

5.1 AESTHETICS

5.1.1 METHODOLOGY

The assessment of aesthetic/visual changes in this section is based on field reconnaissance, review of aerial photographs, and evaluation of the proposed facilities and improvements that would change existing site conditions.

Aesthetics may be defined as visual qualities within a given field of view, and may include the size, shape, color, contextual and general composition, and the relationships between these elements. Due to highly varied preferences between individuals or groups, the analysis of aesthetic impacts is highly subjective and dependent on viewer perceptions.

5.1.2 EXISTING CONDITIONS

Regulatory Setting

State

Scenic Highways Program

Through the California Scenic Highway Program, the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) classifies highways meeting specific criteria as “scenic” throughout California. The purpose of the program is to preserve and protect scenic highway corridors from changes that would diminish the aesthetic value of lands adjacent to highways. According to Caltrans, “a highway may be designated scenic depending upon how much of the natural landscape can be seen by travelers, the scenic quality of the landscape, and the extent to which development intrudes upon the traveler’s enjoyment of the view” (Caltrans 2009).

There are no designated or eligible scenic highways within or near the Whittier Narrows Dam Basin Recreation Area (WNCBRA). The nearest officially designated scenic highway is State Route 2 (SR-2), located approximately 15 miles north of the WNCBRA (Caltrans 2009).

County

County of Los Angeles General Plan

The County General Plan identifies Scenic Highways as Special Management Areas. The current General Plan has not designated or proposed any scenic highway in or near the WNCBRA.

Environmental Setting

The WNCBRA is an approximate 1,500-acre open space area that is surrounded by urban development. It consists mainly of undeveloped land with natural vegetation and river channels, as well as landscaped areas with a large number of mature trees. Wide open lawns, lakes, picnic areas, structures that are in scale with their surroundings, trails, sports facilities, and other amenities provide a variety of recreational uses at numerous locations. In addition, maintenance yards, parking lots, wastewater treatment plant, and agricultural fields are present in the WNCBRA.

As a natural divide between nearby hills, the site has a general slope to the south/southwest but features a variable terrain due to river banks, lakes, berms, dams, and roadways. Interstate 605 (I-605) separates the site from the Puente Hills to the east and Lincoln Avenue separates the site from the Montebello Hills to the west.

The WNCBRA is visible from State Route 60 (SR-60), as it crosses the site. Westbound travelers initially observe the area from the SR-60 freeway, beginning with the San Gabriel River and its banks after the I-605 interchange, followed by industrial, commercial, and residential uses east of the WNCBRA. The view then changes to large, open grass fields revealing a regional park with mature trees, parking lots, and picnic areas. Past Rosemead Boulevard, a more natural open area (undeveloped unpaved areas, unpaved trails, and overgrown vegetation) is visible, which, in turn, is adjacent to residential areas that are located west of the WNCBRA.

Southbound on Rosemead Boulevard, travelers see soccer fields and a dirt lot after industrial uses past Rush Street followed by picnic areas. Lakes and open fields then become visible, along with plant nurseries and crop fields. The view changes into natural areas with native vegetation, open water, and bare soils with a raised berm (dam) to the east and along the western side of the road. Travelling farther south, residential areas become visible.

Scenic views in the WNCBRA include views of the lakes and large open areas with mature vegetation, which contrast with the surrounding urban environment. The San Gabriel Mountains are visible to the north on clear days. These distant mountains and the nearby hills frame the San Gabriel Valley provide scenic vistas from the WNCBRA.

5.1.3 THRESHOLDS OF SIGNIFICANCE

The following significance criteria are derived from Appendix G of the State CEQA Guidelines. The project would result in a significant adverse impact on aesthetics if it would:

Threshold 5.1.1: *Have a substantial adverse effect on a scenic vista;*

Threshold 5.1.2: *Substantially damage scenic resources, including, but not limited to, trees, rock outcroppings, and historic buildings within a state scenic highway;*

Threshold 5.1.3: *Substantially degrade the existing visual character or quality of the site and its surroundings; or*

Threshold 5.1.4: *Create a new source of substantial light or glare, which would adversely affect day or nighttime views in the area.*

5.1.4 ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

Project Design Features

The proposed MDPI includes programs and improvements that would improve visual quality and aesthetics at the WNCBRA. These include:

- PDF 5.1.1: *Implementation of the LACDPR Signage Master Plan.*** The Master Development Plan Input (MDPI) recommends the procurement of funding to implement a master sign program that is consistent with the Los Angeles County Department of Parks and Recreation's (LACDPR's) Signage Master Plan that has been partially implemented at select sites (Area B, parking area entries, at Durfee Avenue/Santa Anita Avenue) in the WNCBRA. The proposed program would include entry/identification signs, directional signs, regulatory signs, and trail markers that would include a consistent logo and graphic identity to improve wayfinding in and near the WNCBRA and create an identity for the WNCBRA. The signs would be provided in other parts of the WNCBRA that are not under the LACDPR's jurisdiction, such as the Bosque and Pico Rivera facilities.
- PDF 5.1.2: *Identity and Branding Program.*** The MDPI includes a short-term action for the development of a unique identity and brand that will be used to promote the WNCBRA. The program includes graphic identity, logotype, and media elements (newsletter, press release, event announcements) that would be coordinated with the Signage Master Plan. This program would improve the public image of the WNCBRA as well as perceptions of the existing and future facilities.
- PDF 5.1.3: *Volunteer Cleanup Activities.*** The MDPI includes a short-term action to organize voluntary cleanup activities to be held at regular intervals to remove litter and trash at the site in order to provide cleaner views of various areas within the WNCBRA.
- PDF 5.1.4: *Green Streets.*** Green streets are proposed on roadways within and near the WNCBRA to provide pedestrian and bicycle safety, storm water management, and streetscape aesthetics. Landscape edges that treat runoff or transformation of concrete medians to landscaped medians that treat runoff would help improve storm water quality in the Rio Hondo and San Gabriel River. Creation of these Green Streets within and near the WNCBRA would improve the visual quality of streetscapes.

Standard Conditions

There are no standard conditions that specifically relate to aesthetics.

Impact Analysis

Scenic Vistas

Threshold 5.1.1: Would the project have a substantial adverse effect on a scenic vista?

Proposed facilities and improvements at the WNCBRA would change the visual quality of individual sites where grading, excavation, and construction activities would occur and where changes in vegetation or landscaping and new structures (building, parking lots, driveways, pathways, etc.) are introduced. More intensive recreational areas would be created where various recreational uses are proposed, and more natural areas would be created in areas proposed for habitat restoration. Creation of trails would also provide greater opportunities for public views within the WNCBRA.

Traveler views on SR-60 and along Rosemead Boulevard may change as new recreational facilities are built along the freeway and highway, but retention of the majority of existing facilities and the primary recreational land use of the site would not substantially alter views. Also, views of the lakes and wide open spaces will be retained for the most part from public roadways, and internal roads and changes in these scenic vistas would be limited.

While proposed structures (skate park or court sports in Area A, amphitheater and playground in Area B, splash park and welcome center in Area D, entry signage, and light poles) would partially block views, the surrounding hills and the distant San Gabriel Mountains would continue to be visible from various vantage points throughout the WND BRA. Impacts would be less than significant, and no mitigation is required.

Scenic Highway

Threshold 5.1.2: Would the project substantially damage scenic resources, including, but not limited to, trees, rock outcroppings, and historic buildings within a state scenic highway?

While trees within the WND BRA may have to be removed or relocated to accommodate the proposed facilities and improvements, there are no State- or County-designated scenic highways in or near the WND BRA. Thus, proposed facilities and improvements under the MDPI would not affect scenic resources within a scenic highway. No changes to historic buildings (Temple School) are proposed and known historic sites within the WND BRA do not have any aboveground features (see Section 5.5, Cultural Resources). Compliance with the County's Oak Tree Ordinance is discussed in Section 5.4, Biological Resources, of this EIR. No impact on scenic resources within a scenic highway would occur. No mitigation is required.

Visual Character

Threshold 5.1.3: Would the project substantially degrade the existing visual character or quality of the site and its surroundings?

Proposed facilities and improvements under the MDPI would change the visual quality of the sites where individual projects would be built, as well as the overall views of the WND BRA from public roadways and within the site.

