

## **4.11 VISUAL RESOURCES**

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### ***Visual Resources – Environmental Setting***

This section addresses impacts on the visual resources and aesthetic character of Sonoma County's natural environment. Issues include potential impacts to scenic views and vistas, and impacts associated with an increase of urban light sources within the area. The topics discussed in this section overlap with other sections of this EIR, including the *Sections 4.1 Land Use, Population, and Housing; 4.6 Biological Resources; 4.8 Agricultural and Timber Resources; and 4.10 Cultural Resources*. Visual resource impacts are most closely related to the Open Space and Resources Conservation Element of the *Draft GP 2020*.

The unique scenic quality of Sonoma County results from the attractiveness and diversity of its landscape. Visual characteristics of Sonoma County range from the flat valley floors where vineyards dominate the landscape to the mountain ranges in the northwest and eastern portions of the county. Redwood forests and the coastal mountain range are prominent in the west. Rolling foothills and grazing lands form the visual landscape in the southern portion of the county. However, a significant characteristic of the quality of Sonoma County's scenic environment is the interface of small rural communities and the natural landscape.

Three main highway corridors pass through the county, generally following a north-south course that parallels both the coastline and the mountain ranges. US 101 runs through the center of the county, traversing its entire length and passing through the major urbanized areas. It is along this highway that urban development is most noticeable. Highway 12 runs from the Napa County line north to Santa Rosa on the southeastern side of the county and then west to Sebastopol. The rural ambiance, steep mountains, and broad grasslands along the Sonoma Valley portion of this highway have earned it a State Scenic Highway designation. Highway 116 from Sebastopol through the Lower Russian River area has been similarly recognized for its unique beauty. Highway 1 runs along the western edge of the county, generally following the coastline. The magnificent views of the Pacific Ocean, coastal bluffs, wide coastal terraces, and redwood groves distinguish this part of the county from the others. Visible from many parts of the county and beyond, the 4,345 foot majestic Mount Saint Helena is a key component of the county's landscape.

Sonoma County also has a number of unique geologic formations. The granite on Bodega Head is the dominant surface exposure of this Pacific plate formation in the area. Serpentine exposures in the northern half of the county develop unique soils that support a distinctive vegetation community with rare plant species. In addition, large blocks of serpentine frequently form visible knobs and ridges, comprising a somewhat unique landscape. Mount Saint Helena, Sonoma Mountain, and other prominent peaks of Napa and Sonoma counties dominate the visual landscape in eastern Sonoma County.

The existing General Plan establishes three types of scenic resources that signify particularly important areas of the county that warrant protection; Community Separators, Scenic Landscape Units, and Scenic Corridors. Each of these scenic resource areas are discussed below.

## **COMMUNITY SEPARATORS**

*Community Separators* were created as an open space category in the County's first *General Plan*. The purpose is to avoid urban sprawl and corridor-style urbanization, in which there is little distinction between communities, by keeping some land areas open or otherwise retaining a rural character. Eight areas totaling approximately 17,315 acres of land are identified by the County as key lands to be protected from urbanization in order to retain distinct, identifiable cities and communities. The main function of the Community Separators is to provide visual relief from urban development; however, they also serve to contain urban development due to their strategic location. The following eight Community Separators are identified in the existing *General Plan*:

- *Petaluma / Novato* – approximately 2,755 acres between Petaluma and the Marin County line. Dominant features include rolling hills with trees and farms located along the valley floor.
- *Petaluma / Rohnert Park* – approximately 3,360 acres between Petaluma, Penngrove and Rohnert Park / Cotati, including Liberty Valley which has outstanding views.
- *Rohnert Park / Santa Rosa* – approximately 1,700 acres between Rohnert Park and Santa Rosa. Large parcels along Stony Point Road and Petaluma Hill Road create relief from the urban area and provide views of fields and hills.
- *Santa Rosa / Sebastopol* – approximately 1,400 acres between Santa Rosa and Sebastopol. Some strip development exists along the Route 12 corridor between these cities; however scenic views of the Laguna de Santa Rosa, oak studded pastures, and Mount Saint Helena remain.
- *Windsor / Larkfield / Santa Rosa* – approximately 2,000 acres along the US 101 and Old Redwood Highway corridors between Santa Rosa, Larkfield-Wikiup, and Windsor. Significant views are available to the west across fields and vineyards to the Mendocino Highlands and to the east over the Mark West Springs Hills to Mount Saint Helena.
- *Windsor / Healdsburg* – approximately 1,200 acres along the US 101 corridor between Windsor and Healdsburg. With rolling hills to the east of the freeway, this separator maintains Windsor and Healdsburg as distinct cities.
- *Northeast Santa Rosa* – approximately 3,500 acres along Highway 12 near Oakmont and to the northeast of Santa Rosa. This separator follows the ridgeline above Rincon Valley northwest of Calistoga Road and includes scattered rural residential developments and open oak woodlands.
- *Glen Ellen / Agua Caliente* – approximately 1,400 acres between Glen Ellen and Agua Caliente / Boyes Hot Springs along Highway 12. This separator extends through the Valley of the Moon and provides expansive views of the Sonoma-Napa Mountains and vineyard covered hillsides.

## **SCENIC LANDSCAPE UNITS**

There are numerous natural features within Sonoma County that are highly scenic and of special significance. These landscapes have little capacity to absorb development without impacting the scenic value. Fifteen Scenic Landscape Units are designated in the existing *General Plan* to help protect these features. Some of these units are in close proximity to the county's urbanized areas. The primary function of the Scenic Landscape Unit designation is to protect the scenic quality of these areas.

