
3.1 - Aesthetics, Light, and Glare

3.1.1 - Introduction

This section describes the existing aesthetics, light, and glare setting and potential effects from the implementation of the Specific Plan within the Specific Plan area and its surroundings. Descriptions and analysis in this section are based on site reconnaissance by Michael Brandman Associates.

3.1.2 - Environmental Setting

Aesthetic Character

Regional Setting

The Specific Plan Area is located within the City of San Ramon within the San Ramon Valley in the East Bay region of the San Francisco Bay Area. The San Ramon Valley stretches from Alamo in the north to Dublin in the south and is characterized by low rolling foothills to the west and east. The valley bottom is mostly developed with urban uses, while significant portions of the hillsides and nearly all of the ridgelines have remained undeveloped. Mt. Diablo, elevation 3,849 feet above mean sea level, is the most prominent visual feature in the region and is located northeast of the San Ramon Valley. West of the City limits is Wiedemann Hill, elevation 1,850 feet above main sea level. Most of the prominent western slopes of Wiedemann Hill are undeveloped and contain clusters of oak woodlands. Within the city limits are the Dougherty Hills, which separate the San Ramon Valley from the Dougherty Valley to the east. The sides and ridgelines of the Dougherty Hills contain urban development, mostly notably the Canyon Lakes Golf Course and the Canyon Lakes commercial center. Additional development on the sides and ridgelines of the Dougherty Hills is associated with the Old Ranch area in the southern portion of the City limits. Other local topographic features include Las Trampas Ridge, the Sherbourne Hills, the Black Hills, and Highland Peak.

Local Setting

San Ramon is a suburban community of more than 73,000 residents, 26,000 dwelling units, and 16.4 million square feet of non-residential square footage. Urban development is generally concentrated within the city limits, which total 18.43 square miles, and it encompasses San Ramon Valley, Dougherty Valley, and the lower slopes of the Westside foothills and the Dougherty Hills.

Specific Plan Area

The Specific Plan area encompasses approximately 295 gross acres in the northern portion of the City of San Ramon. The Specific Plan area contains more than 100 individual parcels ranging in area from less than 3,000 square feet to more than 1 million square feet. Most of the parcels are developed with existing commercial uses (office, retail, and service). Notable uses include Crow Canyon Commons Shopping Center; the Toyota parts distribution facility; the Bishop Ranch 6, 11, and 12 office complexes; Norris Technology Center; the Pacific Gas and Electric Company (PG&E) Conference Center; the Legacy Plaza office complex; the San Ramon Valley Unified School District

Maintenance Facility; and the former RMC Pacific Materials cement plant site¹. Within the Specific Plan boundaries, there are approximately 3,395,000 square feet of existing buildings. Exhibit 2-3a and 2-3b provide photographs of the Specific Plan area.

Surrounding Land Uses

West

Interstate 680 (I-680) forms the western boundary of the Specific Plan area. The freeway consists of four travel lanes and an auxiliary lane in each direction, for a total of 10 lanes. West of I-680 is the San Ramon Valley Boulevard corridor, which generally consists of automobile-oriented commercial uses (vehicle repair and maintenance, gas stations, fast food restaurants with drive-thrus, etc.).

North

Fostoria Way, which demarcates the boundary between the City of San Ramon and the Town of Danville, forms the northern boundary of the Specific Plan area. The roadway is a divided four lane facility with landscaped median between Crow Canyon Place/Camino Ramon (North) and Camino Ramon (South), and undivided two-lane facility east of Camino Ramon (South). Land uses to the north consist of the Castle Square shopping center (anchored by Costco) and medium-density residential (townhouse) uses.

East

The Iron Horse Trail, Alcosta Boulevard, and Camino Ramon form the eastern boundary of the Specific Plan area. The Iron Horse Trail, a Class I bicycle/pedestrian facility, demarcates the eastern boundary between Fostoria Way and Crow Canyon Road; Alcosta Boulevard, a divided four-lane roadway with landscaped median, forms the boundary between Crow Canyon Road and Norris Canyon Road; and Camino Ramon, an undivided four lane roadway with a center two-way left-turn lane, serves as the boundary between Norris Canyon Road and Executive Parkway. Land uses to the east consist of the PG&E Technological and Ecological Services Research Laboratory, residential uses, and the Bishop Ranch 9 office complex.

