

VISUAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT

El Camino Real @ Floribunda Ave Left-Turn Channelization


September 8, 2014

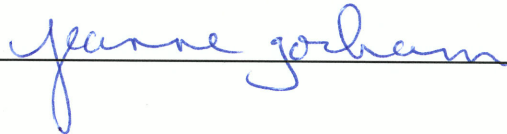
California Department of Transportation

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Statement of Compliance: Produced in compliance with National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) requirements, as appropriate, to meet the level of analysis and documentation that has been determined necessary for this project.

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PURPOSE OF STUDY AND ASSESSMENT METHOD

The purpose of this Visual Impact Assessment (VIA) is to document potential visual impacts caused by the proposed project and propose measures to lessen any detrimental impacts that are identified. Visual impacts are demonstrated by identifying visual resources in the project area, measuring the amount of change that would occur as a result of the project, and predicting how the affected public would respond to or perceive those changes. This visual impact assessment follows the guidance outlined in the publication *Visual Impact Assessment for Highway Projects* published by the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) in March 1981.

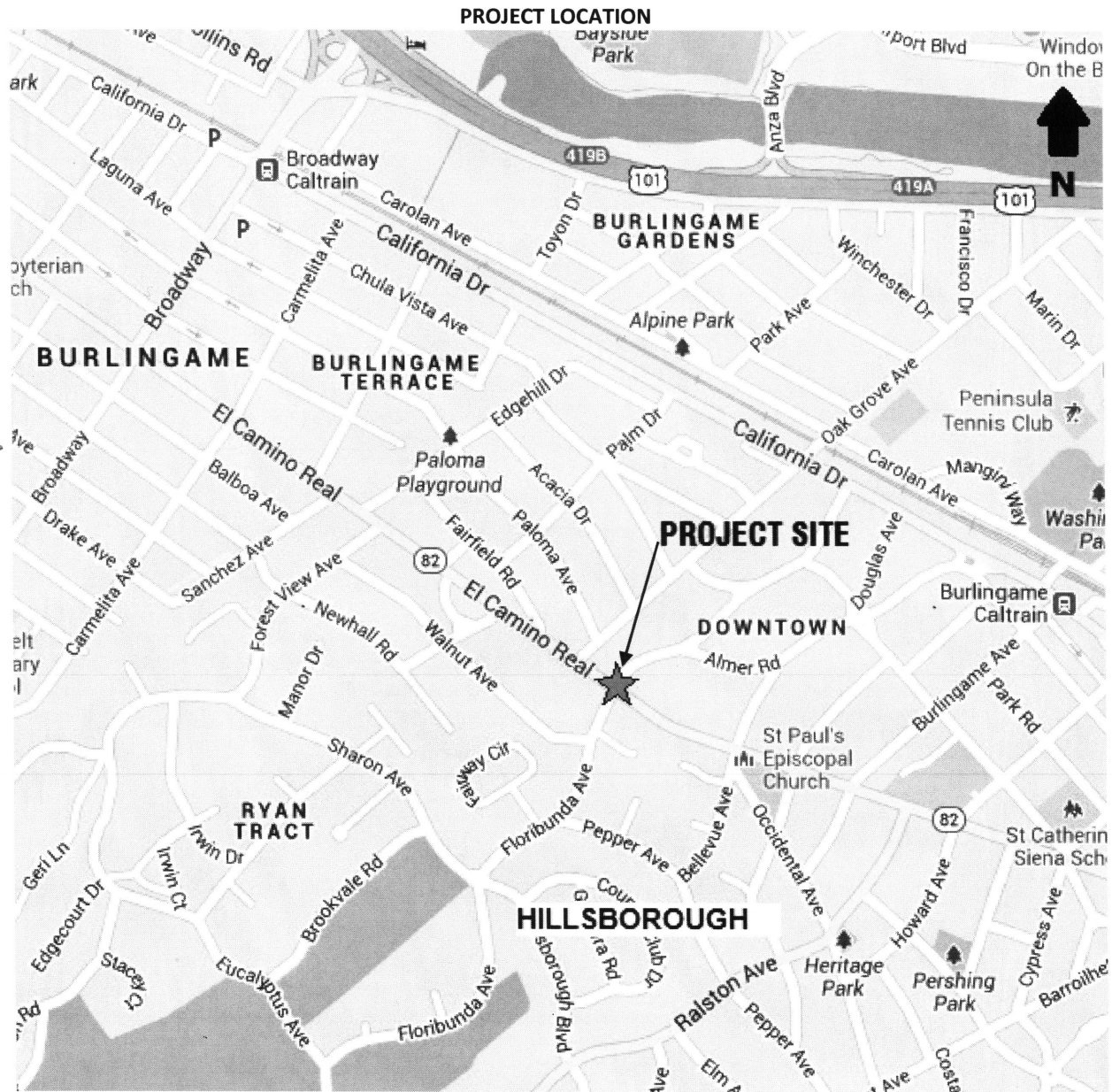
PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The project proposes to widen the intersection of State Route 82 (also known as El Camino Real), and Floribunda Ave to provide signalized, left turn lanes and left turn vehicle storage in both directions of El Camino Real (ECR). The intersection will retain two travel lanes of 11 feet, 10 foot wide left turn pockets, 1.5 foot shoulders and maintain the existing 4 foot sidewalks in both directions of El Camino Real. The majority of the work will occur within the existing State Right of Way.

