4.1 AESTHETICS

This section describes existing visual conditions in the project area and analyzes the effects of the project on visual character and scenic views. This section also evaluates new sources of light and glare. Information regarding aesthetics and visual quality was obtained from the following sources:

- Proposed Vesting Tentative Map for the project
- Proposed Project Photo simulations prepared by Square One Productions in 2015
- *The Contra Costa County General Plan 2005-2020* (General Plan)

These reports are available for review at the Contra Costa County (County) Department of Conservation and Development, Community Development Division, 30 Muir Road, Martinez, California.

In response to the Notice of Preparation for this draft environmental impact report, residents adjacent to the project site submitted comments regarding the project's visual impacts to the surrounding neighborhood and open space areas. Specifically, one commenter raised concerns about lingering effects of construction activities, citing an instance where the office building parking lot was used as a construction staging area but was not restored in a timely manner. Another commenter raised concerns about the visual impact of the new homes on Madrone Trail users, and suggested that all new structures should have adequate setbacks and softened buffers with vegetation rather than fencing. These comments are addressed in this section.

4.1.1 EXISTING CONDITIONS

Regional Setting

The project site is located in Contra Costa County in the unincorporated Alamo area (Alamo). Alamo lies within the San Ramon Valley, which is generally characterized by suburban development and Interstate 680 (I-680) corridor along the valley, and rural uses mixed with large tracts of open space in the surrounding hillsides.

Sensitive Visual Resources

According to the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans), I-680 is designated as a State Scenic Highway due to views of Mount Diablo to the northeast. Other prominent aesthetic features in the region include ridgelines and forested areas along the Las Trampas Range that are intermittently visible to the south and west.

The County has significant topographic variations which create features that provide a visual backdrop for the low-lying developed areas. The General Plan identifies ridges, hillsides, and rock outcroppings as primary scenic resources, along with the San Francisco Bay/Delta estuary system. Several designated scenic ridgeways circle the San Ramon Valley along Las Trampas Ridge to the west and the Mount Diablo range to the east. Furthermore, the County has many smaller, localized scenic resources such as isolated hilltops, mature stands of trees, and other natural features that can be considered aesthetic resources.

Project Site

The approximately 61-acre project site is composed of very-low-density development in the lower proposed residential portions and undeveloped open space in the upper portions.

The lower portion of the project site is approximately 15 percent developed with an existing residential estate house, barn, outbuildings, office complex, and paved areas. All of the existing structures are currently surrounded by mature trees and manicured landscaping (see **Figure 4.1-1a** and **Figure 4.1-1b**). The remainder of the lower portion of the project site is an undeveloped landscape featuring established woodlands, seasonal wetlands, non-native grassland, and formally cultivated walnut orchards. Many mature trees dominate the visual landscape. Deciduous species, such as valley oak (*Quercus lobata*), western sycamore (*Platanus racemosa*), and English walnut (*Juglans regia*) provide seasonal colors throughout the year. In the winter months, evergreen species like coast redwood (*Sequoia sempervirens*) and coast live oak (*Quercus agrifolia*) retain their leaves as the grassy understory turns from yellow to green. The walnut orchards also feature an understory of non-native grasses that change color during the winter rains, although this area receives routine mowing and disking (see **Figure 4.1-1c**).

Paved Driveway within Project Site

Existing Residence

Existing Visual Conditions Figure **4.1-1a**

Source: Cardepoint, 2013

Office Complex and Open Space

Barn and Horse Pasture

Existing Visual Conditions

Figure 4.1-1b

Source: Ardepoint, 2013

Orchard in the Spring/Summer

Orchard in the Fall/Winter

Existing Visual Conditions Figure **4.1-1c**

Source: Cardepoint, 2013; JRP, 2008

Drainage 1

Seasonal Wetland

Existing Visual Conditions

Figure **4.1-1d**

Source: Circlepoint, 2013

A steep, hilly, open space encompasses the upper portions of the project site. This densely-forested area features oak-bay woodland with occasional clearings that reveal non-native grasslands and scattered patches of chaparral. Valley oak is the dominant tree species, which grow in continuous stands with a relatively sparse canopy. California bay laurel (*Umbellularia californica*), buckeye (*Aesculus californica*), coast live oak, and flowering plum (*Prunus* sp.) are also present in this area, providing a variety of colors and textures in the tree canopy. A eucalyptus grove with little understory growth is located in a ravine in the southern section of the open space.

