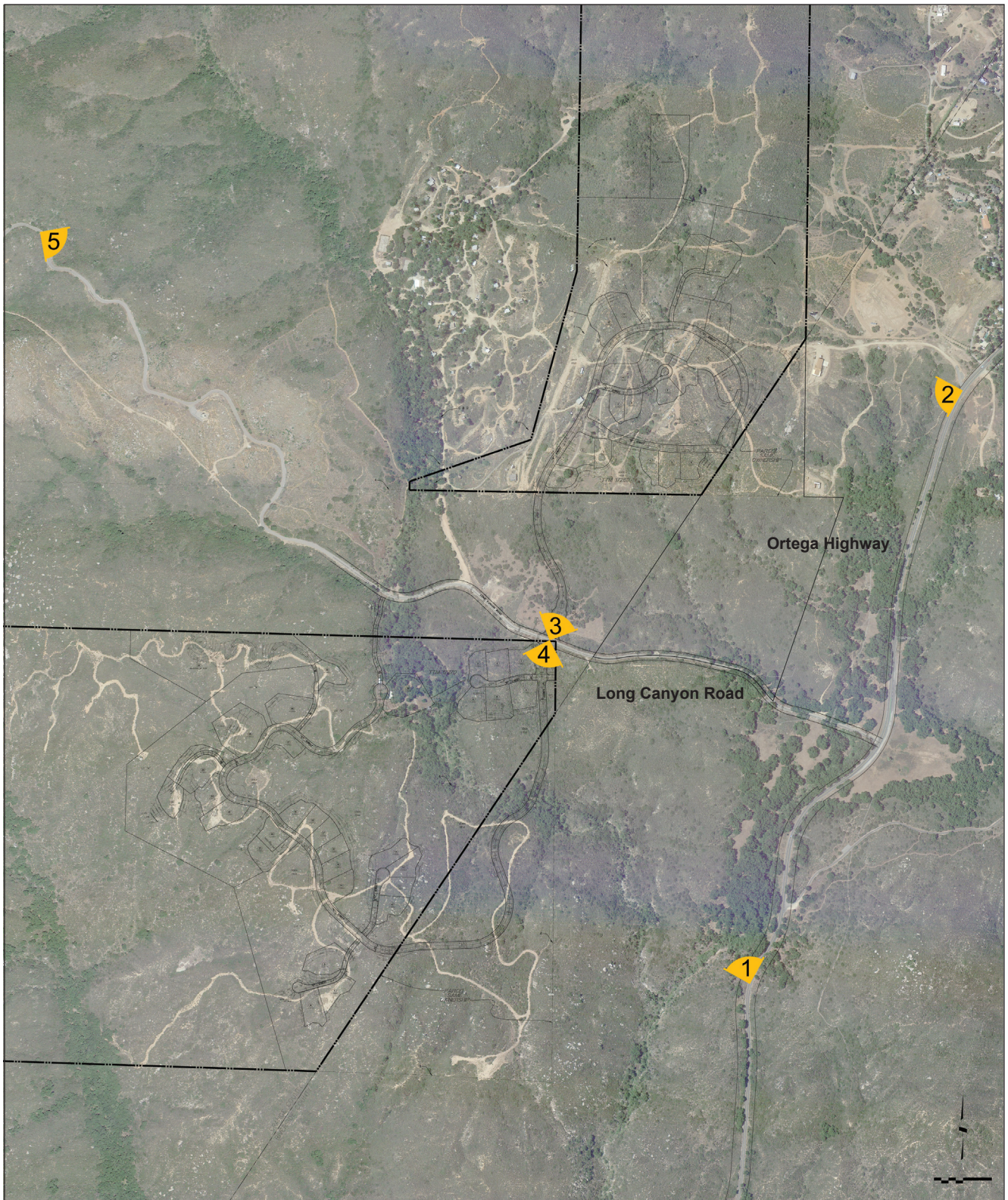
3.1.4 Project Impacts

Impact 3.1-1: Would implementation of the proposed project have a substantial adverse effect on a scenic vista?