In order to create the left turn lanes and storage area, the existing planter strips adjacent to the sidewalks, along El Camino Real at Floribunda Ave will be removed. North of Floribunda Ave, approximately 200 feet of the existing planter strips will be removed on both sides of El Camino Real. The multi-family townhouses on the east side will lose six moderately mature liquidambar trees. A tall hedge will be removed from in front of Centennial Park. South of Floribunda Ave, approximately 200 feet will be removed on the east side encompassing five trees and approximately 130 feet will be removed on the west, encompassing four trees. The new back of curb will be at the current sidewalk locations. In essence, the widened roadway will be located five to six feet closer to all properties. A small amount of right of way will need to be acquired in order to reconstruct the curb ramps at the northeast, northwest and southwest corners. This includes a small landscaped portion from Centennial Park on the northwest corner, and a section from the multi-family residential structures on the northeast and southeast corners. Additionally, temporary construction easements will be required from the residential properties along the east side of El Camino Real between Floribunda Ave and Bellevue Ave. Overhead utilities along the west side of El Camino Real, within the project area, will be relocated.

Replacement planting is not possible within the project limits due to space limitations and overhead utilities.

PROJECT LOCATION AND SETTING



The project location and setting provides for the context for determining the type of changes to the existing visual environment. The proposed project is located on Route 82, between Oak Grove Ave and Bellevue Ave, in the City of Burlingame and Town of Hillsborough, in San Mateo County, California. The landscape is characterized by a flat terrain with dense, urban vegetation. The land use within the project corridor is primarily urban, with heavy residential developments of single family and multi-family buildings as well as a church and an elementary school. The Town of Hillsborough Police Station, Town Hall and Town Offices are located at the project intersection.

Route 82 is a State Conventional Highway and is not designated as a Scenic Highway, nor is it listed as eligible. Under CEQA guidelines however, scenic resources are present within the project limits and will be impacted. These scenic resources are eucalyptus trees which are a part of the Howard Ralston Eucalyptus Tree Rows, currently listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The environmental review process requires an objective evaluation of scenic resources affected by a project. This review process is guided by the Standard Environmental Reference, Chapter 27 Visual and Aesthetics Review.

Chapter 27 outlines examples of what constitutes a scenic resource. Among the examples are the following:

1. A tree that displays outstanding features of form or age.
2. A landmark tree or a group of distinctive trees accented in a setting as a focus of attention.
3. An unusual planting that has historical value.
4. A feature specifically identified in applicable planning documents as having special scenic value.
5. An exceptional example of proportion, balance, rhythm and variety.
6. A vegetative or structural feature that has local, regional, or statewide importance.