The major Scenic Landscape Units are identified in the existing *General Plan*:

- *The Coast* – Three basic types of landscapes are included in the coast unit: the flat terraces south of the Russian River, the hilly terraces from Fort Ross northward, and the cliffs and landslide area in between.
- *Oat Valley* – Oat Valley and the hillsides above it provide the scenic northern entrance to the county near Cloverdale.
- *Alexander and Dry Creek Valleys* – Agricultural marketing in these valleys is closely tied to the area’s scenic image and therefore protection of these scenic units is economically, as well as visually, important.
- *Hills East of Windsor* – These hills provide a scenic backdrop to the Santa Rosa Plain. North of Windsor the area extends into the plain and adjoins the low, rolling hills that form part of the Windsor / Healdsburg Community Separator (described above).
- *Eastside Road* – This area of rolling hills follows Eastside Road south of Windsor to River Road in Trenton. It provides a transition between the community of Windsor and the rich agricultural and mineral resource areas of the Russian River Valley.
- *River Road* – This area follows River Road from the Russian River east to US 101. It includes a variety of landscapes, such as valleys planted in vineyards, orchard covered hillsides, and redwood groves adjacent to the Russian River.
- *Laguna de Santa Rosa*<sup>1</sup> – This area consists primarily of the scenic lowlands and the floodplain around the Laguna de Santa Rosa marsh, swamp, and riparian forest. It also includes hills between Forestville, Sebastopol, and Meacham Hill. It defines the eastern boundary of Sebastopol and the associated rural residential development.
- *Bennett Valley* – Bennett Mountain forms a scenic backdrop from Bennett Valley Road. This area defines Santa Rosa’s southeastern boundary and abuts Annadel State Park.
- *Highway 116* – The view corridor along the northern part of Highway 116 contains unique views of orchards, redwood groves, and the Russian River. This area also defines the community boundaries of Forestville, Guerneville, Monte Rio, and the adjacent rural residential developments.
- *Atascadero Creek* – This area consists primarily of the lowlands and floodplains along Atascadero Creek and the hills along Occidental Road. The area defines the western boundary of Sebastopol and its adjacent rural residential development, separates Sebastopol and Graton, and creates a visual connection to the Laguna de Santa Rosa.
- *Coleman Valley* – The Coleman Valley Road area, northeast of Bodega Bay, contains unique views of forests, canyons, grazing lands, and ocean.

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<sup>1</sup> Three areas of this Unit have been annexed by a city but should still be considered part of a Scenic Landscape Unit because they were annexed solely for agricultural irrigation under the Santa Rosa Subregional Reclamation System.

- *Sonoma Mountains* – These scenic lands clearly define the eastern edge of the Santa Rosa plain between Petaluma and Sonoma. They provide an important backdrop to the urban valley.
- *Hills South of Petaluma* – These open grassy hillsides and ridgelines provide a scenic southern gateway to Sonoma County from Marin County.
- *Sonoma Valley*<sup>2</sup> – Included in this area are the Sonoma-Napa Mountains, which provide a backdrop to the valley and the agricultural areas bordering the valley. This area defines the boundaries of the urban and rural communities.
- *South Sonoma Mountains* – These hillsides are an important part of the south county landscape with a simple landform, minimal vegetation, and a widespread viewing area. Pasture and forage lands along the Highway 37 corridor are included to preserve views of the San Pablo Bay.

Some Scenic Landscape Units on hills and ridges do not extend up to and over the crest of the respective hill or ridge. Projects built on the hill or ridge just outside the boundary of the Scenic Landscape Units have resulted in some reduction in the visual and scenic quality and character of these hills and ridgelines.

#### **SCENIC HIGHWAYS AND SCENIC CORRIDORS**

Many of the roadways throughout Sonoma County offer views of some of the most scenic areas. An extensive network of Scenic Corridors and Scenic Highways are designated in the *Draft GP 2020* and are protected by development standards.

The State of California has officially designated two *Scenic Highways* in Sonoma County that have a total length of approximately 40 miles. The criteria for official designation and eligibility includes the scenic quality of the landscape, how much of the natural landscape can be seen by travelers, and the extent to which development intrudes upon the traveler's enjoyment of the view.

The officially designated Scenic Highways are Highway 116, from Highway 1 to the Sebastopol city limit, and Highway 12, from Danielli Avenue east of Santa Rosa to London Way near Agua Caliente. Highway 116 passes a historic resort area along the Russian River, then through second growth redwood forests and eucalyptus groves. Highway 12 is located in the Valley of the Moon, with mountain ridges lying to the north, east, and southwest, and passes through extensive vineyards and oak groves.

Sonoma County has designated an extensive network of roadways as *Scenic Corridors*. This network threads throughout the unincorporated area, offering a diversity of viewsheds to travelers. They include State Highways 1, 12, 37, 101, 116, 121, and 128. County roadways include Skaggs Springs Road, River Road, Chalk Hill Road, Lakeville Highway, Bennett Valley Road, Dry Creek Road, Mark West Springs Road, Arnold Drive, Petaluma Hill Road, Bodega Avenue, Fulton Road, and many more.

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<sup>2</sup> One area of this Unit has been annexed by a city and is no longer part of this Scenic Landscape Unit.

## **GREENBELTS, GREENWAYS, AND EXPANDED GREENBELTS**

*Greenbelts*, although not officially recognized in the existing *General Plan*, are areas that function as open space buffers around cities and county urbanized areas, much like Community Separators. These areas are eligible for protection by the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District (SCAPOSD). Acquisition of conservation easements and fee title of land within greenbelts can significantly contribute toward permanently preserving lands adjacent to cities for important agricultural, scenic, recreational, and natural resource purposes. Greenbelts are also areas where acquisition can achieve multiple conservation goals. The SCAPOSD *Acquisition Plan 2000* designates two types of greenbelts in the plan: *Priority Greenbelts*, including greenways, and *Expanded Greenbelts*.<sup>3</sup>

The *Greenbelt Acquisition Category* encompasses lands within Community Separators and Scenic Landscape Units, as well as other important lands identified for their scenic value in city general plans.

