

## **3.1 AESTHETICS**

This section describes existing aesthetics and visual character within the planning area and analyzes the potential impacts to visual resources that could result from implementation of the updated General Plan. Specifically, impact associated with scenic vistas, visual character, and light and glare are discussed.

### **3.1.1 EXISTING ENVIRONMENTAL SETTING**

#### **Scenic Vistas and Scenic Resources**

The topography of San Marcos varies, including hillsides, creek areas and lakes. Elevations range from approximately 590 feet above sea level at the central State Route 78 (SR-78)/W San Marcos Boulevard area of the City to prominent ridgelines of approximately 1,200 to 1,600 feet above sea level west of N. Twin Oaks Valley Road and at Double Peak in the Questhaven/La Costa Meadows Neighborhood, respectively.

Due to this varied topography, view opportunities of peaks, canyons, urban and suburban landscapes are present within San Marcos. From the central City area at the base elevation, views are dominated by “P” Mountain, San Marcos Mountains and Owens Peak to the north, with Cerro de Las Posas, Double Peak, Franks Peak, and Mount Whitney to the south.

Scenic resources within the City include, but are not limited to, undeveloped hillsides, prominent landforms such as the San Marcos, Merriam, Mount Whitney, and Cerro de La Posas, Double Peak Mountains, Owens Peak, Franks Peak, creek corridors, rock outcroppings, landmarks or historic buildings, and ocean views. Public vantage points capturing, and used to evaluate, these views are identified as viewing platform locations by the proposed General Plan; 19 locations including parks, scenic roads and SR-78 routes are considered to capture the ridgeline views considered of value. These viewing platforms capture views of the ridgelines, canyons and urban/suburban landscapes.

#### **Scenic Highways**

There are currently no designated state scenic highways or eligible state scenic highways within or adjacent to the planning area.

#### **Visual Character**

San Marcos has prominent landforms such as Mount Whitney, Double Peak, Owens Peak, San Marcos Mountains, Merriam Mountains, Cerro de Las Posas, Frank’s Peak, and canyon areas that enhance the visual and scenic aesthetics of the City. Viewsheds of these peaks, as well as views of the City’s urban and suburban landscape are visible from overlook points, trails, and roads. Views from Twin Oaks Valley Road include the San Marcos Mountains, and Merriam Mountains on the north and Double Peak, Cerro De Las Posas Ridgeline, and Mount Whitney, Cerro de las Posas on the south. SR-78, which is eligible as a state scenic highway and designated by the City as a view corridor, provides views of the Merriam Mountains, and Mount Whitney, Double Peak, Cerro de Las Posas and other minor landforms as well as

landmarks such as California State University San Marcos, and Palomar Community College. There are also views to the Pacific Ocean from areas within and near San Elijo, including from vehicles and pathways along San Elijo Road. See Figure 3.1-1 for Aesthetic Resources.

Much of the visible hillside areas are protected as Open Space/Preserve area or designated with a Ridgeline Protection Overlay zone. Complementing the ridgeline vistas is the extensive open space system of San Marcos. Dedicated open space accounts for approximately 11.8 percent of the City's acreage and comprises natural open space, public and private parks, and easements throughout the City. Agricultural lands provide an additional sense of visual relief and open space in the Twin Oaks Valley Neighborhood.

## **Light and Glare**

The City is within the sphere of influence for Palomar observatory, making ambient light levels within the City of regional concern. The majority of urban development, with existing sources of light and glare associated with street lights, parking lots, lighted commercial and recreational areas, is concentrated along the SR-78 corridor generally between San Marcos Blvd. and Mission Road. Areas with substantially less night-lighting include residential development in Questhaven/La Costa Meadows, Twin Oaks Valley and College Area neighborhoods, and outlying agricultural areas.

### **3.1.2 REGULATORY SETTING**

The following provides a general description of the applicable regulatory requirements for the planning area, including federal, state, and local guidelines.

#### **Federal Regulations**

There are no federal regulations relating to visual resources that are applicable to the proposed General Plan.

#### **State Regulations**

##### *California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA)*

The 1970 California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) ensures that local agencies consider and review the environmental impacts of development projects within their jurisdictions. CEQA requires that an environmental document (e.g., Environmental Impact Report [EIR], or a Mitigated Negative Declaration [MND]) be prepared for projects that are judged in an Initial Study (IS) to have potentially significant effects on the environment. Environmental documents (IS, MND, EIR) must consider, and analyze visual and aesthetic resources including the potential to create new light sources. If impacts are considered potentially significant, recommendations for mitigation measures are made to reduce development impacts to less than significant. This allows early public review of proposed development projects and provides lead agencies the authority to regulate development projects in the early stages of planning.

