

# 4.1 | AESTHETIC RESOURCES

## INTRODUCTION

This section identifies aesthetic resources that offer visual and appealing views of natural landscapes and the built environment. The analysis includes the current environmental setting of aesthetic resources and an analysis of potential impacts of the CGPU.

## EXISTING CONDITIONS

### ENVIRONMENTAL BASELINE CONDITIONS

The CGPU Planning Area environmental baseline conditions outline the current physical ‘on-the-ground’ conditions of the Planning Area at the time the NOP was prepared. The Planning Area is located within the eastern portion of the Coachella Valley, which is defined as a low and relatively flat desert basin bounded by mountainous terrain. The mountain ranges surrounding the area include the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains to the southwest and west, and the Little San Bernardino Mountains to the north and northeast. The surrounding mountains range from 3,000 to 9,000 feet, with peaks ranging to over 11,000 feet (San Geronio peak).<sup>1</sup> The overall valley gradient is from northwest to the Salton Sea with a current surface elevation of approximately 220-feet below mean sea level. The Coachella Valley is surrounded by the Santa Rosa Mountains (Toro Peak, 8,715 feet) approximately 5 miles southwest. The north and northeast portion of the valley is defined by the Little San Bernardino Mountains (up to 5,267 feet) approximately 2 miles to the northeast. The Orocopia Mountains (up to 5,267 feet) and the Chocolate Mountains (up to 2,988 feet) are located more than 10 miles to the southeast of the City and do not contribute aesthetically to the Planning Area.

### TOPOGRAPHY

The topography of the Study Area ranges in elevation from 1,400 feet in the Mecca Hills to the east, to about 160 feet below sea level south of the community of Thermal. The predominant aesthetic and scenic resources of the Study Area are open spaces to the east (Little San Bernardino Mountains

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<sup>1</sup> Bureau of Land Management, “Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument”, 2011; and US Geological Survey Quadrangle Maps.

Figure 4.1-1: Calhoun Street; Looking North towards Mecca Hills



Figure 4.1-2: Bagduoma Park, Coachella, CA. Looking North towards Mecca Hills



“Bajada” and Mecca Hills), the distant mountain ranges to the west (San Jacinto and Santa Rosa Mountains), and the agricultural open spaces along the west side of the All-American Canal (which forms the base of the Mecca Hills in the southeast sphere). There are several natural rock outcroppings in the hillside areas of the east that provide a native desert appearance as viewed from the Valley floor. The northeastern portion of the Study Area contains the alluvial that forms the base of the Joshua Tree National Monument and the San Bernardino Mountains to the north (outside of the Study Area). The viewsheds from the upper portions of the Indio Hills and Mecca Hills towards the south include views of the Salton Sea.

Based on USGS Map, there are approximately 13,000 acres of land in the Mecca Hills area. Approximately three percent of these hillside areas have slopes in excess of 25 percent average slope or greater. Approximately eight percent of the hills contain slopes between 15 and 25 percent average slope. The remainder of the Mecca Hills slopes are 15 percent average slope or less. With the exception of the Mecca Hills, most of the Study Area is a gentle slope and are substantially flat terrain.

### **SCENIC CORRIDORS**

Although there are no highways in the Planning Area currently included on the State’s Scenic Highway System, it is recognized that certain sections of old Highway 99 (now Dillon Road between Grapefruit Blvd and Interstate 10), Old Highway 86 (Harrison Street south of Grapefruit Blvd), and Old Highway 111 (Grapefruit Boulevard) represent visual corridors that provide a glimpse into the historic context of the pre-Freeway era of the eastern Coachella Valley region. Despite the absence of a formal ‘scenic corridor’ declaration, the views from these highways still serve as an aesthetic resource for the City of Coachella, and the region the City lies within. These old highways have not been widened to their build-out capacity in the Study Area nor has much development occurring around there, and they still maintain a rural character.