Priority Greenbelts are lands in close proximity to incorporated cities that have one or more desirable characteristics, such as high visual quality. Priority Greenbelts are frequently lands where multiple conservation goals can be achieved and in many cases they overlap with the Scenic Landscape Units. Eleven Priority Greenbelts are identified in the *Acquisition Plan 2000*:

- *Cloverdale* – This greenbelt wraps around the western and southwestern edges of Cloverdale and includes part of the Oat Valley Scenic Landscape Unit.
- *Healdsburg / Windsor* – This greenbelt wraps around the eastern side of Healdsburg, the northeastern edge of Windsor, and along Eastside Road to the east of Windsor. It includes parts of the Windsor / Healdsburg and Windsor / Larkfield / Santa Rosa Separators as well as the Eastside Road, the Hills East of Windsor, and a portion of the Alexander Valley Scenic Units.
- *Windsor / Santa Rosa* – This greenbelt runs from the northwestern part of Santa Rosa to the southeastern edge of Windsor, mainly along the US 101 corridor. It includes part of the Windsor/Larkfield/Santa Rosa Separator and part of a Scenic Unit north of Santa Rosa.
- *Sebastopol / Santa Rosa* – This greenbelt runs from the eastern edge of Sebastopol to the southwestern corner of Santa Rosa. It includes all of the Santa Rosa / Sebastopol Separator and part of the Laguna de Santa Rosa Scenic Unit.
- *Taylor Mountain* – This greenbelt is on the southeastern corner of Santa Rosa and includes part of the Bennett Valley Scenic Unit.
- *Sonoma Valley* – This greenbelt follows the Highway 12 corridor and includes parts of the Northeast Santa Rosa and Glen Ellen / Agua Caliente Separators as well as parts of the Sonoma Valley Scenic Unit.
- *Santa Rosa / Rohnert Park* – This greenbelt runs along the northern and western sides of Rohnert Park. It includes most of the Rohnert Park / Santa Rosa Separator as well as part of the Laguna de Santa Rosa Scenic Unit.

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<sup>3</sup> *Acquisition Plan 2000; A Blueprint for Agricultural and Open Space Preservation*, Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District, July 2000.

- *Sonoma Mountain* – This large greenbelt covers much of the area east of Rohnert Park, Cotati, and Petaluma, and west of Sonoma. It includes the Sonoma Mountains Scenic Unit.
- *Rohnert Park / Petaluma* – This greenbelt continues down the US 101 corridor from Cotati where it connects with the Santa Rosa / Rohnert Park Greenbelt. It includes parts of the Petaluma / Rohnert Park Separator.
- *Napa / Sonoma* – This greenbelt is at one of the southern entrances from Napa County on Highway 121 and includes part of the Sonoma Valley Scenic Unit.
- *Sonoma / Marin* – This greenbelt continues from the southern end of the Sonoma Mountain greenbelt east of Petaluma along Lakeville Highway. It includes the Petaluma/Novato Separator and part of the South Sonoma Mountains and the Hills South of Petaluma Scenic Units.

*Greenways* are linear open space corridors that run along creek channels and are a noteworthy part of the Priority Greenbelts designation. They are identified by the *Acquisition Plan 2000* along all or part of a number of the county's creeks, including the Mayacamas Creek east of Healdsburg, the Mark West Creek north of Santa Rosa, the Santa Rosa Creek east of Santa Rosa, the Sonoma Creek, the Laguna de Santa Rosa, and two streams northeast of Sonoma.

*Expanded Greenbelts* are those rural open space lands that provide a one-mile buffer beyond cities and highways as extended protection areas. These lands generally serve to help preserve rural character. While there is some overlap with the Scenic Landscape Units, the Expanded Greenbelts generally comprise a constant one mile band along the major roadways and urbanized areas in the county, while the Scenic Units are more limited in scope. Expanded Greenbelts are identified along the entire length of Highway 128, Highway 12, Highway 121, and Highway 37, along parts of US 101, Highway 116, and surrounding Cloverdale, Healdsburg, Windsor, Santa Rosa, Sebastopol, Sonoma, Petaluma, and Rohnert Park.

## **NIGHTTIME SKY**

Landforms generally cannot be seen at night. Rather, the location, type, and quantity of light sources become the important visual factors. Nighttime sources of light can include vehicle headlamps, streetlights, decorative outdoor landscape or security lighting, and interior lighting. Highly visible lights at night can disrupt views of the nighttime sky and have the potential to be seen for miles if geography and landscaping do not intervene. Moving sources of light and glare (e.g., vehicles) easily catch the eye and are difficult to ignore.

*Light pollution* is any adverse effect of man made light and can include urban sky glow, glare, and light trespass. Such excessive lighting can significantly change the character of rural and natural areas by making the built environment more prominent at night and creating visual clutter. It can waste energy, money, and natural resources.<sup>4</sup>

Also referred to as *sky glow*, light pollution is a result of outdoor lighting that is directed to or reflected to the sky. It creates the haze or glow of light that surrounds highly populated areas, reduces the ability to view the night time sky, and changes the character of the night sky. The sky glow

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<sup>4</sup> *The Problem with Light Pollution*, International Dark-Sky Association, Information Sheet 1, May 1996.

phenomenon is a result of light reflected from atmospheric particles, such as fog, dust, or smog. This is typically caused by excess light entering the sky either from a laminar directed above the plane of the horizon, or light reflected from a surface to the sky. Sky glow is of particular concern in areas near observatories, as light emitted or reflected into the sky interferes with the ability of the observatory and the public to view the sky in an unobstructed manner. <sup>5 6</sup>

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## **Visual Resources – Regulatory Setting**

### **COUNTY REGULATIONS**

The existing *General Plan* primarily provides visual preservation and design policy in areas designated as Scenic Landscape Units, Community Separators, and Scenic Corridors. In these areas, design review is required and occurs through the following processes: as required by Area Plans (e.g., the Bennett Valley Area Plan); as required through the Use Permit process; for certain uses in commercial or industrial zones; and as required by the Scenic Resources and Scenic Design Districts of the Zoning Code. <sup>7</sup> Existing regulations also include requirements for design review, use permits, and other discretionary project entitlements outside of those areas. These regulations allow for mitigation of visual impacts as part of the environmental review process.

### **Community Separators**

Approved by Sonoma County residents in a special election in 1996, County Ordinance No. 5003R requires voter approval for a revision or amendment to the boundaries or land use designations and densities of the Community Separators as designated in the existing *General Plan Open Space Element*. The requirements of the Ordinance go into effect relative to a particular Community Separator only when the voters of the city associated with the Community Separator have approved a measure meeting the certain requirements. Most Sonoma County cities have approved such a measure. The ordinance also allows for the adoption of an amendment to the existing *General Plan* without voter approval if it creates or adds additional area to existing separators, involves no net loss in area, or changes land use designation within the Community Separator so as to maintain or improve the open space character in accordance with County and State policies.