Significant and Unavoidable Impact. Scenic vistas in the vicinity of the project site include the views of the generally undeveloped natural setting, ridgelines, hillsides, chaparral, woodlands, rock outcroppings and other features of the surrounding Santa Ana Mountains, which are visible throughout the project area, including from travelers along Ortega Highway, which is an Eligible State Scenic Highway and designated as a Viewscape Corridor by Orange County.

The proposed project would result in a change to scenic vistas from Ortega Highway by altering undeveloped rural land that contains natural visual resources such as topographical changes and various natural vegetation to residential uses and associated structures and landscaping that would be visible within, and thus have a substantial effect on, scenic vistas. Visual simulations of the proposed project from Ortega Highway are provided in **Figures 3.1-4** and **3.1-5**, and are described below.

Viewpoint 1: As shown in **Figure 3.1-4**, with development of the proposed project, views of residential uses in Phase I from Ortega Highway would be very limited and distant. However, Phase 2 (north parcel) would be visible as part of mid-range views to northbound travelers along Ortega Highway at a distance of approximately 0.35 mile south of Long Canyon Road. Undeveloped open space would consist of foreground views; however, some of the residences and rooflines within Phase 2 (north parcel) would be visible against the backdrop of the hills and ridgelines of the Santa Ana Mountains. The degree of visual contrast between the project elements and the existing surrounding area would be limited given obstruction of views by existing vegetation and topography, and that project landscaping seen from this distance (the