The City’s Entertainment Commercial Concept Plan identifies the viewsheds from the Interstate 10, especially as the westbound traffic drivers approach the eastern Coachella Sphere of Influence. There are significant downslope views of the Coachella and Indio regions from the east towards the west. Secondary transportation corridors in the Study Area that provide scenic resources include the Highway 86-S Expressway south of Interstate 10 and the vicinity of Pierce Street and Avenue 54 where the agricultural fields provide scenic vistas towards the Thermal and Mecca communities.

### **BUILT ENVIRONMENT**

The visual character of the Planning Area includes man-made features including parks, schools, commercial, residential, industrial buildings, and infrastructure such as utility lines, arterial roadways with bridges and railroad facilities. These elements interact with the natural environment to either enhance or diminish aesthetic qualities. The scale, density and color of man-made elements can block views or cause visual clutter which degrades views. In the Planning Area, urban uses are generally limited to one and two story residential structures with limited massing. Larger commercial and industrial buildings have a mass and scale that is appropriate for the larger parcels of land on which they are located. Generally the height and massing of buildings in the Planning Area do not obstruct the views of the mountains and hillsides surrounding the Coachella Valley.

### **NIGHT SKY**

There are aesthetic resources with respect to current night skies and the ability to experience full moon illuminations in the undeveloped portions of the Planning Area. The predominance of light pollution and glare during evening hours as a result of the urbanization and standard street lighting specifications will

continue to diminish the region's dark sky qualities. The eastern portions of the study area and the Sphere of Influence areas have a predominance of agricultural open spaces, hillside areas, and undeveloped desert terrain that currently contribute little light pollution.

## REGULATORY ENVIRONMENT

The City of Coachella Municipal Code contains several provisions that are expressly designed to identify and limit aesthetic impacts as projects are undergoing review by the City. Specifically, the following provisions of the Municipal Code regulate impacts related to aesthetics, light, and glare throughout all areas of the City:

**Chapter 16.28.150(L) - Improvements and Grading:** Street lighting facilities shall be provided in accordance with the council's policy for the area of the city where the subdivision is located. Lighting shall be adequate to permit proper policing of the subdivision and shall be so screened or otherwise designed as not to interfere with views from the hillsides of the city.

**Chapter 17.56.010(J)(2)(e)-Signs: Glare From Signs.** Illuminated signs shall be designed in such a manner as to avoid undue glare or reflection of light onto private property in the surrounding area or right-of-way and shall be erected and located in a manner satisfactory to the director of community development. The intensity of lighting of sign may be reviewed in the field by the director of community development who may require the reduction of intensity.

**17.54.010 (K) - Off-Street Parking and Loading: Lighting.** Parking area lighting is not always required; however, if lighted parking areas are required parking areas, such lighting fixtures shall be located, with hoods provided and adjusted, so as to preclude the direct glare of the light from shining onto property or streets.

## ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS AND MITIGATION

### SIGNIFICANCE CRITERIA

#### Significance Thresholds to be Used for Impact Analysis

In order to assist in determining whether a project would have a significant effect on the environment, the issues presented in the Initial Study Environmental Checklist (Appendix G of the California Environmental Quality Act Guidelines) have been utilized as thresholds of significance in this section. As such, impacts resulting from the CGPU may be considered significant if they would:

- Have a substantial adverse effect on a scenic vista;
- Substantially damage scenic resources, including, but not limited to trees, rock outcroppings, and historic buildings within a state scenic highway;
- Substantially degrade the existing visual character or quality of the site and its surroundings; or
- Create a new source of substantial light or glare which would adversely affect day or nighttime views in the area.

The City of Coachella General Plan is intended to be a “self-mitigating” document, in that the proposed General Plan objectives and policies are designed to prevent or avoid impacts on the environment resulting from implementation of the proposed General Plan. As the General Plan is the constitution for all future development, all future development must comply with the General Plan if it is to be approved by the City. Each project application that is submitted to the City must be reviewed for General Plan consistency in order to be eligible for approval by the City. To that end, the relevant updated General Plan objectives and policies preventing or avoiding impacts have been identified for each resource in this section. If the applicable General Plan objectives and policies were determined to be insufficient to prevent or avoid impacts, then mitigation measures have been provided. These mitigation measures have been written as policy statements that would be incorporated into the final General Plan. Each impact discussion includes a determination as to whether any impacts would be less than significant, would be mitigated to a level of less than significant, or would remain significant and unavoidable.