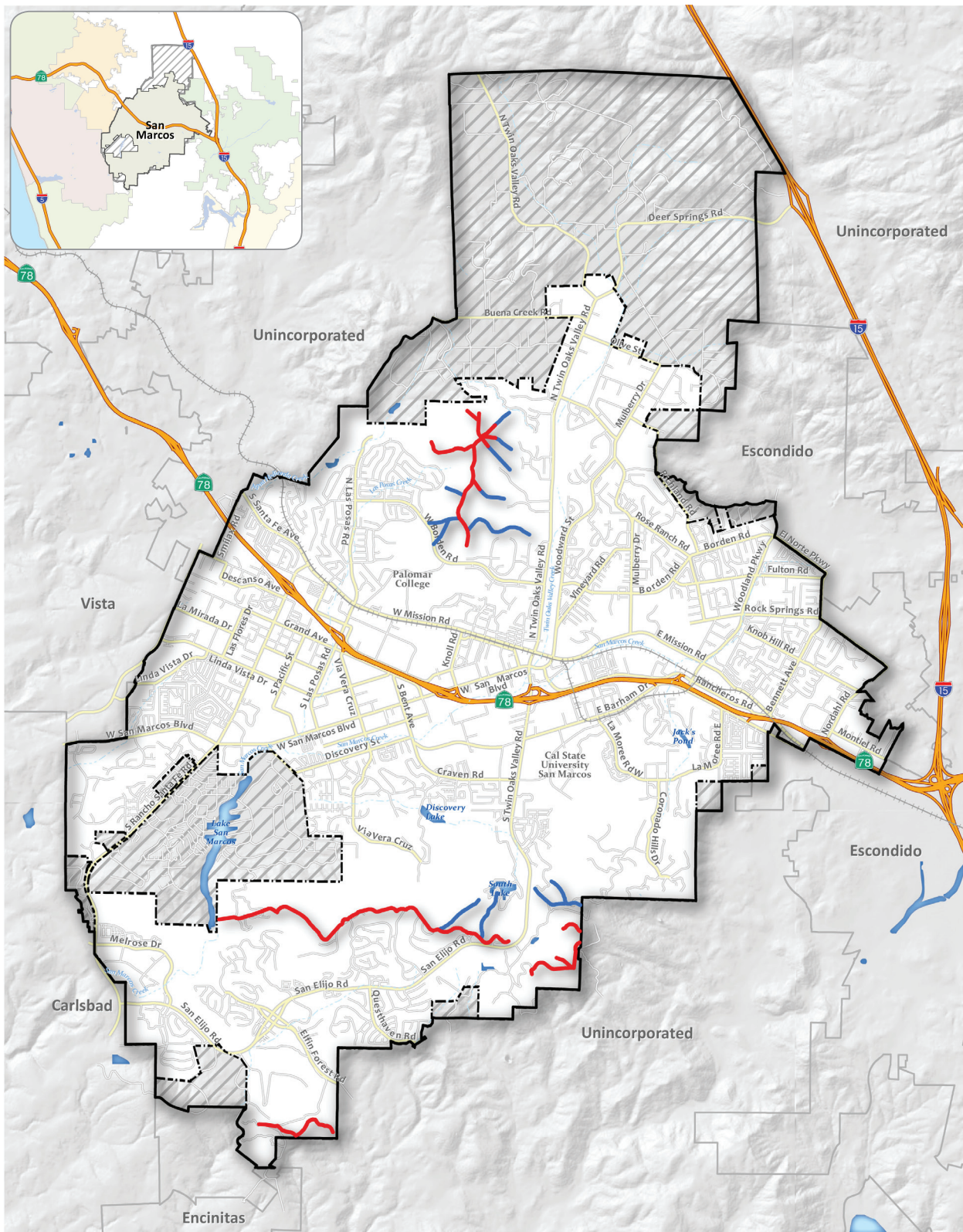


FIGURE 3.1-1

City of San Marcos

## Aesthetic Resources

- |                           |                   |
|---------------------------|-------------------|
| San Marcos City Limits    | <b>Ridgelines</b> |
| Sphere of Influence       | Primary           |
| Planning Area             | Secondary         |
| Major Hydrologic Features |                   |
| Railroad                  |                   |
| Creeks                    |                   |
| Freeway                   |                   |
| Highway                   |                   |
| Major Road                |                   |
| Minor Road                |                   |



### *California Scenic Highway Program*

The California Department of Transportation manages the California Scenic Highway Program. The goal of the program is to preserve and protect scenic highway corridors from changes that would affect the aesthetic value of the land adjacent to highways. No state-designated scenic highways are in the planning area (Caltrans 2011). The nearest officially designated state scenic highways are SR-25 and SR-163, approximately 25 miles south. These highway segments are not visible from the planning area.