SOURCE: Hunsaker & Associates, 2014

The Preserve at San Juan

Figure 3.1-3
Viewpoint Locations Map



Figure 3.1-4. Viewpoint 1: Ortega Highway Looking Northwest

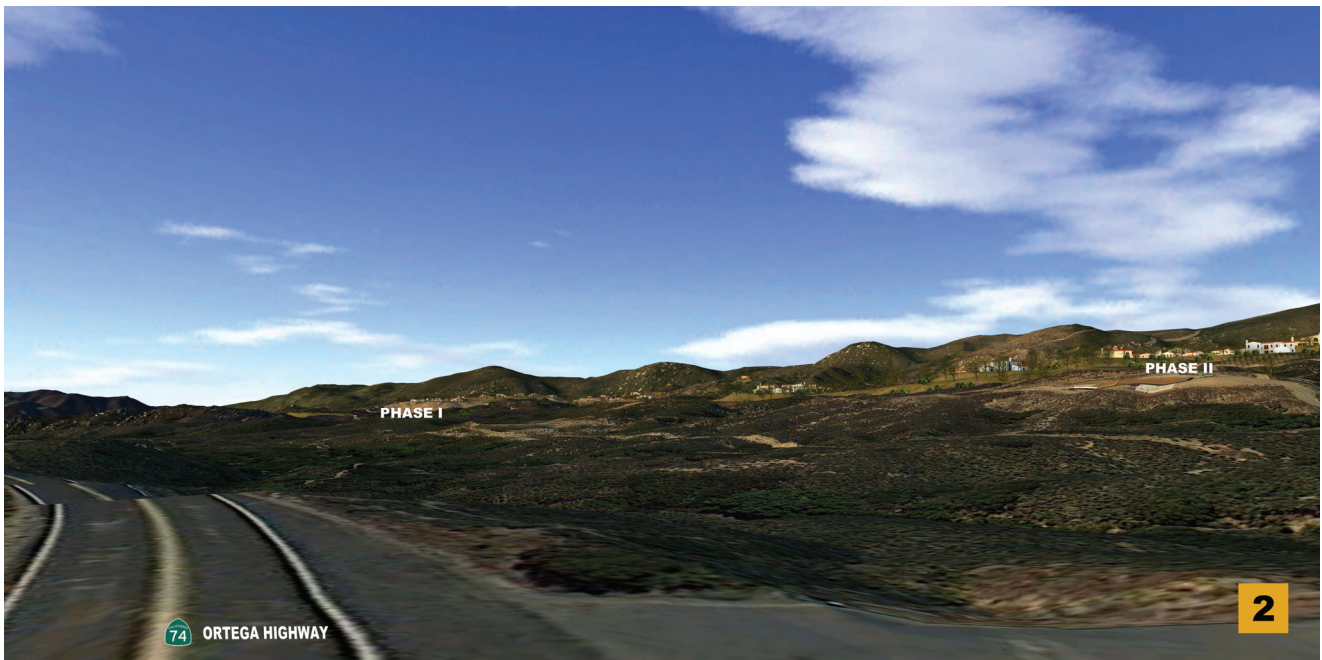


Figure 3.1-5. Viewpoint 2: Ortega Highway Looking Southeast

- trees) would blend into the surrounding area, especially because it includes installation of native oak trees. The major features contributing to the aesthetic value of this scenic vista, including the Santa Ana Mountain ridgeline and rock outcroppings in the background, and rolling hills and natural vegetation in the foreground, would continue to be visually prominent; and the proposed structures would consist of a limited portion of the view, which would be set back at a distance and would largely blend into the existing view. However, the addition of a clustered group of residential structures in the vast open space natural scenic vista would be inconsistent with the existing view, and because Ortega Highway is an Eligible State Scenic Highway and is designated as a viewscape corridor and the project would affect views of the unique scenic resources and aesthetic vistas in the Santa Ana Mountains, which are considered by the General Plan Resources Element to possess outstanding scenic qualities. Thus, the project would result in a significant impact on the scenic vista from Viewpoint 1.
- **Viewpoint 2:** As shown in **Figure 3.1-5**, with the development of the proposed project, mid-range views of residential uses within Phase 2 (north parcel) and long-range views of residential uses within Phase 1 (south parcel) would be visible to southbound travelers along Ortega Highway at a distance approximately 0.5 mile north of Long Canyon Road. The degree of visual contrast between the project elements and surrounding area would be substantial as several residences within Phase 2 (north parcel) would be visible and new landscaping would be introduced to an area that contains open space views of native vegetation and topography. Because these residences would fall in the middle ground, they would not obscure prominent features contributing to scenic vistas in the area, including the ridgelines of the Santa Ana Mountains. Residential uses constructed within Phase 1 (south parcel) would be marginally visible in long-range views and the visual contrast between Phase 1 (south parcel) and the existing surrounding area would be low as most of the structures associated with Phase 1 (south parcel) development would blend with the surrounding landscape. However, the addition of a clustered group of residential structures in the vast open space natural scenic vista, particularly the Phase 2 structures as shown in **Figure 3.1-5**, would be inconsistent with the existing undeveloped view of hillsides, ridgelines, and native vegetation; and because Ortega Highway is an Eligible State Scenic Highway and is designated as a viewscape corridor by Orange County and the project would affect views the unique scenic resources and aesthetic vistas in the Santa Ana Mountains, which are considered by General Plan Resources Element to possess outstanding scenic qualities, the project would result in a significant impact on the scenic vista from Viewpoint 2.

Overall, scenic vistas available from Ortega Highway (Viewpoints 1 and 2) would be impacted by the proposed project, although the project would be set back from the roadway, existing vegetation and topography would obstruct views of the project, and implementation of the following Project Design Features would reduce the impacts to scenic vistas:

- The provision of 414.6 acres or approximately 71 percent of the project site would preserve large areas of scenic vistas onsite, which are adjacent to the vistas within the Cleveland National Forest (PDF-1).

- Open space would be concentrated in the western and northern portions of the project site and the single-family residences would be clustered toward Long Canyon Road to create a buffer between the residential uses and the Cleveland National Forest lands, which would reduce impacts to scenic vistas by preservation of large areas of vistas (PDF-2).
- The project design will maintain similar topographic characteristics as the existing condition (PDF-3).
- Conceptual landscape plan has been designed to preserve open space areas, implement and oak tree planting plan, and provide landscaping that would screen views of the residential buildings and help them blend into the native vegetation surrounding the project site (PDF-4 and PDF-5).

