

## 4.1 AESTHETICS

This chapter discusses the existing aesthetic character of Butte County and evaluates the potential impacts to aesthetics associated with General Plan 2030 and the Airport Land Use Compatibility Plan (ALUCP) override. The following evaluation assesses visual character, scenic vistas, scenic highways, and light and glare resulting from the spatial location of development that would be allowed by General Plan 2030.

### *A. Regulatory Framework*

This section summarizes key State and County regulations and programs related to aesthetics in Butte County.

#### **1. California Building Code, 2007**

The California Building Code, Part 2 of Title 24 in the California Code of Regulations (CCR), is based on the 2006 International Building Code and combines three types of building standards from three different origins:

- ◆ Building standards that have been adopted by State agencies without change from building standards contained in the International Building Code.
- ◆ Building standards that have been adopted and adapted from the International Building Code to meet California conditions.
- ◆ Building standards, authorized by the California legislature, that constitute extensive additions not covered by the International Building Code that have been adopted to address particular California concerns.

The California Building Code also includes standards for outdoor lighting that are intended to improve energy efficiency, and to reduce light pollution and glare by regulating light power and brightness, shielding, and sensor controls.

## **2. California Scenic Highway Program**

The California Scenic Highway Program, maintained by Caltrans, protects scenic State highway corridors from changes that would diminish the aesthetic value of lands adjacent to highways. Scenic State highway corridors designated by the State traverse land of outstanding natural beauty and are protected through local regulation of land use and development intensity, outdoor advertising, and other elements to preserve their scenic qualities. Highways eligible for designation as a State scenic highway are those that possess exceptional scenic qualities, but for which no scenic corridor protection program is in place, or for which no application for official scenic highway status has been made or approved by Caltrans.<sup>1</sup> New routes are added to the State's Master Plan through the action of the State Legislature.

## **3. Butte County Outdoor Lighting Standards**

The Butte County Zoning Ordinance includes standards for outdoor lighting in residential areas. Section 24-241 requires that all outdoor lighting in residential areas "be located, adequately shielded and directed such that no direct light falls outside the property perimeter, or into the public right-of-way."

### ***B. Existing Conditions***

Butte County is primarily a rural county with a landscape that speaks to its agricultural heritage. There are significant areas left as open space and used for agricultural purposes. The rural setting and unique geography of Butte County and its surrounding area have created a number of scenic vistas and corridors. These visual resources, as well as issues related to light and glare, are described in this section.

### **1. Visual Character and Scenic Vistas**

In the rural setting of Butte County, prominent geographic features, such as mountains, hills, and rivers, give shape and profile to the natural environ-

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<sup>1</sup> Caltrans – California Scenic Highway Program. <http://www.dot.ca.gov/hq/LandArch/scenic/scpr.htm>. Accessed February 22, 2007.

ment. Climate, vegetation, and geography interact to differentiate sub-regional landscape units within the larger environmental context. The following discussion identifies five major categories of natural features which contribute to the overall visual and scenic quality of Butte County, including the valley, foothills, mountains, water bodies, and unique land forms. This section also highlights scenic vistas within each category.

a. Valley

The western portion of the county is located in the northeastern Sacramento River Valley. This valley area, which constitutes about 45 percent of the total county area, consists of the Sacramento River Valley floor and associated alluvial fans. The topography is gentle and flat, with elevations ranging from 60 to 200 feet above sea level. The level topography contributes to an open and uniform visual character, with natural waterways and canals, and associated levees, providing the most dominant landscape features. Natural vegetation in the area consists of valley grasslands, valley oak woodlands, fresh water marshes, and vernal pools.

Within the valley area, the most prominent human-made features are the scattered rural residential units and agricultural-industrial facilities such as processing plants, as well as the urban and suburban landscapes surrounding Chico, Gridley, Biggs, and Oroville. Many other small farming and ranching towns exist within the valley floor, and typically include a small town center surrounded by suburban and rural residential development.