County Ordinance No. 5145R was approved by Sonoma County residents in a special election in 1998 and expanded the Petaluma / Novato Community Separator. It requires voter approval of any increase in the allowed density or intensity of land uses allowed within that area. This ordinance gives additional assurance that certain proposed US 101 improvements would not lead to development in this separator exceeding that currently allowed by the existing *General Plan*.

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<sup>5</sup> There are three observatories in Sonoma County: the Ferguson Observatory in Sugarloaf Ridge State Park, operated by the Valley of the Moon Observatory Association; the Hume Observatory in Pepperwood Nature Preserve northeast of Santa Rosa, operated by the California Academy of Sciences; and the Sonoma State University Observatory located on their campus west of Rohnert Park.

<sup>6</sup> *White Paper on Outdoor Lighting Code Issues*, National Electrical Manufacturers Association, August 2000.

<sup>7</sup> *Rural Character Design Standards*, CAC memo, Denise Peter, Sonoma County PRMD, November 21, 2002.

Development within Community Separators is subject to the standards in the Sonoma County Zoning Code. These standards are designed to reduce the visibility of land uses and development from public roads so that the Community Separator maintains an open and undeveloped appearance.

### **Scenic Landscape Units**

The Zoning Code also includes standards for the development within Scenic Landscape Units. These development standards also reduce the visibility of permitted development in order to maintain the natural appearance of the landscape as much as possible.

### **Scenic Corridors**

The County's protective measures for the Scenic Corridors rely on Sonoma County zoning regulations to control the visual impact of development, primarily through the use of the Scenic Resources (SR) overlay zoning district, as well as through the design review process. The SR overlay district establishes a setback of 30 percent of the lot depth up to a maximum of 200 feet from the centerline of the road. Within this area, development is prohibited with certain exceptions.<sup>8</sup> The design review process requires that all development in certain zoning districts is reviewed by the planning director or an appointed design review committee to assure that it meets certain standards.

### **Scenic Highways**

As noted above, portions of two State Highways are designated for scenic protection, Highways 12 and 116. The Highway 12 route through Sonoma Valley is governed by both the Scenic Design (SD) district and the Scenic Resource (SR) district. The standards in the SD district provide for screening of development from the view of Highway 12 travelers. The SR district protects views from all public roads.

The Highway 116 route is protected by the Highway 116 Scenic Highway Study. This study includes an array of policies and standards that protect the unique rural character of this route.

### **Nighttime Sky**

There are no adopted county-wide policies or regulations that apply to the protection of the nighttime sky, nor do all design review or Use Permit approvals contain lighting conditions. The Zoning Code specifically regulates lighting for parking lots where a design review application is required, for Appurtenant Signs, and for projects within three Local Area Development Guidelines areas.<sup>9, 10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *Highway 116 Scenic Highway Study*, CAC memo, Denise Peter, Sonoma County PRMD, August 15, 2002.

<sup>9</sup> These are: Highway 12 Design Guidelines, Glen Ellen Development Guidelines, and the Taylor Mountain/Sonoma Mountain Development Guidelines.

<sup>10</sup> *Light and Glare Policies*, CAC memo, Denise Peter, Sonoma County PRMD, August 15, 2002.

## STATE REGULATIONS

### Scenic Highways

California's Scenic Highway Program was created by the California Legislature in 1963. Its purpose is to preserve and protect scenic highways from change that would diminish the aesthetic value of lands adjacent to highways. Highway 116 and Highway 12 are both Sonoma County Scenic Highways. <sup>11</sup>

The text of the code includes a list of additional roadways that are eligible for designation as *Scenic Highways*. Roadways on this list are not officially designated Scenic Highways until the following steps have been completed: 1) the local jurisdiction adopts a scenic corridor protection program, 2) the local jurisdiction applies to the California Department of transportation for scenic highway approval, and 3) the local jurisdiction receives notification from Caltrans that the highway has been designated as a Scenic Highway. State legislation is required to add routes to the list of eligible highways.

Official designation as a California Scenic Highway provides certain protections to the route as well as the surrounding corridor. The corridor is defined as "the band of land generally adjacent to the highway right-of-way." Protections are determined by the local governing agency but are subject to minimum State requirements set out in Section 261 as follows:

*The standards for official scenic highways shall also require that local governmental agencies have taken such action as may be necessary to protect the scenic appearance of the scenic corridor ... including, but not limited to (1) regulation of land use and intensity (density) of development; (2) detailed land and site planning; (3) control of outdoor advertising; (4) careful attention to and control of earthmoving and landscaping; and (5) the design and appearance of structures and equipment.*

Both Caltrans and the Public Utilities Commission (PUC) have practices and procedures in place that apply to all officially designated State Scenic Highways. Caltrans' protective measures focus on minimizing tree removal and damage to trees. The PUC has language in its code that indicates the Commission's intent to install underground utilities, whenever feasible, when those utilities are proposed in proximity to a designated Scenic Highway.

### Nighttime Sky

In 2001 the California State Legislature passed a bill requiring the California Energy Commission to adopt energy efficiency standards for outdoor lighting in both the public sector and the private sector. The Commission is now in the process of developing and adopting lighting standards for all outdoor lighting applications, including all non-conditioned areas that are not already subject to existing California standards. The Commission adopted changes to the Title 24, parts 1 and 6, Building Energy Efficiency Standards on November 5, 2003. These new Standards became effective on October 1, 2005. Included in the changes to the Standards are new requirements for outdoor lighting. The Commission anticipates that the new standards will improve the quality of outdoor lighting and may reduce the impacts of light trespass, glare, and light pollution. <sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *The California Scenic Highway Program*, Caltrans web site, <http://www.dot.ca.gov/hq/LandArch/scenic/scpr.htm>.

<sup>12</sup> *California Outdoor Lighting Standards Synopsis*, Eley Associates, February 1, 2002.

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## **Visual Resources – Significance Criteria**

According to the *State CEQA Guidelines* and the existing *General Plan*, the project would have a significant visual resources impact if it would:

- Be in conflict with a designated Community Separator, Scenic Landscape Unit, or Scenic Corridor;
- 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;
- Create a new source of substantial light or glare which would adversely affect day or nighttime views in the area;

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## **Visual Resources – Impacts and Mitigation Measures**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The *Draft GP 2020* recognizes the need to protect Sonoma County's visual resources and would do so through the use of designations for some of the most scenic lands as Community Separators, Scenic Landscape Units, or Scenic Corridors. In addition, the County recognizes the need to protect the scenic quality of its rural and urban communities.