## **Local Plans and Policies**

### *San Marcos Ordinances*

#### Zoning Ordinance

The San Marcos Municipal Code and Zoning Ordinance are the primary implementation tools for the policies of the General Plan. The Zoning Ordinance provides more detailed direction related to design and development standards; permitted, conditionally permitted and prohibited uses; and other regulations such as parking standards, lighting and sign regulations. The land uses specified in the Zoning Ordinance are based upon, and should be consistent with, the land use policies set forth in the General Plan. Specifically building design, setbacks, lighting and signage standards and open space requirements for development protect open space provisions and ambient light levels in the City. Lighting standards of the Ordinance require energy-efficient lighting that limits light and glare for private projects, with exceptions for specialized streetscape lighting. Private developments are required to submit lighting plans to ensure consistency with dark sky needs of the region.

#### Ridgeline Protection and Management Overlay Zone Chapter 20.131

The San Marcos Zoning Ordinance has a Ridgeline Protection and Management Overlay Zone (Section 20.131) to protect natural viewsheds and unique natural resources, minimize physical impacts to ridgelines, and establish innovative sensitive architectural standards.

#### Dark Sky Policy

The City of San Marcos adopted a dark sky policy and rural lighting standard in the 1980s and has recently updated the policy to allow for energy-efficient approaches to conserving dark skies. Municipal Code standards require lighting to be directed downward, and limit the type and spacing of lighting to maintain reasonable lighting levels that do not contribute to light pollution. The City uses International Dark-Sky Association (IDA) thresholds to inform its own testing, leading to a policy that allows for the use of energy-efficient lighting sources that include, but are not limited to, LED and induction lighting technologies.

### **3.1.3 THRESHOLDS FOR DETERMINING SIGNIFICANCE**

The impact of the proposed project related to aesthetics would be considered significant if it would exceed the following thresholds of significance, in accordance with Appendix G of the *CEQA Guidelines*:

- 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.

### 3.1.4 ANALYSIS OF ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

#### Scenic Vistas and Scenic Resources

Hillside and ridgeline areas visible throughout the planning area and as viewed from the SR-78 corridor are considered valuable. Over the life of the proposed General Plan, new development and redevelopment are expected resulting in a general intensification of the planning area. As such, implementation of the proposed General Plan could result in both short-term and long-term visual impacts by encroaching on public views. In the short-term, the development of projects allowed by the proposed General Plan could impede views during development staging and construction.

The majority of development/redevelopment capacity within the planning area is situated in the low-lying valley areas of central San Marcos and along existing transit corridors that would not affect the valued hillside and ridgeline views of the planning area. The existing skyline of the planning area is generally low-scale in comparison to the surrounding hillside views. However, limited land use changes to Focus Areas would be permitted in currently undeveloped areas that could be considered visual resources from many of the neighborhoods and from the SR-78 corridor. Should these areas be developed consistent with the proposed General Plan, the visual “open space” aesthetic could be diminished in the College Area, Richmar and Barham/Discovery Community neighborhoods.

Development along the hillsides of Double Peak would have the greatest potential to impact view sheds, although the majority of undeveloped land in these areas is preserved in public or private open space through previously adopted Specific Plans. In conjunction with open space protections of the General Plan, the City of San Marcos Zoning Ordinance regulates and enforces the Ridgeline Protection Overlay zone to limit the impact of visible development on hillsides. The proposed General Plan modifies land uses for anticipated growth in slope-areas to permit varying very low densities of residential development that would likely be visible from lower-lying areas and viewing platform locations. Policies in the Conservation and Open Space Element of the proposed General Plan includes a variety of actions aimed at providing for preservation of scenic vistas through the protection of natural resources and features in open spaces. These policies are specifically written to address aesthetic impacts through ridgeline protection, site design that respects natural topography and iconic ridgelines, and evaluation of viewsheds from adjacent property. However, at a program level analysis where specific viewsheds of future development or impacts on the visual resources of the planning area cannot be evaluated, this impact would be **significant**; mitigation is required.

---

## Scenic Resources within a State Scenic Highway

There are currently no designated state scenic highways or eligible state scenic highways within or adjacent to the planning area. Therefore, **no impact** would occur.