## SCENIC VISTAS

*Impact 4.1-1: Would the project have a substantial adverse effect on a scenic vista?*

**Significance: Less than significant.**

An adverse effect under CEQA could occur if new development would block or substantially change views of scenic vistas.

Within the Planning Area, scenic vistas provide valuable aesthetic resources, including expansive landscape views of the Coachella Valley, to the residents and patrons of the City and Sphere of Influence. Scenic vistas within the Planning Area include the sweeping views of the Mecca Hills in the eastern portion of the Planning Area. Additional scenic vistas that are not within the Planning Area, but can be seen from within the Planning Area, include the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains, which can be viewed to the west and southwest of the Planning Area, and Little San Bernardino Mountains, which can be viewed to the north and northwest of the Planning Area. Existing views of Coachella Valley mountain ranges as shown by in Figure 4.1-1 and 4.1-2. Under the development of the CGPU, scenic vistas within the Planning Area are to remain largely undeveloped, or only have very minimal residential development. Scenic resources are located within subarea 13, 14, 16 and 17, and are planned for minimal impact development of preserved land under the CGPU subarea designations. Development under the CGPU would occur mostly in the western portion of the City where the majority of population and development exists today.

In order to protect scenic resources, the CGPU includes several policies to guide future development so as to limit impacts to views of scenic resources, such as adding design restrictions for billboards along freeways, and preserving important aesthetic resources including agriculture land uses, open space, rock outcroppings, and important landmarks. These policies would protect aesthetic resources in the Planning Area by restricting large structures from obstructing views and by preserving aesthetically important landscape features. These policies would prevent unsightly billboards and development on, or blocking views of, landmarks and other aesthetics features in the region and Planning Area. Additionally, the CGPU includes policies that will limit the magnitude of change that could occur through development of the Mecca Hills. Specifically, the CGPU requires the protection and preservation of important views of the hills and mountains surrounding the City. As shown on the General Plan Designation Map in the Land Use and Community Form Element, the City is planning for lower density housing in the north and east portions of the City with ample areas set aside for open space. Lower density housing and open space will prevent impacts from occurring because this pattern would result in

a less intense use of land, which would only cause minimal change to the views of the existing open space. This land use program is further supported by policies that encourage the preservation of the natural topography and features of undeveloped and working lands in the Planning Area. Finally, the CGPU limits the impact of views from roadways by restricting new billboards along the City's roads and highways, helping to preserve transportation corridors as view corridors of the scenic vistas. The policies that will ensure the protection of scenic vistas in the Planning Area, which can be found in the Sustainability + Natural Environment Element, are as follows:

- 6.1 **View corridor preservation.** Protect and preserve existing, signature views of the hills and mountains from the City.
- 6.2 **Scenic roadways.** Minimize the impact on views by restricting new billboards along the City's roads and highways. Electronic and animated billboards should be prohibited except in rare and special circumstances.
- 10.8 **Preservation of natural land features.** Preserve significant natural features and incorporate into all developments. Such features may include ridges, rock outcroppings, natural drainage courses, wetland and riparian areas, steep topography, important or landmark trees and views.
- 10.9 **Working lands.** Encourage the preservation of agricultural and other working lands as important aesthetic and open space resources of Coachella.

With the implementation of the GP policies discussed above and the land use program proposed by the CGPU, future development would result in less than significant impacts to scenic resources within the Planning Area and views from the Planning Area of scenic vistas surrounding the Planning Area.

### **Mitigation Measures**

No mitigation measures are necessary.