While land designated as a Community Separator, Scenic Landscape Unit, or Scenic Corridor (and appropriately zoned under the Scenic Resources overlay district) would be afforded greater protection from visual impacts by policies of the *Draft GP 2020*, it is important to note that such designation does not preclude development on these lands. Designated parcels would continue to have an underlying land use designation that would allow the development of certain land uses that could adversely affect visual resources.

For instance, much of the land within Community Separators is designated for agricultural or rural residential uses. As discussed in *Section 4.8 Agricultural and Timber Resources*, an agricultural designation of LEA, LIA, or DA would permit other land uses to occur in addition to agricultural production. These uses include: agricultural processing; support services (e.g., sales of farm supplies); visitor-serving uses (e.g., tasting rooms); agricultural employee housing; surface mining operations (if consistent with the Aggregate Resources Management Plan); recreational uses (e.g., campgrounds); and community services facilities (e.g., churches, schools, and granges).

In addition, the County is limited in the extent to which it can protect visual resources. First, the designated scenic areas do not include all of the rural parts of Sonoma County. Second, limits to the County's authority to regulate development on existing rural lots means that some structures are going to continue to be built regardless of adopted scenic protection policies.

**Impact 4.11-1 Community Separators, Scenic Landscape Units, Scenic Corridors, and Scenic Highways**

*Land uses and development consistent with the Draft GP 2020 could impact the visual quality of Community Separators, Scenic Landscape Units, Scenic Corridors, and Scenic Highways. However, policies contained in the Draft GP 2020 and the Sonoma County Code would continue to strictly limit the intensity, density, and location of development within these areas and reduce the visual impact on such lands to a less-than-significant level. (LTS)*

**Community Separators**

There are eight Community Separators as described in the environmental setting to which changes have occurred since adoption of the existing *General Plan*. The proposed Community Separators are illustrated in Figures OSRC 5a through OSRC 5i in the Open Space and Resources Conservation Element. The *Draft GP 2020* proposes reductions in acreage to some Community Separators in order to reflect previously approved city annexations. Otherwise, the *Draft GP 2020* does not include any land use amendments that would directly change either the land use designation and / or allow an increase in development potential at higher residential or commercial densities within Community Separators.<sup>13</sup>

Development pressure within Community Separators would be mostly due to the expansion of Sonoma County's cities. Additional development pressure could result from the location of this land along major arterial roads and the US 101 corridor, and from the potential for great financial gain through conversion of this land to residential or commercial uses. This pressure would reasonably be expected to continue and could result in the loss of vacant land to development and annexation, an increase in allowed density above the maximum permitted one dwelling unit per ten acres, and corridor style urbanization along US 101. Cumulative impacts to visual resources resulting from such pressures are discussed in **Section 6.2 Cumulative Impacts**. Development within Community Separators could also occur as a result of voter approved projects or through permitted uses of the underlying land use designation. Examples of permitted land use activities for agricultural designations which comprise the majority of lands within the Community Separators are discussed in *Impact 4.8-1 Conversion of Agricultural Lands to Non-Agricultural Uses*.

As Community Separators provide visual relief between urban areas, the development of these lands could result in corridor style urbanization and adverse changes to the visual quality of Sonoma County. Corridor style urbanization, so prevalent in many of California's urban areas, is characterized by uninterrupted residential subdivisions and commercial development. This type of development within Community Separators would result in a loss of community identity and uniqueness.

One goal of the SCAPOSD is to preserve agricultural land and natural resource areas, thereby protecting the visual quality of the unincorporated area, through open space acquisitions and conservation easements. As described in **Section 4.8 Agricultural and Timber Resources**, the SCAOSPD has no powers of eminent domain but has funding to purchase interests in real property from willing sellers. The SCAPOSD adopted *Acquisition Plan 2000* in July 2000 to direct land conservation efforts and set land acquisition priorities.

In addition, the *Draft GP 2020* contains policies that would also reduce adverse changes to the scenic quality of Community Separators. Policy **OSRC-1a** would continue to maintain the integrity of Community Separators by avoiding the approval of land use amendments that increased residential

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<sup>13</sup> See **Exhibit 4.1-2** for a list of the proposed land use amendments.

densities in Community Separators above one dwelling unit per ten acres. In addition, Policy **OSRC-1b** would continue to avoid the development of visually incompatible commercial and industrial uses in Community Separators (except for uses permitted by agricultural or resource land use categories) as well as limit recreational uses to locations along the US 101 corridor.

Policy **OSRC-1c** would continue to provide guidelines to permit some development providing certain criteria are met that would reduce both adverse changes to the scenic quality as well as result in long-term open space preservation and additional substantial public benefit. These would include, as conditions of approval, the dedication of a portion of the parcel(s) as permanent open space, the clustering of structures, and requiring that the project be of substantial public benefit which would outweigh the impacts of placing the development within the Community Separator. Additionally proof of adequate public services and infrastructure to serve the project would be required prior to approval. Special consideration would be given to projects containing financing mechanisms that would preserve dedicated open space or park land and project design that would visually enhance the separator or provide public access. As a result, this policy would reduce the cost to the County of maintaining acquired open space land and would allow the public to enjoy the visual relief and scenic quality that these lands provide.

Policies **OSRC-1d** through **OSRC-1f** would apply the Scenic Resources Combining District (SR) zoning overlay and establish design standards for development and land uses within Community Separators. The SR zoning overlay would reduce visual impacts to Community Separators by applying design standards which include regulating building envelopes and structure height limits, requiring the clustering of structures, and minimizing both the removal of tree stands cuts and fills on hills and ridges.

Policies **OSRC-1g** through **OSRC-1h** would implement financial and political mechanisms necessary to maintain Community Separators. Policy **OSRC-1g** would continue the work of the SCAPOSD in acquiring lands within Community Separators and elsewhere by supporting a measure on the ballot to extend the SCAPOSD and the sales tax (scheduled to expire in 2010) for another 20 years. Policy **OSRC-1h** would reduce visual impacts and maintain the integrity of Community Separators by considering creative financial and development options like voluntary transfer development rights (TDR) and purchase development rights (PDR). Policy **OSRC-1i** would specifically prohibit any change to a land use designation that would increase residential or commercial development potential in the Novato – Petaluma Community Separator without prior voter approval. This policy would likely discourage land use amendments and development proposals within this area due to the prohibitive cost of obtaining voter approval and the presumed public support for preservation of Community Separators.