South

Norris Canyon Road and Executive Parkway form the southern boundary of the Specific Plan area. Norris Canyon Road, an undivided four-lane facility, demarcates the boundary between Alcosta Boulevard and Camino Ramon; and Executive Parkway, a divided two-lane facility with landscaped median, forms the boundary between Camino Ramon and Bishop Drive. Land uses to the south consist of the Bishop Ranch 9 and Bishop Ranch 15 office complexes and the AT&T campus.

Designated Resources

The San Ramon General Plan designates ridgelines above 500 feet and creeks as resources intended for protection. No such resources are located within the Specific Plan area.

¹ At the time of Draft EIR release, this site is being redeveloped as a 125-unit residential development known as St. James Place.

State Scenic Highways

The 29.9-mile segment of I-680 between Mission Boulevard in Fremont and State Route 24 in Walnut Creek is classified as an “Officially Designated” State Scenic Highway. The entire segment of I-680 that is located adjacent to the Specific Plan area is within this designation.

Generally, views of surrounding ridgelines and hillsides are available from I-680 near the Specific Plan area.

Light and Glare

The Specific Plan area contains numerous sources of light and glare. Examples of light and glare include streetlights, freestanding lights, building-mounted lights, illuminated signage, reflective building materials, and vehicular headlights. Areas surrounding the Specific Plan area also contain numerous sources of light and glare, similar to those of the Specific Plan area.

3.1.3 - Regulatory Framework

State

California Scenic Highway Program

The California Scenic Highway Program is intended to preserve and protect scenic highway corridors from change that would diminish the aesthetic value of lands adjacent to highways. 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. A scenic corridor is the land generally adjacent to and visible from the highway and is identified using a motorist’s line of vision. The corridor protection program seeks to encourage quality development that does not degrade the scenic value of the corridor. Minimum requirements for scenic corridor protection include:

- Regulation of land use and density of development
- Detailed land and site planning
- Control of outdoor advertising (including a ban on billboards)
- Careful attention to and control of earthmoving and landscaping
- Careful attention to design and appearance of structures and equipment

Local

City of San Ramon

General Plan 2030

The City of San Ramon General Plan 2030 sets forth the following guiding and implementing policies related to scenic vistas, visual character, and light and glare:

- **Implementing Policy 2.3.I-16:** Use development standards to minimize adverse visual effects of transportation infrastructure.

- **Guiding Policy 3.1-G-1:** Manage the City’s growth in a way that balances existing and planned transportation facilities, protection of open space and ridgelines, provision of diverse housing options, and the preservation of high quality community facilities and services.
- **Implementing Policy 3.1-I-2:** Work with Contra Costa County and appropriate agencies to preserve, protect, and enhance open space and ridgelines within the City’s Planning Area, and to establish contiguous open space areas along the edges of San Ramon.
- **Guiding Policy 4.6-G-1:** Foster a pattern of development that enhances the existing character of the City, and encourages land use concepts that contribute to the design of the community.
- **Implementing Policy 4.6-I-9:** Require residential development to employ creative site design and architectural quality that blends with the characteristics of each specific location and its surroundings, while incorporating 360-degree design principles.
- **Implementing Policy 4.6-I-16:** Ensure that neighborhood retail centers and commercial service buildings are compatible with the surrounding neighborhood while incorporating 360-degree design principles.
- **Implementing Policy 4.6-I-20:** Continue to refine design standards for mixed use development that will result in a high quality pedestrian-scaled environment, with one-to-four story buildings, integrated parking, street front windows and entries, and public and private open space or as provided under a separate Specific Plan process.
- **Guiding Policy 4.8-G-1:** Maintain and enhance San Ramon’s identity.
- **Implementing Policy 4.8-I-1:** Continue to develop and refine community design documents such as the San Ramon Beautification Plan, the Creek Corridor Plan, Street Beautification Plan, Street Beautification Guidelines, Architectural Review guidelines and other guidance documents to provide comprehensive design guidelines for beautification, of streetscapes creek corridors, City signs, public art, and community entries in San Ramon.
- **Implementing Policy 4.8-I-2:** Ensure that the design, location, and size of new development blends with the environment and a site’s natural features.
- **Implementing Policy 4.8-I-3:** Continue to refine citywide lighting standards to ensure appropriate illumination levels for residential, commercial, and industrial land uses, and that lighting is of a consistent character and quality while reducing light pollution.
- **Implementing Policy 4.8-I-4:** Ensure that parking facilities adequately address the community image, aesthetics and functional needs of the City.
- **Implementing Policy 4.8-I-8:** Use the development review process to ensure that new development minimizes impacts and preserves and/or enhances significant views of the natural landscape.
- **Implementing Policy 4.8-I-9:** Continue to implement landscaping guidelines for public roadways that improve their visual character.
- **Implementing Policy 4.8-I-10:** Continue to implement gateway treatments for City entries that help residents and visitors know they have arrived in San Ramon.