## **SCENIC RESOURCES**

*Impact 4.1-2: Would the project substantially damage scenic resources, including, but not limited to trees, rock outcroppings, and historic buildings within a state scenic highway?*

### **Significance: No impact.**

Scenic resources including trees, rock outcroppings, and scenic highways within the view sheds of state scenic highways provide aesthetic and visual appeal for residents and visitors of the Planning Area. Similarly, scenic routes provide valuable visual relief to travelers. Generally, new development proposed for areas around scenic resources could impact views from state scenic highways. However,

Currently there are no designated, or eligible, State Scenic Highways within the Planning Area. Major historic highways within the Planning Area include old Highway 99 (now Dillon Road between Grapefruit Blvd and Interstate 10), Old Highway 86 (Harrison Street south of Grapefruit Blvd), and Old Highway 111 (Grapefruit Boulevard), and Highway 86-S Expressway south of Interstate 10. Though there are no designated State Scenic Highways, the listed policies outlined below are from the Sustainability and Natural Environment Element of the CGPU are proposed to preserve and protect corridor preservation and minimize aesthetic obstruction of billboards along these highways.

- 6.2 **Scenic roadways.** Minimize the impact on views by restricting new billboards along the City's roads and highways. Electronic and animated billboards should be prohibited except in rare and special circumstances.
- 10.9 **Working lands.** Encourage the preservation of agricultural and other working lands as important aesthetic and open space resources of Coachella.
- 13.16 **Unique features.** Encourage parks and trails to be designed to conserve scenic and natural features and encourage public awareness of Coachella's unique geography.

Nonetheless, because of the absence of State Scenic Highways in the Planning Area the CGPU would have no impact on these resources. These policies would also help protect outcroppings or other unique features in the Planning Area from being degraded or removed under the CGPU. Additionally, impacts to view sheds from the City's highways are determined to be not significant due to CGPU policies that would limit obstructions to views along highways.

#### **Mitigation Measures**

No mitigation measures are necessary.

## **VISUAL CHARACTER**

*Impact 4.1-3: Would the project substantially degrade the existing visual character or quality of the site and its surroundings?*

#### **Significance: Significant and Unavoidable impact.**

The Planning Area has a unique visual characteristic in its scenic geographical location, agricultural and rancho history, and quality architecture of historic buildings. The expected growth under the CGPU will turn Coachella into a medium-sized city with many more amenities and services to offer visitors and residents. The physical development under the CGPU could change the existing visual characteristic of the City as described below. However, careful planning and design strategies will preserve the Planning Area's unique visual characteristic.

The majority of development and density increase will occur in the western portion of the Planning Area where there is existing development. Development in the portion of the Planning Area will be limited except for some development from the La Entrada Specific Plan and resort areas. As described in the Project Description, the CGPU proposes organizing the City under seventeen different subareas, each with its own vision for its future character (refer to pages 4-66 through 4-83 of the Land Use and Community Form Element for descriptions of each subarea as well as the vision and policies proposed for achieving visual character in each area). The specific subarea visions and character are further supported by detailed guidance on the type of buildings that should be constructed in order to create the form and character sought by the CGPU. Specifically, the CGPU specifies ten different building types that would be appropriate for achieving the vision for Coachella: single-family house, duplex/triplex/quadplex house, multiplex/efficiency dwelling, rowhouse/townhouse, garden apartment, urban apartment building, main street/mixed use building, suburban retail building, office/R+D building, and industrial building.

These policies, listed below, will help preserve the existing visual character of the City where it is deemed valuable, or direct future development to either enhance the existing visual character of the City

or create a new, complementary visual character. Specifically, these policies direct new development to maintain the existing small town-character and cultural diversity of Coachella, preventing development not compatible with the existing character from being constructed. The policies identify specific urban design practices, such as the development of complete neighborhoods, preservation of agriculture and open space, pedestrian-oriented design and sustainable development practices, as methods of achieving the preservation of this character. Further, the policies specify that the City's natural resources should be retained to help preserve visual character, which will further preserve the existing character. Finally, the policies require high-quality and long-lasting building materials and quality architecture, which will also help ensure quality visual character in the community by preventing the construction of bland, poor quality buildings. The following policies outlined by the Land Use and Community Form Element would guide future development to preserve visual character of the Project Area:

- 2.2 **Character and identity.** Strive to maintain the City of Coachella's existing small-town character, identity, and cultural diversity as development occurs in the future.
- 2.3 **Urban design as identity.** Recognize that the City can differentiate itself from other Coachella Valley cities through urban design practices such as the development of complete neighborhoods, preservation of agriculture and open space, pedestrian-oriented design and sustainable development practices.
- 2.4 **Natural context.** Retain the City's natural infrastructure and visual character derived from topography, farmlands, and waterway corridors.
- 2.5 **High quality construction and architecture.** Require high-quality and long-lasting building materials on all new development projects in the City. Encourage innovative and quality architecture in the City with all new public and private projects.