The Howard Ralston Eucalyptus Tree Rows meet all the above criteria for a scenic resource.

The major project feature that will be impacted is the removal of 14 mature trees, four of which are historic eucalyptus trees from the Howard-Ralston Eucalyptus Tree Rows, planted between 1873 and 1876. The tree row was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 2012, under Criteria A and C; criterion A, for their association with the founding of the City of Burlingame and the Town of Hillsborough, and criterion C, as an example of master landscape designer John McLaren's early work. The tree rows highlight McLaren's foresight into roadway beautification and accentuate the historical significance of El Camino Real as the primary route of travel from San Francisco to what is now known as the Peninsula. The tree rows are also a predecessor to the California Highway Tree Planting Program which began 48 years later, in 1921.

The Howard-Ralston Eucalyptus Tree Rows, when originally planted, spanned 4 miles in length from San Mateo to Hillsborough as a tunnel of eucalyptus and elm trees. Due to urbanization, this scenic resource has been reduced to 2.2 miles residing predominantly within the City of Burlingame, with a smaller section within the Town of Hillsborough.

There has been a history of protection by the community and the City of Burlingame, for the tree rows dating back to 1908. The portion of the tree row within Burlingame was designated as a "Heritage Grove" in 1975 by the City of Burlingame. The San Mateo Historic Sites Committee designated the tree rows as a "Point of Historic Significance" within Burlingame.

Beginning in early 2003 Caltrans along with the City of Burlingame and the Burlingame Historical Society, began replacing any historical eucalyptus removed, primarily due to safety reasons, with contributing elms (*Ulmus* 'Morton', common name Accolade elms) to maintain the visual integrity of the tree rows along El Camino Real.

Within the project area along El Camino Real, from just north of Oak Grove Ave to just north of Bellevue Ave, the Howard Ralston Eucalyptus Tree Rows are heavily intact except for a one block long section on

both sides of El Camino Real, between Oak Grove Ave and Floribunda Ave. This block consists of the Hillsborough Town Hall and police department to the west, and multifamily townhouses to the east. The west side, south of Floribunda, is characterized as very natural with dense vegetation, both trees and large shrubs, and no sidewalk, but rather an informal trail created by pedestrians seeking a path along the western side. On the east side of El Camino Real, between Oak Grove Road and Floribunda Ave, Liquidambar trees have been planted adjacent to residential townhomes, currently heavily landscaped. South of Floribunda Ave, historical eucalyptus trees line pedestrian sidewalks adjacent to high-density, residential apartments and condominiums.

VISUAL RESOURCES AND RESOURCE CHANGE

Visual resources of the project setting are defined and identified below by assessing *visual character* and *visual quality* in the project corridor. *Resource change* is assessed by evaluating the visual character and the visual quality of the visual resources that comprise the project corridor before and after the construction of the proposed project.

- The visual character of the proposed project will be compatible with the existing visual character of the corridor. In terms of form, line, color, and texture, the current elements are a mixture of urban development, urban landscape, and remnants of the historic eucalyptus rows. The historic eucalyptus trees create a definitive statement rising up and above the roadway by as much as one hundred feet (100') as well as over the tallest structures along El Camino Real. Their trunks, which in most cases exceed six feet in diameter, stand as sentries along El Camino Real, and hide utility poles. The smooth, peeling bark and tall canopy of these trees create a sense of place within an urban forest, in an otherwise man-made concrete and asphalt setting.

The project proposes to remove four eucalyptus trees, two from each corner south of Floribunda Avenue. Their removal widens the existing gap within the historic stand of trees by (300') three hundred feet on the West side of El Camino Real, and (400') four hundred feet on the East side of El Camino Real.