Two intermittent drainages flow through the project site. Drainage 1 is situated within the mature horticultural landscape south and east of the existing estate residence, and is heavily altered from its natural condition (see **Figure 4.1-1d**). Drainage 2 is located near the southern boundary and dissipates into seasonal wetlands also located on this portion of the site (see **Figure 4.1-1d**). Both drainages are relatively small, but feature a variety of native and non-native riparian vegetation along the banks.

Surrounding Area

The project site is bordered by a low-density residential community to the north, east, and southeast. Structures in this single-family neighborhood are generally one- to three-story homes. Existing homes on the adjacent lots range from approximately 2,000 square feet to approximately 6,500 square feet and include landscaped yards, pools, and accessory structures. These architecturally modern structures reflect local building styles and trends of the past several decades.

Las Trampas Regional Wilderness lies to the south, west, and northwest of the project site. This rugged, 5,342-acre park generally remains in a natural state, with the exception of trail improvements for public access. The unpaved, multiple-use Madrone Trail provides access to Las Trampas Regional Wilderness. This trail begins at the terminus of Camille Avenue and runs past the project site along Camille Lane before winding up to Las Trampas Ridge.

As mentioned above, the General Plan Open Space Element identifies a number of scenic ridgelines surrounding the project site. These include several Las Trampas Ridge subridgelines located 0.9 mile to the northwest and rising to 800 feet above mean sea level (AMSL), and Alamo Ridge, located 0.9 mile to the east and rising to 720 feet AMSL (Topoquest, 2008).

Public Views of the Project Site

The project site is bordered by residential subdivisions to the north and east, and Las Trampas Regional Wilderness to the south and west. Public viewpoints of the project site from the north and east are only available from local roads. In general, these views are completely obscured by existing structures and associated

landscaping within the residential neighborhoods. Public viewpoints from the south and east from Las Trampas Regional Wilderness generally capture the mature trees and topographic features located in the open space areas. However, the western portions of the project site are visible from Madrone Trail as it runs along Camille Lane.

Four publicly accessible views of the project site were selected to represent public views from off-site locations. Two viewpoints were taken from local roads, and are displayed in **Figure 4.1-2** (Viewpoint A and Viewpoint B). Two more viewpoints were taken along the Madrone Trail, which parallels Camille Lane as it wraps around the western boundary of the project site (see **Figure 4.1-2b**). These viewpoints capture the existing visual charter and quality of the project area.

Viewpoint A - View of the Project Site from Underhill Drive

Underhill Drive terminates at the easternmost corner of the project site. Existing views of the project site from Underhill Drive reveal a natural, wooded area. Mature trees are planted along the edge of the project site, and dominate the foreground. Limited views of the sky and other vegetation further into the project site are available through the tree canopy. Viewpoint A (see **Figure 4.1-2a**) illustrates how dense vegetation obscures existing improvements on the project site, such as the office complex located approximately 250 feet west of this viewpoint.

Viewpoint B – View of the Project Site from Ironwood Place

Ironwood Place terminates along the northern boundary of the project site. Existing views of the project site from Ironwood Place reveal a natural, wooded area dominated by mature trees. The trees in this viewshed are not as large as those seen in Viewpoint A, and allow a longer sight distance into the project site. However, like Viewpoint A, Viewpoint B (see **Figure 4.1-2a**) illustrates how dense vegetation obscures any existing improvements on the project site, such as a residence located approximately 375 feet south of this viewpoint.

Viewpoints C & D – View of the Project Site from Madrone Trail

Madrone Trail runs parallel to Camille Lane along the eastern boundary of the project site. Views from this trail into the project site mostly include undisturbed natural areas and former walnut orchards (Viewpoint C). The office complex is also visible from segments of Madrone Trail (Viewpoint D).

Light and Glare

Sources of daytime glare can either be a direct source of light, or can be an object which reflects light from another source, such as windows. Existing sources of daytime glare in the project area include light reflected from buildings and car windows on and around the project site. External nighttime lighting from existing

structures on the project site and in the surrounding area contribute low levels of nighttime glare.

Lighting sources in the project vicinity are typical of a lower density residential area, with exterior residential lighting, cars, and streetlights generating relatively low levels of night lighting. Ambient light is produced by the residential neighborhood along the north, east, and southeast property boundary.