In addition to the *Draft GP 2020* policies discussed above, Sonoma County has two existing ordinances that would continue to regulate development within Community Separators. Ordinance 5003R requires voter approval for the revision of or amendment to the boundaries or land use designations and densities of Community Separators as designated in the Open Space and Resources Conservation Element of the existing *General Plan*.<sup>14</sup> This ordinance would give a higher level of assurance that Community Separators would not be reduced in size or have their land use regulations relaxed during the foreseeable future and encourages the county's nine incorporated cities to adopt voter-approved companion ordinances establishing urban growth boundaries.

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<sup>14</sup> Ordinance 5003 R was approved by Sonoma County voters on November 5, 1996.

In a similar fashion, Ordinance 5145R expanded the Petaluma – Novato Community Separator and requires voter approval of any increase in the allowed intensity or density of land uses in this area.<sup>15</sup> This ordinance would ensure that certain Caltrans proposed US 101 improvements would not lead to development within this Community Separator at densities above those outlined in the existing *General Plan*.<sup>16</sup>

### **Scenic Landscape Units**

Scenic Landscape Units face many of the same potential impacts as do Community Separators because such designation does not preclude development of these lands. Policies contained in the Land Use and Agricultural Resources Elements that would permit certain land use activities consistent with the underlying land use designation (e.g., agricultural processing and visitor-serving development) could degrade the visual quality of Scenic Landscape Units.

The *Draft GP 2020* proposes modifications in several Scenic Landscape Units throughout the nine Planning Areas, primarily to adjust the boundaries to extend up to and over ridgelines. The proposed Scenic Landscape Units are illustrated in Figures OSRC 5a through OSRC 5i in the Open Space and Resources Conservation Element of the *Draft GP 2020*

The *Draft GP 2020* does not propose any land use amendments that would directly change either the land use designation and / or allow an increase in development potential at higher residential or commercial densities within Scenic Landscape Units.

Potential adverse changes to the scenic quality of Scenic Landscape Units could occur as a result of the development of vacant lands and permitted land use activities. However, policies contained in the *Draft GP 2020* and the County Zoning Code would reduce many of the visual impacts in these areas.

Policy **OSRC-2a** would continue to avoid amendments which would increase residential density in excess of unit per ten acres. Development at or below this density would preserve open space, maintain the visual character of rural Sonoma County, and provide visual relief from urban areas. Policy **OSRC-2b** would prevent the development of visually incompatible commercial and industrial uses from degrading the scenic quality of Scenic Landscape Units.

Policy **OSRC-2c** would continue to apply the Scenic Resources Combining District (SR) to lands designated Scenic Landscape Units. The SR zoning overlay contains provisions for reducing visual impacts similar to those described in Policies **OSRC-2d** and **OSRC-2e**. These would include, but are not limited to, requiring the use of vegetation and existing topography to screen development; requiring additional landscaping in open areas not screened by existing vegetation and topography; discouraging cuts and fills on hillsides; locating structures so as to minimize tree removal; the underground placement of utilities; architectural design review of structures to promote compatibility with surrounding uses and existing visual character; and the use of height limitations, building envelopes, clustering, and tree preservation for residential subdivisions within the Scenic Landscape Unit. The incorporation of these standards into the zoning code would ensure that adverse changes to

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<sup>15</sup> Ordinance 5145 R was approved by Sonoma County voters on November 3, 1998.

<sup>16</sup> *Open Space Element – Community Separators and Scenic Landscape Units*, Lisa Posternak, Sonoma County PRMD, September 19, 2002.

the scenic quality of these lands would be reduced during the design review phase for both ministerial and discretionary projects.

Policy **OSRC-2f** would continue to identify critical scenic areas within Scenic Landscape Units and, to the extent allowed by law, require the dedication of a permanent scenic or agricultural easement before the approval of subdivision of property. Additionally, Policy **OSRC-2g** would continue to consider transfer of development rights (TDR) and purchase of development rights (PDR) programs within Scenic Landscape Units. These programs would add protection and thereby reduce visual impacts through the permanent preservation of open space.

Ridges and hillsides within Scenic Landscape Units, such as the Sonoma and Mayacamas Mountains, or those within view from the Scenic Corridors, are some of the county's principal scenic resources and contribute substantially to Sonoma County's unique visual and rural character. Despite constraints to development from natural hazards and topographical features, hillsides and ridgelines are attractive places to live because of their views and proximity to nature. But, excessive or poorly located hillside development can diminish these views, idyllic surroundings, and wildlife habitats and permanently change the character of the community. Ridges and hillsides within Scenic Landscape Units along Scenic Corridors would be particularly sensitive to development.

Policy **OSRC-2d** would reduce visual impacts along designated hillsides and ridgelines by avoiding the placement of structures in locations that would exceed the silhouette of the ridgeline against the sky or in highly visible open areas. Furthermore, projects would be required to minimize cuts and fills on hills and ridges and screen driveways from view. Additional provisions applicable to hillside and skyline protection are included in the SR zoning overlay. Adverse changes to the scenic quality of Scenic Landscape Units would be reduced by these policies, particularly on hillsides and ridgelines.

### **Scenic Corridors**

Similar to Community Separators, and Scenic Landscape Units, Scenic Corridors could be affected by land use activities. Depending on the type of land use and development allowed along designated scenic corridors, rural and /or urban uses could be located or designed in ways that are visually obtrusive to travelers. In urban communities, projects could alter the character of communities. In rural areas, land uses could adversely affect the natural scenic environment. Billboards and similar outdoor advertising structures could detract from scenic views. Scenic corridors are identified on Figures OSRC 5a through OSRC 5i of the Open Space and Resources Conservation Element.

