3.1

AESTHETICS

CHAPTER THREE
ENVIRONMENTAL SETTING, IMPACTS AND MITIGATION MEASURES

3.1 Aesthetics

This section of the Draft EIR addresses the aesthetic and visual impacts of the project on the surrounding area. Aesthetic impacts are considered to be those issues and impacts which can be objectively analyzed and quantified. These include light pollution, glare production, reflectivity, change in visual character, and impacts to a scenic vista. The analysis does not include subjective measures of aesthetics, such as the attractiveness of structural design, the color of the buildings, or other matters of opinion or preference. The analysis focuses only on those impacts which are objectively significant to the environment. During the Notice of Preparation (NOP) period, no comments were received regarding aesthetic impacts.

3.1.1 SETTING

Environmental Setting

Located in the Central San Joaquin Valley, the City of Merced is the seat of Merced County government as well as a major retail commercial/service center for the surrounding region. The City is located at the intersection of several state highways and is one of the primary access points to Yosemite National Park. Known as the "Gateway to Yosemite," Merced is approximately 80 miles west of the Valley floor of the Park, along Highway 140.

The City of Merced is located near the geographic center of the County of Merced. To the east of the City is the western slope of the Sierra Nevada mountain range. The City of Merced's 2010 City limits are generally bounded on the west by State Highway 59 and the El Capitan Canal, on the east by McKee Road, on the north by Bellevue Road and Nevada Street, and on the south by the Merced Regional Airport and Childs Avenue.

The northern portion of the City is characterized by gently rolling terrain, while the southerly portion is relatively flat. The area surrounding the City is largely used for agricultural production. The northern, western, and eastern portions of the City contain a number of creeks and canals including Bear Creek, Black Rascal Creek, Fahrens Creek, and Cottonwood Creek. Lake Yosemite is located approximately three miles north and east of the City. The City of Atwater and Castle Airport is located approximately four miles north of the City. Several photos were taken around the City to give perspective of the primarily undeveloped open space lands surrounding the City of Merced that are proposed for inclusion within the SUDP/SOI to be ultimately developed with a variety of urban uses. Figure 3.1-1 provides the location of individual photo views and is followed by Figures 3.1-2 through 3.1-7 which show several views of lands that will ultimately be converted to a variety of urbanized uses in accordance with the proposed General Plan.