4.1.2 REGULATORY SETTING

State

California Scenic Highway Program

The intent of the California Scenic Highway Program is to protect and enhance California's natural beauty and to protect the social and economic values provided by the state's scenic resources. State scenic highways are officially designated by Scenic Highways Advisory Committee. I-680 is designated as a state scenic highway from the Alameda County line to State Route 24, primarily due to the views of Mount Diablo (Caltrans, 2015). Other ridgelines hillsides surrounding the San Ramon Valley are also visible from this roadway.

Project Consistency Analysis

The project site is located about 0.5 miles west from I-680. The lower portion of the project site that is proposed for development is visually separated from this State Scenic Highway by residential development and landscaping that contains mature trees. Furthermore, the lower portion of the site and the local stretch of 1-680 lie within the same elevation: I-680 from Alamo to Danville ranges from 270 feet AMSL to 400 feet AMSL, and the lower sections of the project site ranges from 370 feet AMSL to 400 feet AMSL (Contra Costa County, 2015). The upper portions of the project site, some of which may be visible from I-680, would not be developed and would retain their scenic visual character.

Local

Contra Costa County General Plan

The Open Space Element of the General Plan contains the following relevant policies related to visual resources and aesthetics:

Open Space Element

9-2: Historic and scenic features, watersheds, natural waterways, and areas important for the maintenance of natural vegetation and wildlife populations shall be preserved and enhanced.