However, after implementation of the Project Design Features, the proposed project would continue to result in a significant impact to scenic vistas that are available from portions of Ortega Highway, which is an Eligible State Scenic Highway and is designated as a viewscape corridor by Orange County. The project would affect views of the unique scenic resources and aesthetic vistas in the Santa Ana Mountains that are considered to possess outstanding scenic qualities by the General Plan Resources Element. The proposed project would permanently alter the existing views from a largely undisturbed natural setting to a residential development. Therefore, Mitigation Measure MM 3.1-1 has been included to require the use of earthen tones for exterior paint on the project's structures to further blend in with the natural environment and reduce impacts to scenic vistas. However, even with implementation of the Project Design Features and Mitigation Measure MM 3.1-1, the proposed project would continue to result in impacts to viewpoints from Ortega Highway, and as a result, impacts related to scenic vistas would be significant and unavoidable.

Mitigation Measure

MM 3.1-1 The project's design plans shall state that exterior paint colors for the residential and associated structures are limited to a palette of earthy tones that shall be provided for homeowners to choose from to ensure that project structures blend into the natural surroundings. Exterior paint options shall be included in the CR&Rs; and managed, approved, and enforced by the Homeowner's Association.

Impact 3.1-2: Would implementation of the proposed project substantially damage scenic resources, including, but not limited to, trees, rock outcroppings, and historic buildings within a state scenic highway?

No Impact. The project site is not located within a state scenic highway. Ortega Highway is an Eligible State Scenic Highway– not officially designated (Caltrans, 2016), and as described above the proposed project would be partially visible from Ortega Highway from to Viewpoints 1 and 2 to both northbound and southbound travelers; however, because Ortega Highway is not a designated state scenic highway, and no other state scenic highways are in the region of the

project site, impacts related to damage scenic resources within a state scenic highway would not occur.

Impact 3.1-3: Would implementation of the proposed project substantially degrade the existing visual character or quality of the site and its surroundings?

Significant and Unavoidable Impact. The proposed project would result in a change in the visual character of the project site and vicinity by altering undeveloped rural land that contains natural visual resources such as topographical changes and various natural vegetation to residential uses and associated structures, landscaping, fencing, roadways, and parking areas.

- **Viewpoints 1 and 2:** As described above and shown in **Figures 3.1-4 and 3.1-5**, residential uses in Phase 2 (north parcel) would be visible as part of mid-range views to northbound travelers along Ortega Highway against the backdrop of the hills and ridgelines of the Santa Ana Mountains. Although the proposed structures would consist of a limited portion of the view, which would be set back at a distance and would largely blend into the existing Santa Ana Mountain backdrop, the clustered group of residential structures in the vast open space natural scenic vista would be inconsistent with the existing visual character or quality of the site and its surroundings. The degree of visual contrast between the clustered residences and surrounding views of native vegetation and topography would be substantial. Thus, the character of the existing undeveloped, rural, open space area would be modified in a manner that is inconsistent with the existing rural character of views from Ortega Highway.
- **Viewpoint 3:** As shown in **Figure 3.1-6**, with the development of the proposed project, views of the residential uses, roadways, and landscaping associated with Phase 2 (north parcel) would be clearly visible looking north along Long Canyon Road. The degree of visual contrast between the project elements and the surrounding area would be substantial, as entire houses and associated roadways and landscaping would be featured prominently in foreground views and would be introduced in an area that is currently largely undisturbed. From this viewpoint, the proposed project would be incompatible with the character of the existing views, which consist of rural, undeveloped, open space, and native vegetation.

Viewpoint 4: As shown in **Figure 3.1-7**, with the development of the proposed project, views of the residential uses, roadways, and landscaping associated with Phase 1 (south parcel) would be clearly visible from Long Canyon Road. The degree of visual contrast between the project elements and the surrounding area would be substantial as entire structures and new roadways would be featured prominently in foreground views in an area that is rural, largely undisturbed, and provides vast views of native vegetation and open space. Thus, the proposed project would be incompatible with the character of the existing views, which consist of rural, undeveloped, open space, and native vegetation.