The *Draft GP 2020* contains policies that would reduce the potential impacts on the visual quality of Scenic Corridors. Policy **OSRC-3a** would continue to apply the Scenic Resources Combining District (SR) zoning overlay to portions of property within a scenic corridor setback.<sup>17</sup> Policy **OSRC-3c** would continue to define this setback as 30 percent of the lot depth up to a maximum depth of 200 feet from the road's centerline. Application of the SR overlay would reduce adverse visual changes to Scenic Corridors by promoting uses consistent with the rural character of Sonoma County. Development would be limited within this setback to agricultural and other support structures associated with existing facilities. Furthermore, for those portions of Scenic Corridors located within urban areas, Policy **OSRC-3e** would continue to require and incorporate urban design criteria such as the use of applicable lighting, and the shielding of parking lots from public view.

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<sup>17</sup> Article 64 Scenic Resources Combining District, Sonoma County Zoning Code, accessed online at <http://www.sonoma-county.org/prmd/Zoning/index.htm>.

Policy **OSRC-3g** would reduce the visual impact from outdoor advertising by continuing to avoid freeway oriented billboards along Scenic Corridors and by establishing design criteria for advertising structures and signs. The policy would also consider phasing out existing signs through amortization. Many courts have determined that amortization does not constitute a taking, and is therefore used as a method for removing billboards nationwide.

Policy **OSRC-3h** would continue to require public works projects to minimize tree damage and removal within Scenic Corridors, design appropriate replanting programs, and revegetate after grading and road cuts. In addition to this policy, the Sonoma County Code contains two ordinances that would reduce potential impacts to trees. The Sonoma County Tree Ordinance (No. 4044) would continue to regulate the removal of certain designated trees, including oaks, madrone, redwood, and California bay. *Protected trees* are defined as those designated trees having a minimum trunk diameter of nine inches measured at 4.5 feet above grade. According to the ordinance, protected trees would be replaced at a 1:1 ratio. In addition, the proposed removal could not exceed 50 percent of the protected trees on the site. The Sonoma County Heritage Tree Ordinance No. 3651 would continue to provide for the identification and protection of designated heritage trees.

Additional policies applicable to Scenic Corridors in coastal areas are contained in the Sonoma County Local Coastal Plan (LCP). Policies in the LCP are more restrictive in terms of height limitations new structures and rely on vegetation to screen the project from view. Vegetative screening alone is not always effective because climate factors, plant diseases, and pests result in low survivorship of new landscaping in coastal areas.<sup>18</sup>

### **Scenic Highways**

As previously noted, portions of Highways 12 and 116 are designated as State Scenic Highways. Similar to Scenic Corridors, Scenic Highways can be adversely affected by land uses and development that may be sited near the roadway. These land uses, whether urban or rural, could be developed in ways that are not in keeping with the character of the communities through which travelers pass along these routes.

In 1988, Caltrans, in consultation with Sonoma County staff and the County Scenic Highway Advisory Committee, designated Highway 116 as a Scenic Corridor. These agencies delineated the Highway 116 viewshed and established applicable policies to protect the Scenic Corridor's visual quality.<sup>19</sup> However, during public workshops pertaining to the scope of the *Draft GP 2020* update, comments were received suggesting that scenic protection policies for Highway 116 were not being adequately implemented by the County into the existing *General Plan* or the County Code.<sup>20</sup>

In 2001, Caltrans conducted a staff review of the County's Corridor Protection Programs for Highways 12 and 116. The report concluded these programs were adequate to protect the scenic values of these Scenic Highways.

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<sup>18</sup> *Sonoma County LCP Amendment #1-00*, Peter Douglas, California Coastal Commission, June 29, 2001, accessed online at <http://www.coastal.ca.gov/nca/lcpa-sc-1-00.pdf>.

<sup>19</sup> *The Final Report of the Sonoma 116 Scenic Highway Corridor Study*, Caltrans, September 1988.

<sup>20</sup> *Highway 116 Scenic Highway Study*, Denise Peter, Sonoma County PRMD, August 15, 2002.

Policy **OSRC-3i** and **OSRC Program 8** (Scenic Highway 116 Program) would continue to recognize Highway 116 as an official State Scenic Highway. If adopted, the program would prepare Local Development Guidelines to be incorporated into the Zoning Code that were identified in the 116 Scenic Highway Corridor Study.

The *Draft GP 2020* contains policies and programs that, if adopted and implemented, would reduce the visual impacts and maintain the visual quality of scenic highways. These include the policies and programs previously discussed under Scenic Corridors. In addition, both highways are protected by zoning standards. The SD and SR districts, cited earlier, protect Highway 12 by requiring that structures be screened from view along the route. Highway 116 is protected, not only by standards in the SR district, but also by Highway 116 Scenic Highway Study, that establishes protective policies for development within the mapped viewshed of the highway. The *Draft GP 2020* would also call for improved implementation of this study's policies and standards. State Scenic Highways are also subject to restrictive State regulations pertaining to outdoor advertising structures, thereby adding protection to the County's billboard policy discussed earlier.

In summary, land uses and development that would be allowed within Community Separators, Scenic Landscape Units, Scenic Corridors, and Scenic Highways could adversely affect the visual quality of these areas. However, the *Draft GP 2020* includes both existing and new policies and programs that would reduce this impact to a less-than-significant level.

**Mitigation Measure 4.11-1** None required.

**Impact 4.11-2 Visual Impacts in Other Urban and Rural Areas**

*Land uses and development consistent with the Draft GP 2020 could impact the visual quality of urban and rural areas that are not designated as scenic resource areas. However, policies contained in the Draft GP 2020 and existing regulations would reduce these impacts to a less-than-significant level. (LTS)*

In the preceding discussion regarding designated scenic resources in the *Draft GP 2020*, the impact identification focused on the most important scenic resources in the unincorporated area. This section addresses the visual impacts of land uses and development on the remaining unincorporated area. While these lands, both urban and rural, are not designated scenic resources, they contribute nonetheless to the overall visual quality and character of the county.

Land uses and development in the urban areas could result in the loss of visual quality if the design of structures associated with urban development is not consistent with the style and character of the surrounding uses. Each urban community has a character that was initiated early in its history and has evolved over time. If new development is not consistent with that character it could detract from the visual impression and attractiveness of that community. Building architecture, landscaping, lighting, color, materials, and other design features are all important aspects of this character.

Similarly, rural land uses and development consistent with the *Draft GP 2020* could degrade the visual quality of rural areas and rural communities. Each rural area whether valley floor, rolling hills, mountains, or other topographic feature, has a rural character that identifies it and often makes it unique and different from other rural areas. In these areas, building architecture and structural style may not be as important as the blending of the design and layout of uses with the natural visual environment.