## Visual Character

The overall visual character of San Marcos can be described as a mix of residential, commercial and industrial land uses surrounded by open space, hillside vistas and agricultural lands. Areas of vacant land within the core of the planning area, primarily the Business/Industrial District and Barham/Discovery Community, contribute to the open feeling of the area and provide views toward the surrounding mountains and hillsides. Increased urbanization through development and intensification of the planning area is expected to occur under the proposed General Plan. This may impact the character of the planning area through increased density, evolution of land uses to more intense uses, infill development and limited conversion of agricultural or current vacant land that is viewed as open space.

Policies of Land Use and Community Planning Element and the Conservation and Open Space Element of the proposed General Plan seek to maintain and enhance the quality of the visual character in and around San Marcos. Specifically these policies would maintain the natural integrity of open spaces, improves and expands park land, and protects viewsheds of and from ridgelines. The Ridgeline Protection and Overlay Zone further manages hillside development to reduce impacts on the community-wide visual character.

Through preservation of the integrity of open spaces and ridgelines, implementation of the proposed General Plan policies would reduce the impact associated with visual character to a **less than significant** level. No mitigation is required.

## Light and Glare

The urbanized core of the planning area currently experiences a substantial level of light and glare associated with commercial and industrial land uses. New development, infill and redevelopment of non-residential uses under the proposed General Plan has the greatest potential to increase light and glare in the planning area. Currently the planning area is estimated to be approximately 75 percent built out; additional residential and commercial development throughout the planning area, plus proposed mixed use development, would increase light and glare contributors. Development of these uses under the proposed General Plan would occur primarily in the areas that are currently urbanized and commonly experience the impacts of existing light sources. Adjacent residential areas are already impacted by light and glare from commercial sources, however, more intense uses could potentially increase adverse light and glare impacts.

As the planning area is within the sky glow area, or area which has the potential to interfere with dark skies through the creation of light pollution, of the Palomar Observatory, the control of light and glare contribution is important to maintain adequately low levels of light on a regional scale to ensure

functionality and effectiveness of the observatory. Under the proposed General Plan, the City will continue utilization of the Dark Sky Policy and rural lighting standards, which as discussed in Section 3.1.2, have been updated to create a policy that allows for the use of energy-efficient lighting sources that include, but are not limited to, LED and induction lighting technologies. Since their adoption, utilization of these standards have maintained the light and glare levels of the planning area within acceptable limits for Palomar Observatory. The existing City Energy Efficient Lighting Project, which allows LED, induction and other energy-saving light sources, will also continue in conjunction with lighting, signage, and building material regulations of the Zoning Ordinance to limit light and glare impacts.

With adherence to, and implementation of, the proposed General Plan policies, regulations of the Zoning Ordinance, and continuance of the updated Dark Sky Policy and affiliated City programs, program-level impacts to lighting and glare would be **less than significant**.

### 3.1.5 MITIGATION MEASURES

Implementation of the San Marcos General Plan would result in potential significant impacts related to aesthetic resources. The following mitigation measures are general and programmatic in nature, and would be refined in project-specific CEQA documents.

#### Scenic Vistas and Scenic Resources

AES-1 Require proposed development within visually sensitive areas through the City's Ridgeline Ordinance and Specific Plans to minimize visual impacts and to preserve unique or special visual features through the application of techniques, such as:

- Creative site planning
- Integration of natural features into the project
- Use of appropriate scale, materials, and design to complement the surrounding natural landscape
- Minimal disturbance of topography
- Allow clustering of development through Specific Plans so as to preserve a balance of open space vistas, natural features, and community character.
- Creation of contiguous open space networks
- Requiring development to be consistent with the updated, energy-efficient Dark Sky Ordinance.
- Require development to comply with the Ridgeline Overlay Zone.

(Implementation Program COS-3.1)

AES-2 Continue to implement and monitor the City's Ridgeline Ordinance to ensure achievement of the desired effect. (Implementation Program LU-5.2)

### **Scenic Resources within a State Scenic Highway**

No mitigation is required.

### **Visual Character**

No mitigation is required.

### **Light and Glare**

No mitigation is required.

## **3.1.6 SIGNIFICANCE AFTER MITIGATION**

### **Scenic Vistas and Scenic Resources**

Implementation of the proposed General Plan would result in general intensification of the planning area. Impacts to scenic vistas and resources would be significant. Measures AES-1 and AES-2 would reduce impacts associated with scenic vistas and resources; and the program level impacts would be reduced to **less than significant**.

### **Scenic Resources within a State Scenic Highway**

**No impact** related to scenic highways will occur; no mitigation is required.

### **Visual Character**

Impacts associated with visual character would be **less than significant** without mitigation.

### **Light and Glare**

Impacts associated with light and glare would be **less than significant** without mitigation.