From the open valley area, the most prominent scenic views are to distant features such as the Sutter Buttes to the south, the Coast Ranges to the west, and the county's eastern foothills.

b. Foothills

The foothills form a transitional area between the valley floor on the west and the mountains on the east. This area, which occupies approximately 25 percent of the county's land area, consists of extensive rolling foothills with elevations ranging from about 200 to 2,100 feet above sea level. Foothill oak

woodland, intermixed with chaparral, forms a transitional region between the valley grasslands and the mountain forests. In visual terms, the foothills form a distinct and highly attractive landscape which is more varied in topography and vegetation than the valley.

The visual character of the foothills is also less open than the valley, although viewpoints within the foothill area provide sweeping panoramas of the valley area and beyond. The rolling topography is frequently punctuated by distinctive clusters of oaks or land forms such as Table Mountain. In the spring, a unique and spectacular wildflower display occurs in this area after vernal pools have dried. The foothills also contain views of rivers, creeks, and ravines.

The foothills include vast grassland areas used for grazing, as well as significant rural, suburban, and urban development. The slopes east of Oroville have attracted both dispersed rural and concentrated urban development. In the Paradise area, development is dispersed over the ridges within the Town of Paradise and in the unincorporated communities to the north.

Because the vegetation in the foothills is primarily grasslands and chaparral, the foothills provide important scenic vistas along river and creek canyons and out across the Sacramento Valley, such as the views from the Skyway, Neal Road, and Highway 70.

c. Mountains

Approximately 30 percent of the county is a mountainous area formed by the southern portion of the Cascade Mountain Range and the western slopes of the Sierra Nevada. Elevations range from 2,100 feet to 8,000 feet above sea level. The mountain areas, and the foothill areas to the west, have deep-cut canyons, such as those seen along Butte Creek and parts of the eastern Feather River, which were formed by streams and rivers flowing westward from prehistoric glaciers. The combination of canyons and high mountains creates some of the county's most visually stunning and environmentally sensitive lands. In addition to being topographically distinct, the mountain areas

are also clearly distinguished by dense and lush vegetation. The mountain areas are heavily forested with coniferous forest, mixed evergreen forest, montane meadow, and montane riparian environments.

The Feather River Canyon is famous not only for scenic quality but also for its human-made features such as the Western Pacific Railroad line, known as the “Feather River Route,” as well as water/power plants and historical gold mining.

The mountain areas are predominantly natural and highly scenic in character with dispersed human activities and modification throughout the area. The road network, including State highways, county roads, logging roads, and private residential roads, influences the area’s visual character, because most roads have required the alteration of topography or vegetation to accommodate them within the rugged terrain. Although no major urban settlements are located in the mountains, smaller communities are distributed throughout the area, including many former mining camps that are now centers of rural residential development or linked to the tourism industry.

Although scenic vistas are limited by the dense vegetation, there are scenic vistas of dramatic river and creek canyons and into the foothill regions in some parts of the mountain areas.

d. Waterbodies

Butte County has an abundance of water resources that contribute to the county’s visual character. Butte County is part of the Sacramento River Basin watershed, and is bounded by the Sacramento River on its west side. Numerous streams and rivers drain runoff from the Sierra Nevada and Cascades southwesterly across the county into the Sacramento River. Of these waterways, the most significant are Butte Creek, Big Chico Creek, and the North, Middle, and South Forks of the Feather River. These waterways are significant visual features within the county even though visual access to and from much of their length is relatively limited by steep terrain.

More dominant as visual features are the county's surface water bodies. Few natural lakes exist in the county, although numerous reservoirs have been built to provide domestic and irrigation water, hydroelectric power, recreation, flood control, and watershed management. The most visually significant of the county's water bodies, because of their location and size, are Lake Oroville and the Thermalito Forebay and Afterbay. Other reservoirs that are important local visual features include: Concow Reservoir, Paradise Lake, Magalia Reservoir, Philbrook Reservoir, Lake Madrone, Ponderosa Reservoir, Lake Wyandotte, Round Valley Reservoir, Lost Creek Reservoir, and Sly Creek Reservoir.