Viewpoint A - View of the Project Site from Underhill Drive

Viewpoint B - View of the Project Site from Ironwood Place

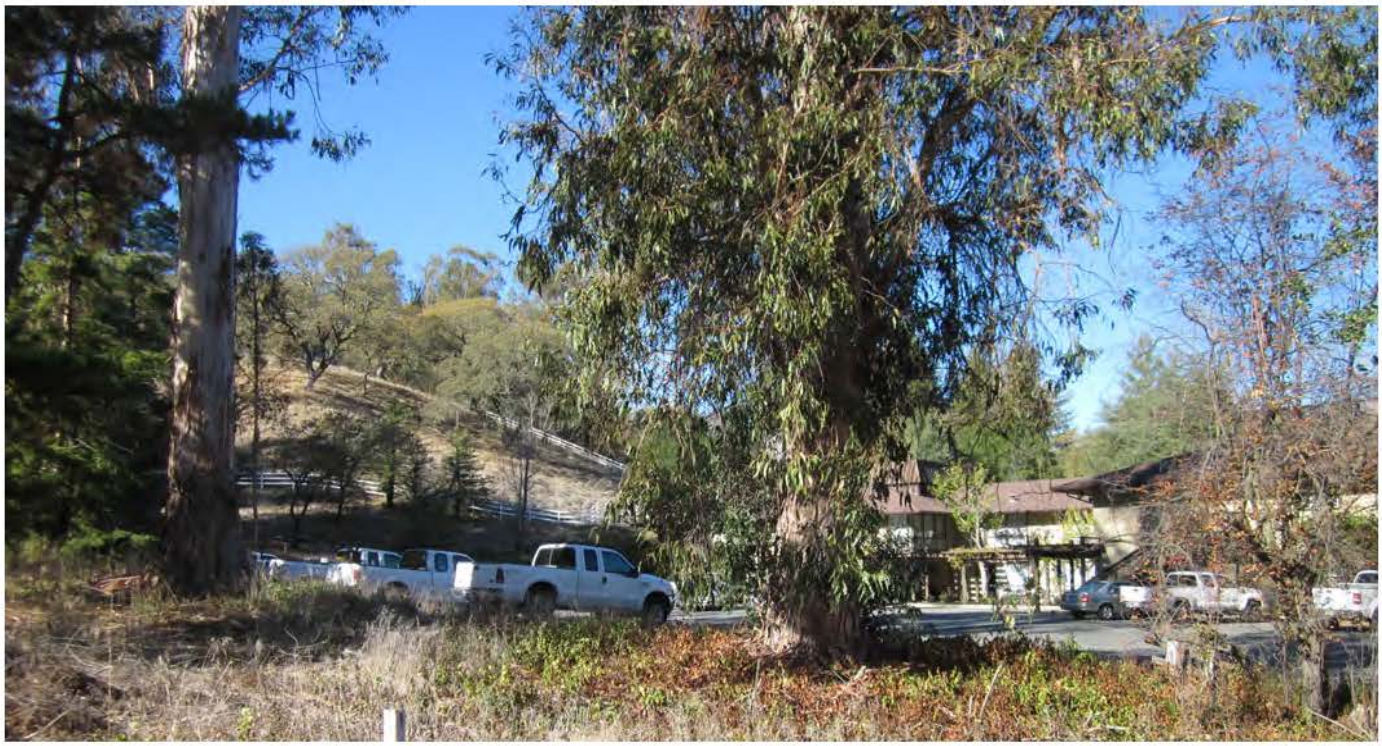
Location of Viewpoint A and Viewpoint B

Public Views of the Project Site

Figure 4.1-2a

Source: Square One Productions, 2015

Viewpoint C - Orchard Seen From Madrone Trail



Viewpoint D - Office Complex Seen From Madrone Trail

Public Views of the Project Site

Figure **4.1-2b**

Source: Cardepoint, 2013

9-10: To preserve and protect areas of identified high scenic value, where practical, and in accordance with the Land Use Element map.

9-14: High quality engineering of slopes shall be required to avoid soil erosion, downstream flooding, slope failure, loss of vegetative cover, high maintenance costs, property damages and damages to visual quality. Particularly vulnerable areas should be avoided for urban development. Slopes of 26 percent or more should generally be protected and are generally not desirable for conventional cut-and-fill pad development. Development on open hillsides and significant ridgelines shall be restricted.

9-15: In order to conserve the scenic beauty of the County, developers shall be required to restore the natural contours and vegetation of the land after grading and other land disturbances. Public and private projects shall be designed to minimize damages to significant trees and other visual landmarks.

9-20: New power lines shall be located parallel to existing lines in order to minimize their visual impact.

9-24: Any new development shall be encouraged to generally conform with natural contours to avoid excessive grading.

9-25: All new land uses which are to be located below a major scenic ridge shall be reviewed with an emphasis on protecting the visual qualities of the ridge.

9-47: Recreational activity shall be allowed only in a manner which complements the natural features of the area, including the topography, waterways, vegetation and soil characteristics.

The General Plan does not clearly define “significant trees” or “significant natural vegetation” in terms of visual resources. While there is no comprehensive list of specific features that automatically qualify trees as scenic resources under CEQA, certain characteristics can be identified which contribute to the determination of a scenic resource. The following is a partial list of visual qualities and conditions which, if present, may indicate the presence of a scenic resource (California Department of Transportation, 2008):

- A tree that displays outstanding features of form or age.
- A landmark tree or a group of distinctive trees accented in a setting as a focus of attention.
- An unusual planting that has historical value.

Conversely, examples of features that lack the typical characteristics of a scenic resource include:

- Trees that are commonplace and repetitious, occurring frequently along a roadway.

- The fringe trees of a forest.
- Trees that are incompatible with their surroundings.

Project Consistency Analysis

Although the project would construct 35 new residential units, the lower portions of the project site have been previously developed with a family estate, office building, and ancillary structures, and is surrounded on its northern, northeastern, and eastern borders by residential development. Although the project would alter the project site's existing aesthetic, the new single-family units would conform to the adjacent residential neighborhood with respect to mass and land use. Visual resources would remain largely the same. The project would conform to General Plan policies 9-14, 9-15, and 9-24 by locating development in portions of the project site that require minimal grading. Additionally, slopes located on the upper approximately 41 acres of the property would remain open space, thus conforming to policies 9-2, 9-10, and 9-47.

The project would require the removal of approximately 469 trees across the project site, many of which are nonnative, unsuitable for the regional climate, exhibit signs of poor health or structural form, or negatively affect the long-term sustainability of more suitable trees. As discussed **Section 4.4, Biological Resources**, the project would implement an onsite tree-planting plan to comply with a replacement ratio established by the County.

4.1.3 IMPACTS AND MITIGATION MEASURES

Significance Criteria

Appendix G of the CEQA Guidelines identifies environmental issues a lead agency can consider when determining whether a project could have significant effects on the environment. The project would have a significant impact if it 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.
- Create a new source of substantial light or glare which would adversely affect day or nighttime views in the area.

Discussion of No Impacts

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

As discussed above, I-680 is classified as a State Scenic Highway and is located approximately 0.5 mile east of the project site. However, the structures resulting from the project would be constructed on the lower section of the project site. This flat area is visually separated from this interstate by substantial residential development, mature landscaping, and topographic variations, and would not obstruct the viewshed from I-680. The upper portions of the project site, some of which may be visible from I-680, would not be developed and would retain their scenic visual character. No impact would occur.

Discussion of Less-than-Significant Impacts

Would the project have a substantial adverse effect on a scenic vista?