SCENIC VIEWS AND RESOURCES

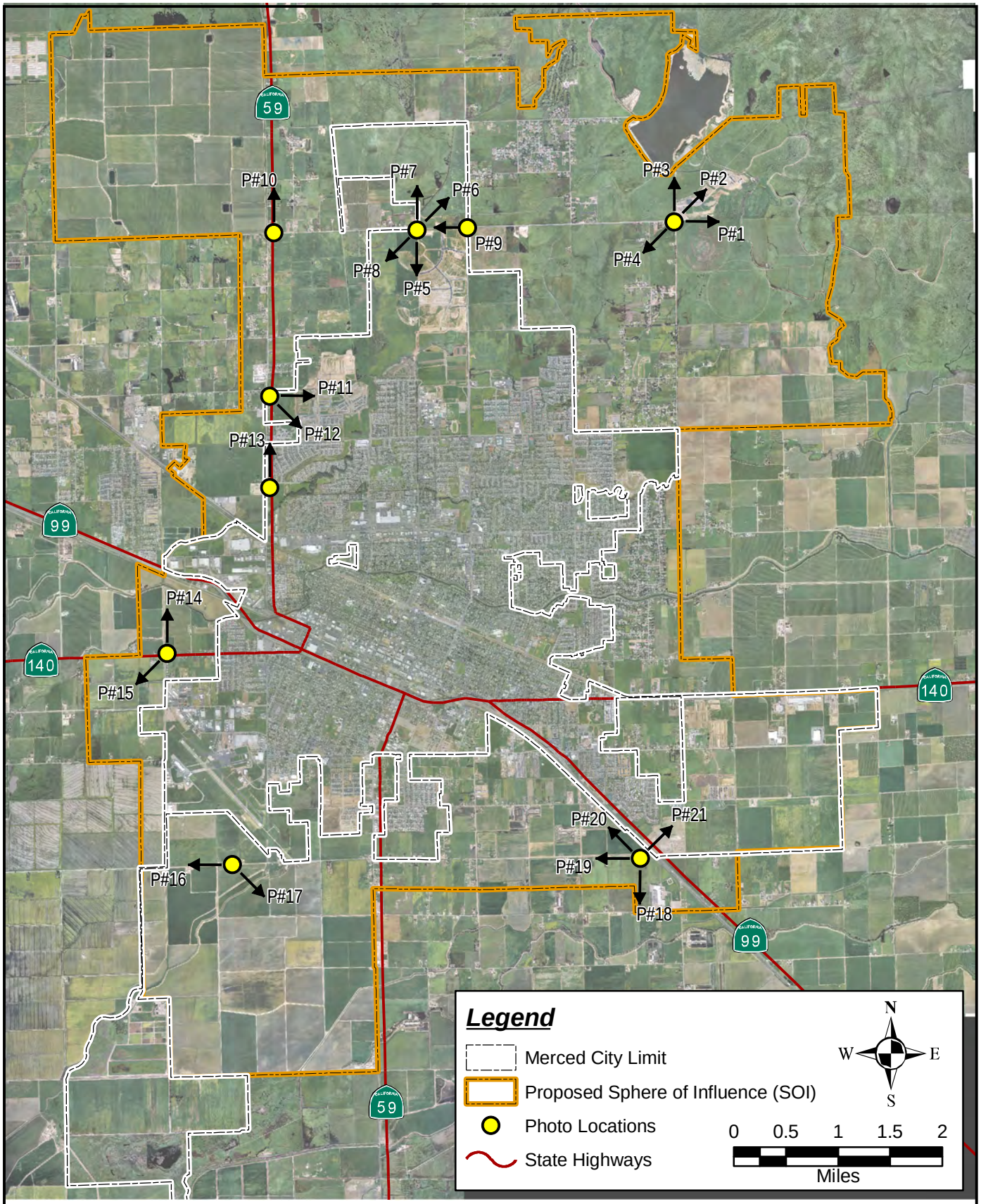
Visual resources are classified into two categories: scenic views and scenic resources. Scenic views are elements of the broader view shed such as mountain ranges, valleys, and ridgelines. They are usually middle ground or background elements of a view shed that can be seen from a range of viewpoints, often along a roadway or other corridor. Scenic resources are specific features of a viewing area (or view shed) such as trees, rock outcroppings, and historic buildings. They are features that act as the focal point of a view shed and are usually foreground elements.

An impact will occur if the proposed project changes the view to the middle ground or background elements of the broad view shed or removes visually significant trees, rocks, or historic buildings in the foreground. Since aesthetic considerations are often subjective and difficult to judge, two generally objective criteria are used in this EIR to establish the level of significance of the change. The first addresses the visibility of the landscape being altered and whether it will appear in the foreground, middle ground, or background of most viewers. Changes in the foreground are most significant, with distance and topography or vegetative screening acting to reduce impact. The second criterion concerns visual contrast, which is a measure of the degree of perceptible change. This is often characterized as being a strong, moderate, or weak change. Using this approach, a strong change would be immediately apparent and would dominate the landscape, whereas a weak change would be barely noticeable.

The view shed in the project area is primarily that of an urban environment surrounded by low-density rural residential development and agricultural uses. The project vicinity does not contain notable features that would typically fall under the heading of visual resources, such as unique geological features. The project site lies along the valley floor with little vertical differentiation that might provide scenic quality (hillside areas, rock outcrops, etc.). The features of the project's visual setting that might shape an appreciation of its visual character are limited to typical urban elements and are subject to personal interpretation. General Plan policies and implementing actions that address visual resources associated with development proposals are a reflection of the City of Merced's sensitivity to the alteration of view sheds in and around the City.

Aesthetic effects are somewhat subjective and are influenced by such factors as the location of the viewer, the duration of exposure, and the status of the viewer in relation to the project. The "status of the viewer" is a reference to the fact that a resident of a property that has a direct view of the project site from an adjacent property is likely to feel differently about the new development than a nonresident who catches a brief glimpse of the project site.

Light and glare effects also are somewhat subjective and are more likely to disturb permanent residents than transient highway travelers. Light and glare effects must be evaluated from two viewpoints: 1) the viewpoint from the project site toward surrounding uses and 2) the viewpoint from surrounding uses toward the project site. The degree of impact is proportional to the perceived negative effect on surrounding land uses. If there is a continuous light or glare that is visible from nearby residences and if it creates a nuisance to residents, the impact is potentially significant. Light sources in the area are currently generated by vehicles on local roadways, and that of the urban environment of the City of Merced. Overall, light levels are at a medium intensity due to the urban agricultural interface of the plan area.