Scenic vistas to the surrounding foothills and mountains are available from Lake Oroville.

e. Unique Landforms and Habitat Areas

The county has a number of areas or features that, while a part of a larger landscape unit, are distinctive enough to contribute unique qualities. These areas and features generally consist of land forms and habitat areas. Unique land forms are those with geologic features that clearly distinguish them from their surroundings. As landmarks and reference points, they provide orientation and an immediate sense of place.

Unique land forms in Butte County include the steep river canyons of the mountain and foothill areas, such as Feather River Canyon, Chico Canyon, and Butte Creek Canyon. Table Mountain, a plateau of ancient volcanic rock located just north of Oroville, and the smaller steep-sided buttes in the Lime Saddle area give a signature character to the foothill area in the heart of the county, and various peaks throughout the eastern portion of the county, including Big Bar Mountain, Bald Rock Dome, and Sugarloaf, provide identifiable landmarks. As noted above, the Sutter Buttes, while located outside of Butte County, are important regional landscape forms because they can be seen from across the entire length of the county. Additionally, Mount Shasta, Mount Lassen, and the Coast Range can be seen from many portions of the county.

Especially unique habitat areas in the county that are also visually important include the seven large wildlife areas: the Big Chico Creek Ecological Preserve, Butte Creek Ecological Preserve, Table Mountain Reserve, Gray Lodge Wildlife Area, Oroville Wildlife Area, Sacramento River Wildlife Area, and Sacramento River National Wildlife Refuge. These areas, which provide habitat for migratory waterfowl and resident populations of smaller mammals and birds, also provide large natural areas of marsh, wetlands, grasslands, and stands of mature trees, distinguishing them from the cultivation and development that mark surrounding valley lands. In addition to these large discrete areas, there are also many wetlands and riparian areas along the Sacramento River that contribute to an overall visual character of healthy, natural, lush vegetation.

## **2. Scenic Highways**

This section describes various scenic highways and corridors either officially designated by the State, in the County's 1977 Scenic Highway Element, or containing the Scenic Highway zoning designation in the County's existing Zoning Ordinance.

### **a. State Scenic Highways**

Although there are no officially designated State scenic highways in Butte County, Highway 70 north of the intersection with Highway 149 is included on the State's Master Plan and is considered an eligible State scenic highway.

### **b. County Scenic Highways and Corridors**

The 1977 Scenic Highway Element recognizes Highway 70 through the Feather River Canyon and a portion of Highway 32 north of Forest Ranch as County scenic highways.

### **c. Scenic Highway Zoning**

In the existing Zoning Ordinance, scenic routes and an area extending 350 feet from the centerline are zoned Scenic Highway. These sectors include portions of Highway 32 north of Chico, Highway 70 north of the Highway

149 intersection, Highway 191, Highway 162 near Lake Oroville, the Skyway through Butte Creek Canyon, Forbestown Road, and Lumpkin Road.

### 3. Light and Glare

Light pollution refers to all forms of unwanted light in the night sky, including glare, light trespass, sky glow, and overlighting. Views of the night sky are an important part of the natural environment, particularly for a rural to semi-rural area, such as Butte County. Excessive light and glare can also be visually disruptive to humans and nocturnal animal species, and often indicate an unnecessarily high level of energy consumption. Current sources of light in Butte County include exterior lighting on residential and commercial buildings, street lights, and billboards and other signage.

Current occurrences of glare are mainly a result of the sun or street lighting reflecting off of large expanses of concrete or other light-colored surfaces, such as parking lots, wide streets, and warehouse rooftops. Glass and other reflective surfaces can also be a source of glare.

#### *C. Standards of Significance*

General Plan 2030 and the ALUCP override would have a significant aesthetics impact if they would:

- ◆ Have a substantial adverse effect on a scenic vista.
- ◆ Substantially degrade the view from a scenic highway, including, but not limited to, trees, rock outcroppings, and historic buildings.
- ◆ Substantially degrade the existing visual character or quality of Butte County.
- ◆ Expose people to substantial light or glare.

#### *D. Impact Discussion*

The following discussion provides an analysis of potential project and cumulative aesthetic impacts that could occur as a result of implementation of General Plan 2030. Implementation of the ALUCP override would have no aesthetic impact in Butte County, and is not discussed further in this section.