The CGPU proposed extensive policies, design guidelines and development strategies that would reduce impacts to aesthetics resources. However, based on the overall scale of growth under the CGPU, there is potential for significant impacts to the visual character of the City. Under the GCPU the population is expected to more than double, which would change the visual makeup of the Planning Area by 2035. This population projection is set by the Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG), and can be said that this growth would happen with or without the proposed CGPU. Furthermore, it is important to note that the CGPU does propose many more policies to maintain and enhance visual characteristics of the Planning Area and considers the growth projections into its policies as much as possible. Despite these policies, the scale of growth alone would cause changes to the visual character of the Planning Area. Though the growth scale could occur with or without the CGPU, and the impacts under the CGPU are considered significant and unavoidable.

### **Mitigation Measures**

No mitigation measures are necessary.

## LIGHT INTRUSION AND GLARE

*Impact 4.1-4: Would the project create a new source of substantial light or glare which would adversely affect day or nighttime views in the area?*

**Significance: Less than significant.**

Glare or light intrusion occurs when poorly directed light shines or spills over into areas where it is unwanted or overly bright. Glare in the Planning Area can prevent views of the nighttime sky, have adverse effects on wildlife that rely on nighttime sky to regulate sleeping and eating schedules, and create nuisance situations for community members both during the day through reflection of light off of reflective surfaces and at night through light spills. Nighttime glare occurs when lighting forms a glow of light rays reaching natural environments prevent natural darkness to cover the landscape. This glare can be created by numerous sources including security lights, street lights and light radiating from buildings through windows or exterior landscaping lights. Nighttime glare and light intrusion be easily minimized through the selection of appropriate lighting and light shields that limit light spill from individual properties.

Currently, nighttime glare exists only in the western portion of the City where dense neighborhoods are a source of nighttime lights. This lighting effects nighttime views, and sometimes creates a glare for exterior land that is less developed and has less nighttime light sources. In the eastern portion of the Planning Area, nighttime glare is minimal or non-existent. This is made possible by the low occurrence of light sources largely due to the amount of open space and agricultural land covering the eastern areas.

As development occurs under the CGPU additional sources of light will also be created in the central and eastern portions of the Planning Area as agricultural lands are converted to urban uses to accommodate the growing population. New development would introduce new light sources that are typical of urban development projects. The new urban uses would include light sources such as street and parking lot lighting, landscape lighting, illuminated signs, exterior lighting on lamps and buildings, and automobile lighting (i.e., headlights). Future residential, commercial, mixed-use, school, and park uses would require the installation of outdoor lighting necessary for recreation maintenance, public safety, and security, particularly the medium- and high-density dwelling units and ball fields associated with the parks and schools. Subarea 16 and 17, however, would be preserved for open space or agriculture use until 2035 and minor lighting is planned in these areas.

While the new development under the CGPU would add new lighting sources to the Planning Area, the number and type of lighting sources is not anticipated to substantially differ from that commonly utilized at existing developments within the City. However, because much of the Planning Area is currently relatively undeveloped with little to no existing light sources, the proposed CGPU is anticipated to introduce a substantial amount of light and glare sources, where none previously existed. New lighting is expected to be added to all sub areas except for subarea 16 and 17, as these subareas would be preserved for open space.

Exterior surfaces of proposed structures within Planning Area are typically finished with a combination of architectural coatings, trim, and/or other building materials such as stucco, wood, concrete, and brushed metal; materials which do not reflect substantive amounts of light. Policy 2.7, listed below, requires that climate appropriate materials such as these continue to be used in future development. Thus, future development is not expected to substantially increase the amount of daytime glare in the Planning Area.