During construction at various sites throughout the WND BRA, views of excavated soils, building materials, stockpiles, construction debris, and construction equipment would be visible to adjacent users and visitors of the WND BRA. However, this impact would be temporary and would occur on scattered sites and at intermittent times, as individual projects are under construction. Thus, visual impacts during construction would be short-term and considered less than significant.

As new facilities and improvements are implemented, changes in visual impacts would occur throughout the WND BRA. These changes include removal of existing vegetation and trees for replacement with recreational facilities or new landscaped areas; development of open fields with scattered structures; pavement of turf areas with trails, recreational facilities, and parking lots; introduction of signs; reconstruction of streets; and replacement of invasive plant species with native vegetation.

The determination of whether permanent changes in the visual quality of the site would degrade the site or its surroundings, and thus, be significant and adverse, is highly subjective as some individuals prefer open and natural settings; others prefer old and low density developments; and others prefer new, urban, and highly structured environments. Similarly, preferences for one architectural style over another make it difficult to conclude that the design of a recreational facility would have a negative or positive aesthetic impact. As such, a change from a less intensive recreational and “natural” area to a more structured setting with more refined edges between roads, landscaped areas, parking lots and more buildings and structures, or the use of a specific architectural style, may be considered a positive impact by one person but not another.

The MDPI includes a program for the development of a Signage Master Plan (PDF 5.1.1) that is consistent with the LACDPR’s Signage Master Plan, to unify the various facilities and create an identity for and visual unity at the WNCBRA. The Identity and Branding Program (PDF 5.1.2) would also create a unique identity and brand that would improve the public image of the WNCBRA and perceptions of the existing and future facilities. Volunteer Cleanup Activities (PDF 5.1.3) would also reduce litter at the WNCBRA and improve visual conditions. Green Streets (PDF 5.1.4) would improve streetscapes within and near the WNCBRA. These PDFs would assist in the development of a cleaner and more unified visual character for the site.

The construction of an amphitheater, soccer fields, welcome center, splash park, performance pavilions, skate park, and other facilities would disturb and develop large areas of the site. The 1996 Whittier Narrows Dam Basin Master Plan does not include design guidelines for future facilities at the WNCBRA by which a proposal may be evaluated for consistency with the USACE’s aesthetic standards. Also, there are no design guidelines proposed in the MDPI. The actual design concepts for any of the proposed recreational facilities have also not been developed at this stage. Thus, the evaluation of aesthetic impacts cannot be readily made.

In addition, the perception of changes that would occur with proposed facilities and improvements in the WNCBRA would vary from different vantage points and for different viewer groups. Visual preferences between the existing and future conditions would be highly subjective according to the distance of the viewer from the individual project site, the length of time the view is visible, the visibility (angle and extent) of the facility or improvement, and the type of viewer (resident versus recreational user). Some people would likely prefer the preservation of the existing natural setting; others would prefer a visual character that reflects existing recreational facilities; and others would prefer the creation of visual interest and contrast.

Aside from the subjective nature of aesthetics and visual quality, the proposed facilities and improvements would not all be visible from any one single vantage point or viewer group, and visual changes would be scattered and confined to individual sites throughout the WNCBRA. Thus, impacts are considered less than significant.

Sources of Light and Glare

Threshold 5.1.4: Would the project create a new source of substantial light or glare which would adversely affect day or nighttime views in the area?

Most of the proposed facilities and improvements are not expected to create new sources of light and glare since the proposed trails, natural area parks, Green Streets, storm water BMPs, traffic calming measures, river crossings, and fitness routes are not expected to include exterior

lighting or glazing materials that may create light or glare spillover. However, parking lots that would accompany the proposed recreational facilities and exterior lighting for some recreational facilities (e.g., amphitheater, splash park, welcome center, disc golf areas, performance pavilions, entry signage, skate park, and/or court sports) for security or nighttime use, if installed, would introduce new light sources that would increase lighting levels at the WNDDBRA. These new light sources would increase nighttime lighting levels in the project area.

