

The Visual Impact Assessment Process

Step-By-Step

Addressing potential visual impacts has been a key concern in the new design of the Azusa Rock project. Since many people are unfamiliar with how visual impacts are technically analyzed (and how project view simulations are created), the following information details the key steps that environmental planners follow in the process:

STEP 1: COLLECT PROJECT INFORMATION AND REGULATORY BACKGROUND

In this first step, the planner obtains a description of the project and a set of digital CAD plans detailing the physical and topographic changes that will be created by the project. They form an understanding of how the project proposes to alter the visual landscape. They also review the local agency's General Plan to understand all regulatory goals, policies and implementation measures that pertain to sensitive viewpoints or visual resources in the area.

STEP 2: MAP THE PROJECT VIEWSHED

A "viewshed" is any area from which the project site or project activities may be seen. A key component in developing the project's visual setting is to identify and map the project viewshed. In this step, the planner may use computer-aided line-of-sight analysis to get an approximate understanding of the viewshed. But the planner also visits the project site to view and take photos in a 360 degree circle of what can be seen from the site (termed "inter-visibility," which is the principle that from any point visible to the observer, the observer can also be seen). The planner then drives through the surrounding area to verify where the site can be seen from. The result of this analysis is a compilation of a map showing where the site can be seen from, known as "The Project Viewshed."

STEP 3: IDENTIFY ANY SENSITIVE RECEPTORS THAT ARE LOCATED WITHIN THE PROJECT VIEWSHED

Using the CEQA guidelines and the local General Plan as the basis for what constitutes a "sensitive receptor" (sensitive viewpoint), the planner locates any federal, state, or locally designated "scenic vistas" within the viewshed. Second, the planner locates any federal, state, or locally designated "scenic highways" within the viewshed. Lastly, the planner locates any residential, public recreational, or locally important places within the project viewshed. Representative panoramic photos are taken from each of these sensitive receptor locations to create a "baseline view conditions photo" for each sensitive view location.

STEP 4: ASSESS THE EXISTING VISUAL QUALITY OF SENSITIVE VIEWS

In this step, the planner assesses the existing visual quality for each of the sensitive receptor viewpoints. There are no established state or local methodologies for rating visual quality. Therefore, the visual impact assessment must rely on well-established methodologies of federal land management agencies, such as the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) "Scenic Quality Rating Criteria." The BLM Visual Resource Management Manual provides a seven-category rating system by which visual quality can be numerically quantified.

STEP 5: CREATE PHOTO SIMULATIONS OF THE PROJECT'S VISUAL CHANGES

In this stage, the planner creates photo simulations of the proposed project for each of the project views identified in Step 3. These photo simulations, along with the photos created in Step 3, serve as "before" and "after" project photos for use in impact assessment. To do so, the planner creates a 3D computer model of the proposed plan, as seen from the location and elevation of each of the identified sensitive viewpoints. These models are then spliced into a model of the topography

surrounding the site, including different versions for various reference years and comparisons – allowing the planner to see how much of the project would be visible from each location. But the 3D model depicts the overall massing, shape and scale of the proposed visual changes. Therefore, to create a realistic groundcover for the simulation, the planner then blends the model with the photographs that have been taken at each location in step 3, above, to create site-specific realism for the color, texture, scale, and atmospheric perspective of the proposed groundcover, landscaping and terrain.

STEP 6: ASSESS THE IMPACT OF THE PROJECT ON THE VISUAL QUALITY OF SENSITIVE VIEWS

Once photo simulations of the proposed project are complete, the planner then uses the same process outlined in Step 4 to assess the significance of any changes to each view's visual quality. For each view, the planner determines if there is no impact, a less than significant impact, a potentially significant impact that can be mitigated to a level of insignificance, or a significant impact that cannot be mitigated.

STEP 7: DEVELOP MITIGATION MEASURES FOR POTENTIALLY SIGNIFICANT IMPACTS

If any potentially significant impacts are found to exist in step 6, the planner evaluates whether any of them can be mitigated to a level of insignificance. If so, appropriate mitigation measures are developed, so that the potentially significant impact is reduced to a level of insignificance.

STEP 8: PREPARE VISUAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT REPORT

Finally, once the above elements are complete, the planner prepares a report summarizing the facts and findings of the process.