- **Implementing Policy 4.8-I-11:** Require new office and commercial development to provide outdoor art that is clearly visible to the public or contribute to a citywide public art program through the development of an in lieu fee program.
- **Implementing Policy 4.8-I-12:** Encourage attractive, drought-tolerant landscaping on private property that is suitable for San Ramon’s climate.
- **Implementing Policy 4.8-I-13:** Require appropriate landscape treatment for public rights-of-way in all new residential, office, and commercial development.
- **Implementing Policy 4.8-I-14:** Ensure that businesses provide signs that are attractive and consistent with neighboring commercial uses, minimize visual clutter from roadways and other public areas, and, where possible, cannot be seen from residential neighborhoods.
- **Implementing Policy 4.8-I-15:** Maintain attractive and distinctive street identification signs for all areas of the City.
- **Implementing Policy 4.8-I-16:** Continue to refine urban design standards in the Zoning Ordinance as needed for large-scale office development to promote smart growth principles while minimizing negative impacts on adjacent properties.
- **Implementing Policy 4.8-I-17:** Modify the City Zoning Ordinance to include sun access plane requirements and provide provisions for encroachments into the sun access plane to allow architectural flexibility.
- **Implementing Policy 4.8-I-18:** As part of development proposals, encourage public access to creeks as scenic visual and passive recreational amenities in a manner consistent with need of applicable resource agencies to provide creek and habitat protection.
- **Implementing Policy 4.8-I-19:** Continue to provide park and recreational amenities that combine well designed buildings, recreational equipment and playing fields, and complementary landscaping at key locations throughout the City.
- **Implementing Policy 4.8-I-20:** Require all walls and fences to be designed to minimize visual monotony.
- **Implementing Policy 8.3-I-13:** Develop viewshed criteria to determine how to manage views of the natural hillsides surrounding San Ramon.
- **Implementing Policy 11.21-G-2:** Create safe and aesthetically pleasing neighborhoods, and provide adequate housing to meet the needs of all household types and income groups.
- **Implementing Policy 11.2-I-7:** Ensure that the design, scale, and buffering of housing retains the character of the surrounding neighborhood.

3.1.4 - Methodology

Michael Brandman Associates (MBA) evaluated potential project impacts on aesthetics, light, and glare through site reconnaissance and review of applicable plans and policies. MBA personnel visited the project site and surrounding area on multiple occasions between 2009 and 2011 to document the site conditions through photographs and notation. The City of San Ramon General Plan 2030 and the proposed North Camino Ramon Specific Plan were reviewed to determine applicable policies and design requirements for the proposed project. The assessment of visual and light and glare impacts

was largely guided by the standards set forth in the City’s adopted documents, as well as MBA’s experience with these analytical areas.

3.1.5 - Thresholds of Significance

According to Appendix G, Environmental Checklist of the CEQA Guidelines, aesthetics impacts resulting from the implementation of the proposed project would be considered significant if the project would:

- a) Have a substantial adverse effect on a scenic vista? (Refer to Section 7, Effects Found Not To Be Significant.)
- b) Substantially damage scenic resources, including, but not limited to, trees, rock outcroppings, and historic building within a state scenic highway?
- c) Substantially degrade the existing visual character or quality of the site and its surroundings?
- d) Create a new source of substantial light or glare which would adversely affect day or nighttime views in the area?