Source: Quad Knopf, 2010

Quad Knopf

MERCED VISION 2030 GENERAL PLAN EIR
PHOTOGRAPH LOCATIONS

Figure 3.1-1

Job No.: 060429

Bellevue Road and
North Lake Road
Looking East (P #1)

Bellevue Road and
North Lake Road
Looking Northeast
To UC Merced (P #2)

Bellevue Road and
North Lake Road
Looking North (P #3)

Bellevue Road and
North Lake Road
Looking Southwest
(P #4)

Source: Quad Knopf, 2008

Quad Knopf

MERCED VISION 2030 GENERAL PLAN EIR
PHOTOPLATE 1

Figure 3.1-2

Job No.: 060429

Bellevue Road and M Street Looking Southeast (P #5)

Bellevue Road and M Street Looking Northeast (P #6)

Bellevue Road and M Street Looking North (P #7)

Bellevue Road and M Street Looking Southwest (P #8)

Source: Quad Knopf, 2008

Quad Knopf

MERCED VISION 2030 GENERAL PLAN EIR
PHOTOPLATE 2

Figure 3.1-3

Job No.: 060429

Bellevue Road and G Street Looking West (P #9)

Bellevue Road and Highway 59 Looking North (P #10)

Highway 59 and Belcher Ave Looking East (P #11)

Highway 59 and Belcher Ave Looking Southeast (P #12)

Source: Quad Knopf, 2008

Quad Knopf

MERCED VISION 2030 GENERAL PLAN EIR
PHOTOPLATE 3

Figure 3.1-4

Job No.: 060429

Highway 59 and Buena Vista Ave Looking North (P #13)

Highway 140 and Thornton Ave Looking North (P #14)

Highway 140 and Thornton Ave Looking Southwest (P #15)

Source: Quad Knopf, 2008

Quad Knopf

MERCED VISION 2030 GENERAL PLAN EIR
PHOTOPLATE 4

Figure 3.1-5

Job No.: 060429

Dickenson Ferry Road
South of Merced Regional Airport
Looking West (P #16)

Dickenson Ferry Road
South of Merced Regional Airport
Looking Southeast (P #17)

Source: Quad Knopf, 2008

Quad Knopf

MERCED VISION 2030 GENERAL PLAN EIR
PHOTOPLATE 5

Figure 3.1-6

Job No.: 060429

Highway 99 and
Mission Ave
Looking South (P #18)

Highway 99 and
Mission Ave
Looking West (P #19)

Highway 99 and
Mission Ave
Looking Northwest
(P #20)

Highway 99 and
Mission Ave
Looking Northeast
(P #21)

Source: Quad Knopf, 2008

Quad Knopf

MERCED VISION 2030 GENERAL PLAN EIR
PHOTOPLATE 6

Figure 3.1-7

Job No.: 060429

Regulatory Setting

FEDERAL

National Scenic Byways Program

There are no National Scenic Byways within the Plan Area.

STATE

California Scenic Highway Program

As with the Federal program, there are no State designated Scenic Highways within the Plan Area.

LOCAL

General Plan Policy Consistency

The Merced Vision 2030 General Plan contains a number of policies that apply to Aesthetic impacts in conjunction with ultimate build-out of the City in accordance with the General Plan. The specific policies listed below contained in the Land Use, Urban Design and the Open Space, Conservation, and Recreation Elements are designed to ensure that aesthetic impacts are minimized as development occurs in accordance with the Merced Vision 2030 General Plan.

Urban Expansion Policies:

UE-1.1 Designate areas for new urban development that recognize the physical characteristics and environmental constraints of the planning area.

UE-1.2 Foster compact and efficient development patterns to maintain a compact urban form.

UE-1.3 Control the annexation, timing, density, and location of new land uses within the City's urban expansion boundaries.

UE-1.4 Continue joint planning efforts on the UC Merced and University Community plans.

UE-1.5 Promote annexation of developed areas within the City's Specific Urban Development Plan (SUDP)/Sphere of Influence (SOI) during the planning period.

Urban Design Policies:

UD-2.1 Use Urban Village design concepts in neighborhood revitalization programs.

UD-2.2 Maintain and enhance the unique community appearance of Merced.