Figure 3.1-6. Viewpoint 3: Long Canyon Road at Project Entrance, Looking North



Figure 3.1-7. Viewpoint 4: Long Canyon Road at Project Entrance, Looking South

SOURCE: Hunsaker & Associates, 2014

- **Viewpoint 5:** As shown in **Figure 3.1-8**, with the development of the proposed project, views of the proposed residential uses would be visible from Long Canyon Road approximately 0.5 mile to the west of the project site at a location with a higher elevation than the project site, near the USFS El Cariso Hotshot Camp. The degree of visual contrast between the project elements and the surrounding open space, undeveloped area that contains hillsides and ridgetops would be substantial. Thus, the project would be incompatible with the character of the existing views, which consist of rural, undeveloped open space and native vegetation.

Overall, the proposed project would represent a substantial change to the existing visual character of the project area due to the addition of residential uses in an undeveloped open space area that contains various topographical features and native vegetation. However, the project includes several Project Design Features that are provided to minimize the visual contrast between the proposed project and the surrounding natural environment. In addition to Project Design Features PDF-1 through PDF-5 listed previously under Impact 3.1-1, above, Project Design Features PDF-6, PDF-9, and PDF-19, as listed below would also be implemented:

- Interior private streets have been designed to rural street standards (PDF-6).
- The project circulation is designed to be consistent with the County's Viewscape Typical Section including: an enlarged parkway, a hiking trail, and a lack of curbs (PDF-9).
- The water storage tanks will be visually screened with native/drought-tolerant landscaping and will be painted a neutral tone to blend with the surrounding environment (PDF-19).

In addition, Mitigation Measure MM 3.1-1 would require the use of earthen tones for exterior paint to blend in with the natural environment and reduce impacts to the visual character of the surrounding area. However, due to the substantial change to the existing visual character that would occur from implementation of the proposed project in the rural open space area of native vegetation, a significant and unavoidable impact related to the existing visual character of the project area and its surroundings would occur.

Mitigation Measure

MM 3.1-1 *(Provided previously under Impact 3.1-1)*

Impact 3.1-4: Would implementation of the proposed project create a new source of substantial light or glare, which would adversely affect day or nighttime views in the area?

Less than Significant Impact with Implementation of Mitigation. The proposed project would result in new sources of daytime glare from cars and nighttime light associated with street lighting, vehicles, and interior and exterior residential lighting.

The proposed project would not introduce a substantial source of glare to the project site that would affect views in the area because the project would construct 72 homes using typical