3.1.6 - Project Impacts and Mitigation Measures

This section discusses potential impacts associated with the development of the project and provides mitigation measures where appropriate.

State Scenic Highways

Impact AES-1: Development and land use activities contemplated by the Specific Plan would not degrade scenic resources within the viewshed of a State Scenic Highway.

Impact Analysis

I-680 is designated as an “officially designated” State Scenic Highway and serves as the Specific Plan’s western boundary. Generally, views of surrounding ridgelines and hillsides are available from I-680. There are no billboards along I-680 along the western side of the Specific Plan area.

The Specific Plan would allow higher-density mixed-uses to be developed along the freeway. The Specific Plan boundaries contain existing urban development; therefore, redevelopment of these properties as contemplated by the plan would maintain the urban character of this area. The Specific Plan would allow buildings to be constructed to heights of 85 feet or five stories (whichever is less); however, there several multi-story buildings adjacent to the freeway (e.g., Legacy Plaza) that are of similar height and this would not represent a significant visual change to the freeway viewshed. Finally, the Specific Plan sets forth Design Guidelines (see discussion in Impact AES-2) that would ensure that the development contemplated by the Specific Plan implements a contemporary design that is compatible with I-680’s status as a State Scenic Highway. As such, development and land use activities contemplated by the Specific Plan would not have significant adverse effects on State Scenic Highways. Impacts would be less than significant.

Level of Significance Before Mitigation

Less than significant impact.

Mitigation Measures

No mitigation is necessary.

Level of Significance After Mitigation

Less than significant impact.

Visual Character

Impact AES-2: Development and land use activities contemplated by the Specific Plan would not degrade the visual character of the Specific Plan area or its surroundings.

Impact Analysis

The Specific Plan would facilitate the redevelopment of the 295-gross-acre plan area to support as much as 6,720,000 square feet of commercial and residential development. Buildout of the Specific Plan would fundamentally alter the visual character of the plan boundaries, although this change in itself is not considered significant unless the quality of viewscape is substantially diminished.

This impact analysis will assess the proposed project’s potential visual character impacts in several ways, including assessment of the existing visual conditions, evaluation of the proposed Specific Plan’s development standards and design guidelines for land use and development, and the visual compatibility of the project with its surroundings. Each subject will be discussed separately.

Existing Visual Conditions

As previously discussed, the Specific Plan area contains more than 100 individual parcels ranging in area from less than 3,000 square feet to more than 1 million square feet. Most of the parcels are developed with existing commercial uses (office, retail, and service). Notable uses include Crow Canyon Commons Shopping Center; the Toyota parts distribution facility; the Bishop Ranch 6, 11, and 12 office complexes; Norris Technology Center; the PG&E Conference Center; the Legacy Plaza office complex; the San Ramon Valley Unified School District Maintenance Facility; and the former RMC Pacific Materials cement plant site. In total, the Special Plan area contains close to 3.4 million square of existing commercial development, most of which was developed in the last four decades. More importantly, there are no significant natural features (creeks, ridgelines, forested areas, meadows, etc.) or significant historic resources within the Specific Plan boundaries. As such, the Specific Plan area can be characterized as fully committed to contemporary urban use.

Development Standards and Design Guidelines

The proposed Specific Plan sets forth development standards and design Guidelines that will apply to new development within the plan boundaries.

The following development standards pertain to all new development and land use activities that occur pursuant to the plan:

- Minimum Lot Size: 80,000 square feet (Minimum width: 200 feet)
- Height Limit: 85 feet or five stores (whichever is less)
- Floor Area Ratio: Maximum of 0.70 average for entire Specific Plan Area
- Residential Density: Minimum 20 units per acre

The Specific Plan sets forth development standards for each sub-area in Chapter 6.

The following design guidelines to promote development and land use activities that reflect the Vision of the Specific Plan. The intent of these Design Guidelines is to:

- Encourage a diversity of project types and land use mixes
- Avoid trendy designs in favor of timeless building styles
- Emphasize ground floor interest and detail to encourage a pedestrian environment
- Enhance a sense of inter-connectivity between buildings and neighborhoods within the Specific Plan Area
- Enhance the connectivity and visual relationships between buildings and public spaces
- Encourage visual diversity
- Emphasize a human scale
- Encourage sustainability, Green Building design, and energy efficiency

The Design Guidelines do not require a single architectural style; however, there is an expectation that design forms, materials, and details will be respectful of their neighbors, and that buildings will adhere to the Architectural Design Principles (see below). Architectural Review will be required for all new development projects to ensure consistency with these Guidelines and overall Specific Plan Vision.