Open Space, Conservation, and Recreation Policies:

OS-1.1 Identify and mitigate impacts to wildlife habitats which support rare, endangered, or threatened species.

OS-1.2 Preserve and enhance creeks in their natural state throughout the planning area.

OS-1.3 Promote the protection and enhancement of designated scenic routes.

OS-1.4 Improve and expand the City's urban forest.

OS-2.1 Protect agricultural areas outside the City's SUDP/SOI from urban impacts.

OS-2.2 Relieve pressures on converting areas containing large concentrations of "prime" agricultural soils to urban uses by providing adequate urban development land within the Merced City SUDP/SOI.

Land Use Policies:

L-2.5 Maintain attractive industrial areas and business parks.

3.1.2 THRESHOLDS OF SIGNIFICANCE

Consistent with Appendix G of the CEQA Guidelines, the proposed project is considered to have a significant impact on the environment if it will:

- 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.

3.1.3 IMPACTS AND MITIGATION MEASURES

Impact #3.1-1: Substantial adverse effect on a scenic vista

Discussion/Conclusion: Scenic vistas may be defined as expansive views of highly valued landscapes from publicly accessible viewpoints. Scenic vistas include views of natural features such as topography, water courses, rock outcrops, and natural vegetation as well as manmade scenic structures. Given the unrelieved topography of Merced, the majority of vistas will be local. Most areas of the City have views of the Sierra Nevada and the Coast Range, when air

quality permits. It is not expected that new development on the perimeter will be tall enough to impact the views of existing residents.

The proposed General Plan will emphasize compact development in the planning area in an effort to protect the existing visual resources. The visual character of the proposed SUDP/SOI area will eventually change from open agricultural fields and pasture land, to urban development. The General Plan contains a number of policies to reduce the impact of new development on the existing visual character and scenic vistas within the planning area.

Policy OS-1.3 of the Open Space Element aims to preserve the scenic corridors and resources by promoting the protection and enhancement of scenic routes through the following implementation measures:

1.3.a Identify, and where appropriate, designate additional scenic routes within the City's proposed SUDP and Sphere of Influence.

1.3.b Preserve the designated Scenic Corridors. The Scenic Corridors are as follows:

a) North and South Bear Creek Drive within the City limits.
b) N Street from 16th Street to the Merced County Courthouse.
c) 21st Street from the Merced County Courthouse to Glen Avenue.
d) M Street from Black Rascal Creek to Bellevue Road.
e) West 28th Street from Mercy Hospital to G Street.
f) Lake Road from Yosemite Avenue to Lake Yosemite.
g) R Street (extended) from Black Rascal Creek to Bellevue Road.
h) Olive Avenue East of McKee Road.
i) M Street from 18th Street to Bear Creek.
j) Campus Parkway.
k) Bellevue Road from Lake Road to "G" Street.

Most of these corridors are within current city limits, and are developed. Route "d" has approved urban development along both sides, though not all of it has been built. Routes "f", "g" and "h" go through areas that are proposed to be within either the SUDP/SOI or AOI, and will be subject to the requirements of the 2030 Plan (see Figure 3.1-8).

1.3.c Utilize established guidelines for the review of projects proposed within a designated Scenic Corridor.

1.3.d Explore the feasibility of creating some scenic corridors in South Merced through the use of special standards.

The General Plan also contains policies intended to protect regional agricultural resources and the scenic view sheds they provide. Policy OS 2.1 of the Open Space Element calls for the protection of "agricultural areas outside of the City's SUDP/SOI from urban impacts." Policy OS-2.2 intends to "relieve pressures on converting areas containing large concentrations of

"prime" agricultural soils to urban uses by providing adequate urban development land within the Merced City SUDP/SOI."

Policies within the Urban Design Element, the Urban Expansion Element and the Land Use Element contain standards which will reduce any impacts to scenic vistas. Low Floor Area Ratios (FAR) ensure that commercial structures will not be high enough to restrict views. Maximum residential building heights similarly prohibit excessively tall structures. The only residents who experience a change to their views will be those directly adjacent to new development.

These, and several more policies in the General Plan, reduce the impact development will have on the scenic vistas within and surrounding the planning area. This impact is ***less than significant.***

Mitigation Measures

No mitigation measures are required.