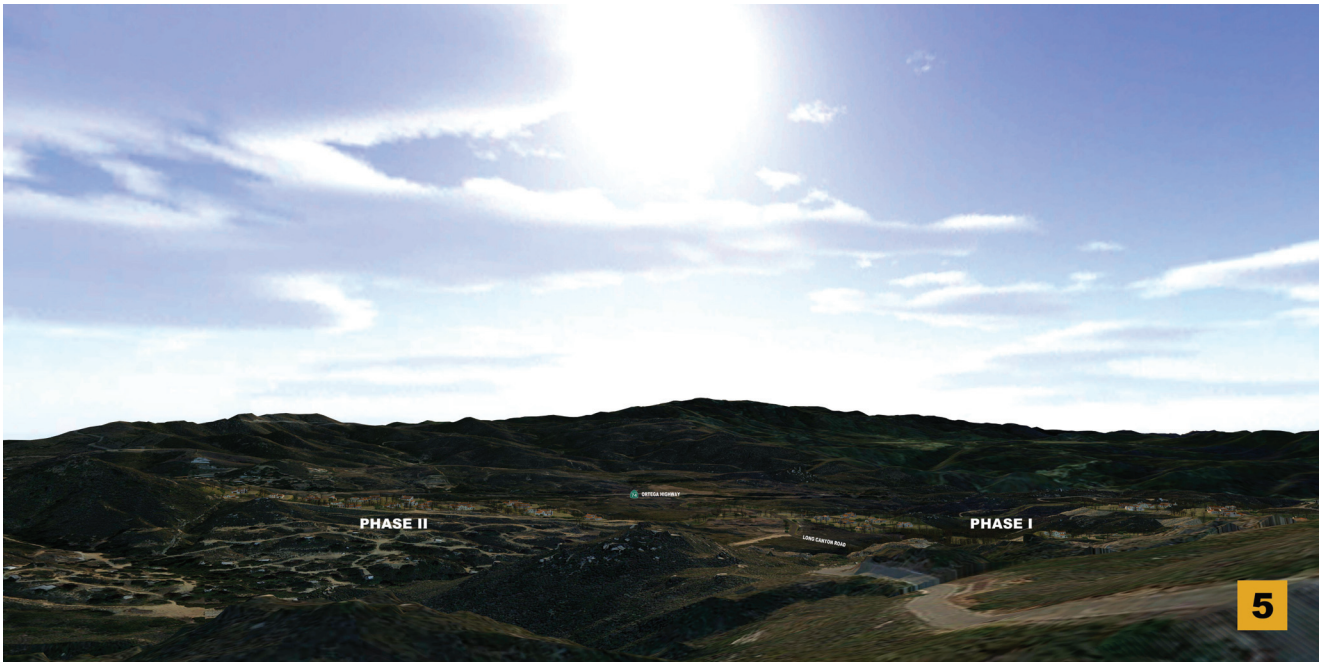


Figure 3.1-8. Viewpoint 5: USFS El Cariso Hotshot Camp, Looking East

building materials (i.e., stucco siding, clay tile roofs, etc.), which would not create substantial daytime glare. Sources of daytime glare would include cars within the project site; however, the project does not include a substantial number of cars, or a central parking location that could create a substantial source of glare. Thus, impacts related to glare would be less than significant.

New sources of nighttime lighting would include indoor and outdoor lighting at the residential units as well as street lights associated with the interior roadway network for the residential development. The overall effect would be an increase in ambient light within the project site; however, residential lighting spilling out of the project area would be limited by the existing and proposed vegetation and natural topography of the area. The trees and hills and valleys would shield residential lights, such that an adverse impact relating to these lights would not occur.

In addition, new onsite roadway lighting would be shielded downward onto roadways and away from sensitive uses in conformance with County lighting standards. The County's approval process for the proposed project (implemented through Mitigation Measure MM 3.1-2) includes review of the project's specific lighting plans, which would ensure that the proposed lights would meet County standards while not generating a substantial source of light that would adversely affect nighttime views in the area. Furthermore, incorporation of Project Design Feature PDF-20, which includes BMPs related to minimizing ambient light from the project, would reduce potential impacts related to light. Therefore, with implementation of the Project Design Feature PDF-20 and Mitigation Measure MM 3.1-2, which requires lighting to be designed to meet the standards of the County, impacts related to lighting would be less than significant.

Mitigation Measure

MM 3.1-2 Prior to the issuance of building permits, the applicant shall demonstrate that all exterior lighting has been designed and located so that all direct rays are confined to the development areas of the project site in a manner meeting the approval of the County's Building and Safety Department.

3.1.5 Cumulative Impacts

The proposed project would represent a substantial change in the visual character of the project site and vicinity by altering undeveloped land to residential community uses. The project site is located in a rural and relatively remote area of Orange County, adjacent to the Cleveland National Forest. The geographic area within which cumulative effects to aesthetic resources could occur is the viewshed surrounding the project site, as only those projects that can be viewed in the context of the proposed project could contribute to cumulative visual effects.

There are no proposed or existing other projects within the viewshed of the proposed project. The nearest project listed on Table 3-1 of Chapter 3, is approximately 2.4 miles away from the project site in the City of Lake Elsinore and does not fall within the project's viewshed. Thus, the project area is too distant to potentially combine with visual impacts from cumulative projects. Likewise, the proposed project would not contribute to any cumulative increase in ambient nighttime lighting conditions or daytime glare due to its distance from other projects. Therefore, the

proposed project would not result in a cumulatively considerable impact related to aesthetic resources, and cumulative impacts would be less than significant.