The architectural form and details of buildings are generally determined by the uses they are designed to accommodate, their frontage orientation, and parking needs.

The following basic architectural principles are applicable to new developments:

1. Building heights, window patterns, and colors shall be varied along any single block frontage.
2. Roof lines shall be varied along block frontages by height and/or roof form variation.
3. Building walls and details shall be organized into a clearly identifiable base, middle, and top.
4. Architectural forms, materials, and details shall be carried around all sides of a building.

5. Architectural scaling elements, such as banding, belt coursing, bay windows, balconies, sills, lintels, mullions, and changes in texture, and pattern, shall be used to break up the appearance of large building forms.
6. Facade depths shall be varied utilizing a combination of techniques including projecting elements (e.g., pilasters and bay windows), wall plane offsets, and recessed windows.
7. High quality materials along with special accent materials and design details shall be incorporated into all first floor facades and paving areas abutting pedestrian walkways.
8. Exterior walls greater than 40 feet in length shall incorporate textures, details, or other architectural elements to avoid flat, monolithic facades.
9. Parking shall be visually screened from public view.
10. Trash enclosures, loading areas and utility structures shall be integrated into the building design using materials and details from the main structure palette.
11. All rooftop equipment shall be visually screened from public view with roofs or with parapets, walls, or enclosures utilizing materials drawn from the building's facade palette.
12. Integrate pedestrian and architectural lighting into the buildings and streetscape design to provide for pedestrian safety and accent architecture and landscape within the Plan Area.

The Specific Plan sets forth design guidelines for each end use in Chapter 7.

In sum, the Specific Plan sets forth comprehensive development standards and design guidelines that would ensure that new development and land use activities provide contemporary design that is visually compatible with the Specific Plan's vision for the project site and surrounding land uses.

Visual Compatibility with Surrounding Land Uses

The Specific Plan boundaries are surrounded by urban uses on all sides. Surrounding land uses include I-680 and the San Ramon Valley Boulevard corridor (west), the Castle Square retail center and residential uses located within the Town of Danville (north), residential uses and the San Ramon Regional Medical Center (east), and the Bishop Ranch Business Park (south). All of the surrounding land uses are characterized by contemporary development.

The proposed Specific Plan would maintain consistency with the surrounding commercial and residential uses in terms of end uses and design characteristics and, therefore, would be visually compatible.

Conclusion

Although the buildout of the Specific Plan would result in significant visual change to the plan area, the development and land use activities contemplated by the plan would achieve a high-quality design

that would be visually compatible with surrounding land uses. As such, impacts would be less than significant.

Level of Significance Before Mitigation

Less than significant impact.

Mitigation Measures

No mitigation is necessary.

Level of Significance After Mitigation

Less than significant impact.

Light and Glare

Impact AES-3: **Development and land use activities contemplated by the Specific Plan would not create new sources of light and glare that may adversely affect views.**

Impact Analysis

The Specific Plan boundaries currently contain approximately 3.4 million square feet of development, which emit existing sources of light and glare, including sources that illuminated continuously during the nighttime hours (e.g., parking lot lighting). Generally, most land uses within the Specific Plan boundaries are illuminated during the nighttime hours, including nearly all surface parking areas.

The Specific Plan contemplates the redevelopment of the plan to support as much as 6.72 million square feet of commercial and residential development or a net increase of 3.32 million square feet relative to existing conditions. A potential benefit of the Specific Plan would be the replacement of surface parking lots—which generally involve the continuous illumination of large expanses of area with high-intensity lighting—with structured parking and on-street parking—which generally involve illumination of smaller areas with lower-intensity lighting. Additionally, the redevelopment of existing commercial properties to residential use would also be expected to result in net reductions in lighting intensity. As such, impacts would be less than significant.

Level of Significance Before Mitigation

Less than significant impact.

Mitigation Measures

No mitigation is necessary.

Level of Significance After Mitigation

Less than significant impact.