Impact #3.1-2: Substantially damage scenic resources, including but not limited to trees, rock outcroppings, and historic buildings within a state scenic highway

Discussion/Conclusion: The planning area does not contain a state designated scenic byway or highway. There will be ***no impact*** to scenic resources including, but not limited to trees, rock outcroppings, and historic buildings within a state scenic highway view shed.

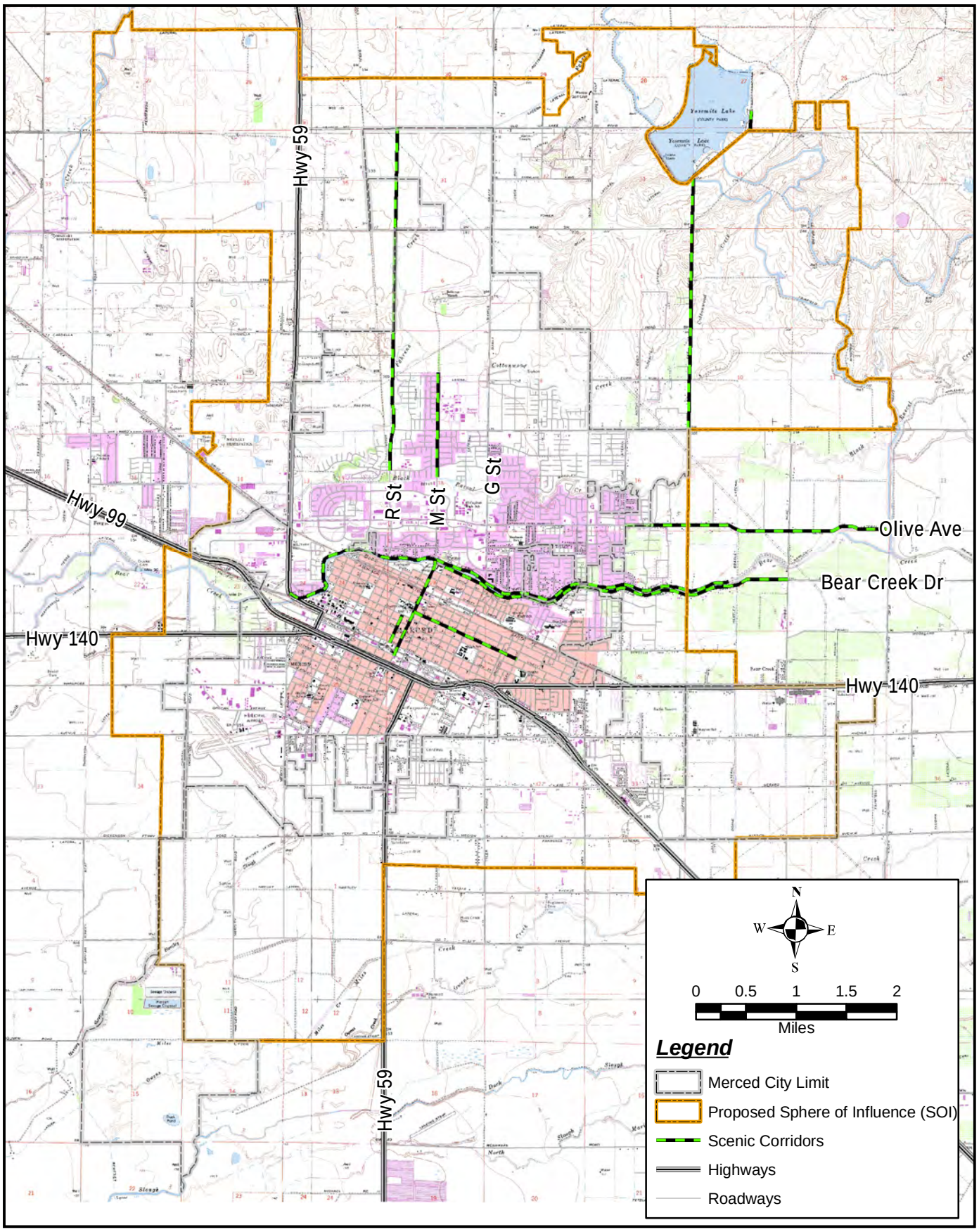
Mitigation Measures

No mitigation measures are required.