Additionally five liquidambar trees on the northeast side of El Camino Real and Floribunda Avenue will be removed. These trees function as street trees, and provide an enhanced vegetative buffer between the multifamily residential buildings and the street. The loss of the liquidambar row creates a block-long gap in the line of street trees.

In spite of the project's tree removal, the street environment retains its landscaped character due to the substantial trees and shrubs within the neighboring properties, and the visibility of the eucalyptus tree row further along the street.

The visual quality of the existing corridor will be moderately affected by the loss of the trees and the widened intersection. Vividness, described as the visual power or memorability of landscape components as they combine in distinctive visual patterns, will be moderately altered as a result of the tree removals. The removed eucalyptus trees will be notable especially since each individual tree maintains a distinctive presence; and the loss of the liquidambar trees lessens the experiential quality of a tree-lined street. Overall, the project area retains a strong urban landscape of mixed trees and shrubs.

The intactness, described as the visual integrity of the natural and man-made landscape and its freedom from encroaching elements, will be only marginally impacted since the project changes are consistent

with the area's urban landscape. The project area remains a mixture of urban development, urban landscape, and remnants of the historic eucalyptus rows.

Unity, defined as the visual coherence and compositional harmony of the landscape, frequently attesting to the careful design of individual manmade components in the landscape, will be moderately affected due to the loss of trees regardless of species. The removed trees will create a noticeable gap in the line of street trees, however there will remain a layered landscape of trees and shrub along the other side of the sidewalk.

The Resource Change, (changes to visual resources as measured by changes in visual character and visual quality) for the proposed project, will be moderate. The historic tree rows remain a strong presence along the street and the density of the remaining urban landscape continues to provide a vegetative buffer and natural amenity to the street environment.

VIEWERS AND VIEWER RESPONSE

Neighbors (people with views to the road) and *highway users* (people with views from the road) will be moderately affected by the proposed project. Neighbors will see increased pavement that encroaches closer to properties and will be more exposed to El Camino Real. In some instances, where historic eucalyptus will be removed, neighbors and users will gain better sightlines at the intersection without the large trunks of the eucalyptus trees obscuring their view. The neighbors in the multi-family townhouses between Floribunda Ave and Oak Grove Ave will be the most affected by the loss of their five street trees and be more visually sensitive to their loss. Overall, the neighbors could have a moderate to high reaction to the loss of trees. Highway users will still see an intact line of trees past Floribunda Ave directing their travel down El Camino Real. Their viewer response will be moderate. The most sensitive viewers are those concerned with the preservation of the Howard-Ralston Eucalyptus Tree Rows. Their response is expected to be high. It is anticipated that the average response of all viewer groups will be moderate-high depending on the sub-group..

VISUAL IMPACT

Visual impacts are determined by assessing changes to the visual resources and predicting viewer response to those changes. The greatest visual impact is two-fold, one being a permanent impact, the other a temporary one. The permanent impact will be the removal of eleven street trees (4 historic eucalyptus, 1 elm, 5 liquidambar) at or adjacent to the intersection. The project area retains a dense, urban landscape of varied trees and shrubs preserving the overall visual experience. Temporary construction impacts will occur involving potential traffic detours, lane closures, and signs relating to construction, safety cones and flags and other elements related to ongoing construction. These impacts will be minor in duration.

Overall, the visual impacts of this project will be moderate with the build option. The no-build alternative does not address the need for safe left turn lanes and vehicle storage.

VISUAL SIMULATIONS



Existing view from Oak Grove Blvd and El Camino Real looking South



Simulated view after construction



Simulated view of Floribunda Ave and El Camino Real after construction

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the proposed project will have a moderate impact to the visual environment. The greatest impact this project creates is the loss of street trees, four of which are components of a scenic resource. The loss of trees will increase natural light to residential units as well as lesson the vegetative buffer. The overall character and quality of the visual environment persists. Widening the intersection creates better visibility for pedestrians, bicyclists and motorists. The loss of street trees, while noticeable, does not substantially change the character and quality of the urban landscape due to the density of the remaining planting.