While the WNDDBRA and the facilities within the WNDDBRA would not be considered light-sensitive land uses, increases in lighting levels at the site may affect adjacent land uses, such as residential areas to the north and east. The Whittier Narrows Golf Course and the dam buffer the residential areas to the west and south, and light spillover is not likely to extend into the abutting residences to the west and south. Industrial uses to the southeast are not considered light-sensitive uses. However, a potential for light spillover may occur to residences to the north and east. Depending on the actual locations of proposed facilities, site improvements, and light fixtures for the proposed skate park or court sports in Area A, the proposed amphitheater and playground in Area B, and the proposed splash park and welcome center in Area D, new light sources (parking lot lights and exterior security lighting) at the edges of the WNDDBRA may create light spillover into nearby residences, where no intervening structures or land uses are present.

Glare impacts may also occur, depending on the building materials used for facades and roofs of the proposed facilities, which may affect drivers on nearby roadways and freeways. Light and glare impacts could create nuisances that could affect sleep, rest, listening, learning, and driving activities at abutting residences. Mitigation to reduce light and glare impacts on abutting residences and light-sensitive areas outside the WNDDBRA (MM 5.1.1) is provided below.

5.1.5 CUMULATIVE IMPACTS

More intense urban development in the San Gabriel Valley can be expected as vacant land is utilized for new developments. Growth and development in the San Gabriel Valley and the proposed facilities and improvements at the WNDDBRA would change the visual quality of the landscape through the introduction of new structures and infrastructure. The transformations of the visual environment reflects continued urbanization in Los Angeles County as vacant and underutilized lands are developed and redeveloped to accommodate demands for residential, commercial, industrial, institutional, and public uses. Views of the valley would change through the introduction of buildings, parking lots, landscaped areas, signs, and other site improvements, creating an overall increase in development intensity and highly urbanized setting for the San Gabriel Valley and Los Angeles County.

Development and design review of individual development projects by the individual cities or the County would prevent the potential for adverse view impacts or negative aesthetic impacts to be created by new development. Compliance with applicable development and design standards by individual development projects would avoid or mitigate visual impacts so that aesthetic impacts do not become cumulatively significant.

New sources of light and glare would also be created as new developments occur in the valley. These sources would include exterior lighting, parking lot light poles, walkways lights, and interior lighting at buildings that are in use during the nighttime hours. An overall increase in lighting levels throughout the project area can be experienced over time. Similarly, new structures would potentially create additional sources of glare in the area. Compliance with City or County lighting standards would prevent light spillover and adverse impacts on adjacent

light-sensitive uses. Setbacks, landscaping, and development standards relating to light and glare are expected to prevent substantial light intrusion and spillover. Due to the largely urbanized setting in the San Gabriel Valley and the area surrounding the WNCBRA, changes to the visual quality of the individual development site are not expected to be cumulatively significant or adverse, and impacts would be less than significant.

5.1.6 MITIGATION PROGRAM

To reduce or avoid significant adverse impacts related to aesthetics, the following mitigation measure is required:

MM 5.1.1: Light and glare sources that would accompany proposed facilities and improvements shall be selected and designed to prevent light spillover and glare onto adjacent land uses. Controls on light intensity, type of source, light shields, directional lighting, pole heights, operating hours, barriers/buffers, glazing materials, and other factors shall be incorporated into individual projects to prevent light and glare trespass into abutting residences and light-sensitive areas outside the WNCBRA.

5.1.7 LEVEL OF SIGNIFICANCE AFTER MITIGATION

The proposed recreational facilities and improvements set forth in the MDPI would change the visual quality of various areas in the WNCBRA but impacts would be less than significant. Significant adverse impacts associated with the introduction of new sources of light and glare would be reduced with implementation of MM 5.1.1. Impacts would be less than significant after mitigation. Cumulative impacts would be less than significant.

5.1.8 REFERENCES

- California Department of Transportation (Caltrans). 2009 (December 7 Last accessed). California Scenic Highway Program. http://www.dot.ca.gov/hq/LandArch/scenic_highways/scenic_hwy.htm.
- Los Angeles, County of. 1980 (November). *County of Los Angeles General Plan (Conservation and Open Space Element)*. Los Angeles, CA: County of Los Angeles
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- Wenk Associates, Inc./Green_Space Planning, LLC, BonTerra Consulting, Malcolm Pirnie, Inc., Amigos de los Rios, Urban Semillas, and ETM Associates (Wenk et al.). 2010. *Whittier Narrows Dam Basin Recreation Area Master Development Plan Input* (prepared for the Water Conservation Authority). Denver, CO: Wenk et al.