##### **1. Project Impacts**

a. Have a substantial adverse effect on a scenic vista.

Development allowed by General Plan 2030 could occur within areas that would affect scenic vistas. In particular, development in valley and foothill areas that are visible parts of vistas from various vantage points within the county could adversely affect scenic vistas. However, General Plan 2030 includes goals and policies intended to protect scenic resources, direct new development to urbanized areas, and preserve agriculture and open spaces areas.

Conservation and Open Space Goal COS-17 is to maintain and enhance the quality of Butte County's scenic and visual resources. In support of this goal, Policy COS-P17.1 requires that views of Butte County's scenic resources, including water features, unique geologic features, and wildlife habitat areas, be maintained. Policy COS-P17.2 limits development along scenic ridgelines in Butte County for the purpose of protecting and enhancing the aesthetic qualities of ridgeline areas, and to preserve natural features that contribute to the county's scenic resources and unique sense of place.

The land use map in the General Plan 2030 Land Use Element, as well as its supporting policies under Goal LU-1, conserve large areas for open space and agricultural uses and focus development within existing urbanized areas and unincorporated communities. Policy LU-P15.2 requires that new urban development be primarily located in or immediately adjoining already urbanized areas. In addition, Goal LU-13 and its supporting policies maintain the Chico Area Greenline, which acts as an urban growth boundary and limits urban development from extending westward from the Chico area. More detailed information about the preservation of open space and agricultural land in its existing character is provided in Section 4.2, Agriculture, of this EIR.

Together, these goals and policies would reduce potential scenic vista impacts from General Plan 2030 to a *less-than-significant* level.

- b. Substantially degrade the view from a scenic highway, including, but not limited to, trees, rock outcroppings, and historic buildings.

As stated in Section B.2, there are no State-designated scenic highways in Butte County. The portions of Highways 70 and 32 that were designated as scenic highways by the 1977 Butte County Scenic Highway Element would be maintained as County-designated scenic highways under General Plan 2030, as shown in Figure COS-8 of General Plan 2030.

Development under General Plan 2030 could occur within areas that would affect County-designated scenic highways. However, General Plan 2030 includes goals, policies, and actions that would preserve the views from scenic highways into the future.

In addition, Conservation and Open Space Element Goal COS-18 would protect and enhance scenic areas adjacent to and visible from highways for enjoyment by residents and visitors. This goal is supported by Policy COS-P18.1 and Action COS-A18.1, which instruct the County to review its scenic highways program and consider designating new scenic corridors based on a consideration of factors such as an area's scenic characteristics, including vista points, geologic resources, native plant and animal species, waterways, historic resources, agricultural, timber, and recreation uses. Furthermore, Policy COS-P18.3 requires utility companies to choose the least conspicuous locations for distribution lines, so as to avoid impacts to scenic corridors where there is reasonable choice.

The goals, policies, and actions in General Plan 2030 would reduce potential scenic highway impacts from General Plan 2030 to a *less-than-significant* level.

- c. Substantially degrade the existing visual character of Butte County.

As described in Section B, Butte County's existing visual character comes from its varied topography, open space areas, waterbodies, and unique land-

forms, as well as the character of its agricultural uses and rural, suburban, and urban neighborhoods. Implementation of General Plan 2030 would allow ongoing growth and redevelopment in Butte County's established community areas, and the extension of growth on some sites and into some areas that are currently undeveloped.

There are two primary ways in which General Plan 2030 could influence the future visual character and quality of Butte County. First, development on a significant amount of land that is currently undeveloped could result in a significant change to the visual character and quality of the county. The second way that the proposed General Plan 2030 could affect the visual character and quality of Butte County is through a change in the form and appearance of new development within existing neighborhoods.

However, as described below, General Plan 2030 includes a range of goals and policies that seek to direct growth into already-urbanized areas, support the visual qualities and character of the county, and achieve a balance between allowing new development and preserving Butte County's valued open spaces and scenic resources.