Impact #3.1-3: Substantially degrade the existing visual character or quality of the site and its surroundings

Discussion/Conclusion: Existing developed areas located on the urban edge of the City, as well as travelers on roads and highways traversing the periphery of the City have views of rural/agricultural areas that will ultimately convert to urban settings with implementation of the proposed General Plan Land Use Element. The City is located in an area of intense agricultural operations, gradually transitioning to pasture land on the north and east. Orchards, vineyards, row crops and dairies constitute the bulk of the active agricultural operations along the west, south and southeast boundaries of the City.

Also located on the periphery are areas of higher intensity residential development, such as Franklin-Beechwood area, between Santa Fe Avenue and Highway 99. These areas have been developed within the County, but are now adjacent to, or within the City SUDP/SOI. Lower-density rural residential development (1-5 acre parcels) has occurred in several areas proposed to be within the SUDP/SOI. These include the area between N. Lake Road and N. Gardner Avenue,



Quad Knopf

MERCED VISION 2030 GENERAL PLAN EIR
SCENIC CORRIDORS

Figure 3.1-8

Job No.: 060429

neighborhoods just south of the Merced Golf & Country Club, and the area east of McKee Road. These areas are not proposed for changes in land use, but may eventually be surrounded by higher intensity urban-type land uses. Along the north and northeast periphery lies pasture land. This area contains sensitive habitat that has been left outside the SUDP/SOI. Implementation of the General Plan will have no effect on these areas. Implementation of the proposed General Plan Land Use Element will ultimately alter the existing visual character by transforming views from the existing rural setting to urban residential, commercial and industrial vistas. Policies within the Land Use, Urban Expansion and Urban Design elements will assure that development will enhance the visual character of the site and its surroundings.

The policies listed above in the Local Regulatory Setting discussion will, together, minimize visual impacts that will result from General Plan implementation particularly within already developed, areas and areas planned for development within the City. The policies and implementing actions contained within the General Plan will result in urban development that is compact, low profile and architecturally interesting. While the visual character of the proposed SUDP/SOI will change over time, it will not be degraded. The impact will be ***less than significant***.

Mitigation Measures

No mitigation measures are required.

Impact #3.1-4: Create a new source of substantial light or glare that would adversely affect day or night views in the area

Discussion/Conclusion: Each development project within the City's SUDP/Sphere of Influence could potentially result in an incremental contribution to a cumulative light and glare impact. General Plan Policy OS-1.4 will reduce the potential impact of light and glare by improving and expanding the City's urban forest through many implementation measures that promote tree planting and explore alternate funding sources for providing long-term maintenance. Trees not only create an attractive atmosphere for residents and visitors but also reduce glare. The City does not have any standards for outdoor lighting that would reduce this impact. This is a ***potentially significant*** impact.

Mitigation Measure #3.1-4:

The following guidelines will be followed in selecting and designing any outdoor lighting:

1. *All outdoor lights including parking lot lights, landscaping, security, path and deck lights should be fully shielded, full cutoff luminaries.*

2. *Complete avoidance of all outdoor up-lighting for any purpose.*

3. *Avoidance of tree mounted lights unless they are fully shielded and pointing down towards the ground or shining into dense foliage. Ensure compliance over time.*

4. *Complete avoidance of up-lighting and unshielded lighting in water features such as fountains or ponds.*

Effectiveness of Mitigation Measure:

Mitigation Measure #3.1-4 will ensure that all future lighting is directed downward and away from adjacent properties, and will not contribute additional glare. This will reduce the impact to ***less than significant***.

CUMULATIVE IMPACT ANALYSIS

Impact #3.1-5: The proposed project could have a cumulatively adverse affect on aesthetic resources including the generation of light and glare

Discussion/Conclusion: Cumulative impacts from implementation of the General Plan and within the proposed SUDP/Sphere of Influence will result from the introduction of new urban development to traditionally rural agricultural areas surrounding the City of Merced. There would be a cumulative visual impact in terms of loss of agricultural land as viewed from the City and public roadways discussed in this section of the EIR.

Nighttime illumination and daytime glare would also be increased in the project vicinity as a result of cumulative General Plan build-out over time. Although individual project developments would be responsible for incorporating mitigation to minimize their visual impacts, the net result would still be a general conversion of a large area with a rural character to an urban and developed character. Some may see the loss of the area's rural character as a negative change in visual quality. This impact is considered ***potentially significant and cumulatively considerable.***

Mitigation Measures

No mitigation measures are available that would fully mitigation this impact; therefore, this impact remains ***significant, cumulatively considerable, and unavoidable***.

3.2

AGRICULTURAL AND FOREST RESOURCES