All new development in the City is required to adhere to lighting requirements contained in the City's Zoning Code. Chapter 16.28.150(L) (Improvements and Grading); Chapter 17.56.010(J)(2)(e); (Signs); and 17.54.010 (K) (Off-Street Parking and Loading). These measures are uniformly applied to all development in the City with the express purpose of limiting light and glare impacts. As such, adherence to the Zoning Code would be mandatory and enforceable upon approval of any new project plans. Adherence to the City's Zoning Code and subdivision ordinances that strictly limit light-related impacts of potential light spillover through shielding and screening and would ensure that any building or parking lot lighting would not significantly impact adjacent uses through light spill. Furthermore, Policy 6.5, listed below, would further reduce potential spillover light-related impacts of new projects by requiring new light sources to be limited so as to prevent light-related impacts.

The new development could contribute to additional nighttime glare, however the following policy from the Land Use and Community Form Element and Sustainability + Natural Environment Element addresses nighttime glare:

- 6.5     **Dark sky.** Limit light pollution from outdoor sources, especially in rural, hillside and mountain areas, and open spaces, to maintain darkness for night sky viewing.

Thus, because of the Municipal Code requirements that regulate light and glare and because of the proposed CGPU policy that would further limit light and glare impacts, which, together will limit light trespass and night time light pollution, new lighting sources associated with new urban development would not significantly affect existing conditions in the Planning Area. Under the development of the CGPU, the creation of new light or glare sources would have a less than significant impact.

### **Mitigation Measures**

No mitigation measures are necessary.

## **CUMULATIVE IMPACTS**

Because the proposed project is a CGPU, which takes into account existing and potential development over approximately the next twenty years, the analysis of aesthetic-related impacts contained within this chapter of the EIR is already cumulative in nature. The analysis uses this basis for cumulative impacts because the scope of cumulative aesthetics impacts are largely defined by the viewsheds of the hills and mountains surrounding the Coachella Valley. The Coachella Valley currently has a population of approximately 500,000. According to the 2035 Regional Transportation Plan, the 2035 population of the Coachella Valley will grow by nearly 400,000 people to 884,000. This growth will be accommodated through the construction of approximately 25,000 new residential units in the Coachella Valley. The increase in population growth, and the increase in developed area necessary to accommodate that growth, will result in a substantial change in the visual character of the Coachella Valley as large swaths of undeveloped desert and agricultural land are converted to urban uses and substantial numbers of new sources of light and glare are introduced. This substantial change in the visual characteristics of the Coachella Valley will likely result in a significant, cumulative impacts to all aesthetics resources across the valley including views, visual character, and light and glare.

The growth of the City of Coachella under the CGPU will result in approximately 94,000 new residents. While the CGPU strongly promotes compact, walkable development, the City will still contribute more than 20% of the new growth in the Coachella Valley. Thus, the City will have a cumulatively significant contribution to the valley wide aesthetic impacts and the CGPU would have a cumulative significant aesthetic impact to the visual character of the valley, the views of open space, and light and glare.

Because the nature of the impacts are directly related to the change in land uses from non-urban uses to urban uses, the only realistic mitigation beyond the policies presented in the CGPU and the regulations of the municipal code would be to restrict or prevent new growth in Coachella. Such an approach is not legally feasible because it would severely impact property rights and increase the cost of housing. As such, no further mitigation is possible.

## **SIGNIFICANT AND UNAVOIDABLE IMPACTS**

Aesthetic resources within the Planning Area provide a valuable finite resource that contributes to the attraction and quality of life in the Planning Area. Protection of these resources is important, however some changes are seen as unavoidable. Based on the analysis above, it has been determined the visual character of the Planning Area would have significant and unavoidable impacts under the CGPU. The scale of growth through 2035 does not lend variance in changes in the visual character of the City, as this growth would significantly change the landscape of the Planning Area. Additionally, implementation of the CGPU would result in significant unavoidable cumulative impacts to aesthetic resources within the Coachella Valley.

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