As discussed in Section D.1.a, Conservation and Open Space Goal COS-17 and its supporting policies work to maintain and enhance the quality of Butte County's scenic and visual resources. In addition, the land use map in the Land Use Element, its supporting policies under Goal LU-1, Policy LU-P15.2, and Goal LU-13 and its supporting policies preserve large areas for open space and agricultural uses and focus development within existing urbanized areas and unincorporated communities.

Development under General Plan 2030 would avoid significant impacts on the visual character of existing communities due to Policy LU-P4.1, which requires that the integrity and stability of existing residential neighborhoods be promoted and preserved. In addition, the Land Use Element supports community planning efforts that would preserve the character of these communities through Policy LU-P2.3, which supports planning efforts in unin-

incorporated communities by providing knowledge, time, and materials to community efforts, and Policy LU-P2.4, which engages unincorporated communities in community planning processes to set a community vision, develop Area Plans and potentially urban growth boundaries, community boundaries, and spheres of influence (SOIs).

Together, these goals and policies set a framework that would balance open space preservation with new development allowed under General Plan 2030, and would ensure that new development preserves the visual character and quality of Butte County. The impact to visual character and quality would therefore be *less than significant*.

d. Expose people to substantial light or glare.

Development under General Plan 2030 could increase the amount of light and glare through the installation of exterior lighting on new residential and commercial development. However, as discussed in Section A.3 above, the Butte County Building Code and Zoning Ordinance regulate light power and brightness, shielding, and sensor controls, and require light fixtures to be designed and sited so as to minimize light pollution, glare, and light trespass into adjoining properties. Therefore, General Plan 2030 would have a *less-than-significant* impact related to light and glare.

## 2. Cumulative Impacts

General Plan 2030 could result in changes to the visual character and quality of Butte County through development of undeveloped areas and/or changes to the character of existing communities. However, as outlined in Section D.1, goals, policies, and actions in the proposed General Plan 2030, combined with other State and local regulations, would reduce project-level aesthetic impacts to a less-than-significant level.

When combined with the overall growth trends within Butte County and adjacent counties, the conversion of the region's visual quality from a rural, agricultural character to a more urban feel could result in a cumulatively significant aesthetic impact. However, within the timeframe of General Plan

2030, it is unlikely that the Butte County region would be significantly converted from agricultural land and open space to urban uses. Furthermore, the other counties in the Butte County region, where conversion from open space and agricultural land to urban uses is of most concern, have adopted General Plan policies that direct growth to existing urbanized areas and/or protect agricultural land. For instance, Yuba County's 1996 General Plan includes Goal 1-LUG and its associated objectives, policies, and implementation strategies that direct growth to existing communities and approved specific and community plan areas. In addition, Glenn County's 1993 General Plan includes Goal NRG-1 and its associated policies and implementation strategies, programs, and priorities that preserve agricultural land.

In addition to local policies to avoid urbanization of open space and agricultural lands, State, and local scenic highway programs would mitigate potential impacts along scenic corridors by preserving views and open space land.

Light pollution has the potential to become an issue of increasing concern in the region as new development contributes additional outdoor lighting installed for safety and other reasons. Butte County may be adversely affected not only by light pollution from development within the unincorporated area, but also from sky glow associated with the ongoing urbanization of cities within Butte County and in surrounding areas, such as Yuba City. However, future development in all jurisdictions will be subject to the California Building Code standards that would prevent potential impacts associated with light and glare.

Overall, the cumulative aesthetic impact would be *less than significant*.

#### *E. Maximum Theoretical Buildout*

The maximum theoretical buildout allowed under General Plan 2030 would include significantly more development than the projected 2030 buildout analyzed in Section D in terms of both the amount and the extent of development. Therefore, the potential for impacts to aesthetics would increase.

However, as discussed in Chapter 3, it is extremely unlikely that maximum theoretical buildout would ever occur under General Plan 2030. Therefore, an analysis of maximum theoretical buildout is not required by CEQA.

*F. Impacts and Mitigation Measures*

Since there are no significant impacts related to aesthetics as a result of General Plan 2030, no mitigation measures are required.