The *Draft GP 2020* includes policies and programs that would address these visual impacts, primarily through the use of urban and rural design guidelines. Policy **OSRC-5b** would establish a set of general design guidelines applicable to land uses and development within Urban Service Areas. These urban design standards would focus on maintaining and enhancing the established character of each community. **OSRC Program 9 Urban Design Standards** would promote the development of additional design standards tailored to the character of each community, as has been done for the communities of Glen Ellen and Occidental.

Policy **OSRC-6a** would establish a set of general design guidelines applicable to projects in rural areas. **OSRC Program 10 Rural Character Design Guidelines** would promote the establishment of more specific guidelines that focus on maintenance of the rural character of agricultural and rural commercial development, not only to protect visual quality, but also to avoid the urban industrial appearance of rural uses. The *Draft GP 2020* would also provide for visual resource protection in areas where Local Area Development Guidelines have been adopted such as the Sonoma Mountains and Taylor Mountain, or areas where new Local Area Development Guidelines are supported such as the Mayacamas Mountains.

These policies and programs would combine with existing regulations discussed in the setting to reduce the impact of future land uses and development outside of designated scenic resource areas to a less-than-significant level.

**Mitigation Measure 4.11-2** None required.

**Impact 4.11-3 Light Pollution and Nighttime Sky**

*Land uses and development consistent with the Draft GP 2020 would create additional sources of lighting which could result in sky glow, light trespass, and glare. This would be a significant impact. (S)*

Outdoor lighting used in both the public and private sectors contributes to adverse visual effects on the nighttime sky. Excessive night time lighting resulting from implementation of the *Draft GP 2020* could result in light trespass, light pollution, and glare.

Light trespass is unwanted light from a neighboring property or roadway. The most common form of light trespass is spill light, illuminating objects beyond the property boundaries. Light trespass may be more obtrusive during the late night hours.<sup>21</sup> Light trespass would continue to be an issue as sources of outdoor lighting have and may continue to be more intense than in the past. Additionally, disputes related to light trespass are difficult to resolve due to the need for light during night time activities, particularly for safety and security. Light trespass can be both a nuisance and a health and safety risk if it adversely affects visibility for tasks like driving.

Light pollution has a broader and more cumulative impact than light trespass to Sonoma County residents. Excessive night time lighting could result in sky glow, the haze of light that surrounds highly populated areas and reduces the ability to see the stars. This would be of particular concern near observatories (e.g., the Robert Fergusson Observatory) and could change the appearance of the night time sky for future generations.

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<sup>21</sup> *White Paper on Outdoor Lighting Code Issues*, National Electrical Manufacturers Association, August 2000.

Excessive lighting could also have an adverse impact on wildlife. Increased night lighting from development may disrupt important behaviors and physiological processes of animals. Insects, amphibians, and birds are highly sensitive. Lights at night are especially disruptive to wetland birds and land animals, which use light reflected off of water to orient them. Migratory songbirds are also vulnerable, and are killed in large numbers when night-lit buildings attract them off their course. Some animals cannot forage or find mates because they cannot hide from their predators. Owls, foxes, and other predators who hunt by sight may thrive where night lights are strong.<sup>22</sup>

Implementation of the *Draft GP 2020* could also result in glare. Glare is light of such brightness that it continually draws the eye toward the lamp image and/or prevents the viewer from adequately viewing the intended target. Glare commonly occurs when a spot in the field of view is significantly brighter in contrast to the rest of the field of view, such as when a direct lamp image is visible, or when the difference in light levels between adjacent areas is significant enough to cause the eyes to take several minutes to adapt to the change.

The *Draft GP 2020* contains policies and programs to reduce the adverse affects of excessive lighting. Policy **OSRC-4a** would require all lighting to be cast downward and to be at no more than both the minimum height required and the power necessary for the proposed use. This policy would therefore limit excessive lighting, and reduce the amount of wasted light unnecessarily directed upwards, minimizing sky glow. Policy **OSRC-4b** would prohibit continuous all night lighting except for security and operational purposes. This policy would maintain dark skies in rural areas during nighttime hours and result in aesthetic and biotic benefits. Policy **OSRC-4c** would discourage light levels in excess of industry and State standards. This policy would reduce lighting impacts to visual resources by incorporating progressive State and industrial standards into the project design and review process.

An additional program to develop and incorporate standards and procedures into the County Development Code and design review process was included in the *Draft GP 2020*.<sup>23</sup> The development and adoption of **OSRC Program 7, Outdoor Lighting Standards** would replace the current method of evaluating lighting impacts on a project by project basis with comprehensive procedures and standards. The consistent application of lighting standards would reduce impacts from lighting to visual resources by addressing the issue in the design review process.

Due to the cumulative nature of lighting impacts, the success of **OSRC Program 7 Outdoor Lighting Standards** in reducing impacts from implementation of the *Draft GP 2020* depends upon a voluntary education and incentive program that encourages progressive methods to retrofit existing light sources to compliant ones. Reducing lighting impacts would also depend upon the degree to which ridgelines, hilltops, scenic resources, and other rural areas would be protected from development consistent with policies contained in the Open Space and Resources Conservation, Agriculture Resources, and Land Use elements of the *Draft GP 2020*.

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<sup>22</sup> *Preliminary Evaluation of the Environmental Impacts of a Resort Casino Proposed by the Federated Indians of the Graton Rancheria at Lakeville Highway and State Highway 37 in Southern Sonoma County, California*, The Bay Institute, Sonoma Land Trust, and Sonoma Ecology Center, July 2003.

<sup>23</sup> *Light and Glare Policies – Report to GP 2020 Citizen’s Advisory Committee*, Denise Peter, Sonoma County PRMD, August 15, 2002.

Although these policies and programs would reduce some of the impacts associated with light pollution, future lighting impacts would still occur, particularly from light sources associated with development that is not subject to discretionary review under the proposed lighting standards. Therefore, this would be a significant impact.

**Mitigation Measure 4.11-3** No mitigation available beyond the *Draft GP 2020* policies discussed in the impact analysis above.

**Significance After Mitigation** This would be a significant unavoidable impact. (SU)