As discussed above, the project is located within 1 mile of several designated scenic ridgelines, including Las Trampas Ridge. However, due to the flat topography in the proposed residential portions of the project site, public views of scenic ridges looking west from Camille Lane and Ironwood Place west are almost entirely obscured by existing vegetation and structures.

Though Las Trampas Regional Wilderness and associated trail systems (including Madrone Trail) encircles the northwestern, western, and southern portions of the project site, these areas are flat and lack the panoramic perspective that characterize scenic vistas.[1] Though public vistas looking east towards the project site are available from ridgelines and outcrops within Las Trampas Regional Wilderness, these views would be unaffected because the proposed development would be visually separated from these viewsheds by topography and existing trees. This impact would be less than significant.

Would the project substantially degrade the existing visual character or quality of the site and its surroundings?

The lower portions of the project site generally have low visibility from public vantage points due to flat topography and visual barriers. Public views of the project site are available from Madrone Trail and local roadways, including the Ironwood Place cul-de-sacs, Camille Lane, and Camille Avenue. As shown in **Figure 4.1-3a** and **Figure 4.1-3b** existing fences, structures, and vegetation screen views

[1] Other aesthetic impacts (i.e. those unrelated to scenic vistas) to viewers along Madrone Trail system are evaluated below in this section.

from local roadways. A majority of the mature trees along the northern and eastern perimeters of the project site would be retained through a Tree Preservation Plan.

The southeast corner of the project site is highly visible from a portion of Madrone Trail. Daytime recreationalists along the trail segment travel along the project perimeter for approximately 850 linear feet before entering Las Trampas Regional Wilderness. This portion of Madrone Trail travels parallel to Camille Lane through existing single-family subdivisions and currently exhibits a suburban characteristic. Furthermore, the existing office building is visible from a large portion of this trail segment (Viewpoint D).

Construction

Construction activities would alter views of the project site. The most dramatic visual change would occur during the initial site-wide preparations, such as demolition, clearing, grubbing, earthworks, utility installation, and street paving. Visual impacts associated with the construction activities would include exposed pads and staging areas for grading and construction equipment. In addition, temporary structures, material storage areas, and debris piles could be located within the project site during various stages of demolition and construction. Tree removal throughout the project site during the initial construction phase would transform the visual character of the portions of the project site proposed for development. Trees could also potentially be cleared from the upper open space areas to create a wetland mitigation area, staging area, and connector trail to Madrone Trail. However, this area represents one percent of the open space area, which would predominantly retain its natural character.

Demolition, clearing, grubbing, and mass-grading activities are anticipated to occur over a 5-month period, after which heavy-duty construction equipment would be removed from the project site. Construction would transition to lot-by-lot homebuilding and landscaping for up to ten years or until every lot is occupied with single-family homes. Prepared lots would remain vacant until sold and developed, but would be maintained through the stipulations of a construction-period stormwater pollution prevention plan and an erosion control plan. The project's Tree Preservation Plan would also retain a perimeter of trees around the development site, which would help screen construction activities.

Furthermore, public views of the lower approximately 20 acres of the project site are generally obscured by local topography and landscaping. One notable exception is the Madrone Trail, which offers public views of proposed Lots 15, 16, 17, 18, and 27 as it wraps around the western boundary of the project site. Although trail users will see construction equipment and activities, this would represent a temporary visual impact. Development of the proposed residential lots would only occur in the

lower portions of the project site, while the upper open space areas would mostly remain in a natural state.[2]

Given the temporary duration of major construction activities (i.e. earthwork and paving), the limited public visibility of the project site, and surrounding suburban character, project construction would not substantially degrade the area's existing visual quality.

Operation

Impact AES-1: New homes on the project site could conflict with the character of existing residential neighborhoods in the area (Less than Significant with Mitigation).

Upon operation, the developed portions of the project site would resemble the surrounding low-density residential neighborhoods, and visual resources would predominately remain the same. **Figure 4.1-3** (Viewpoint A2 and Viewpoint B2) depicts views of the project site from Underhill Drive, Ironwood Place, and Madrone Trail under pre-project and post-project conditions. These images simulate mature vegetation to be retained under the Tree Preservation Plan while illustrating the approximate scale of the proposed structures on the project site.

Viewpoint A2 - Proposed Visual Conditions from Underhill Drive

Viewpoint A2 captures a dense grove of mature trees located on the property boundary. Most of these trees would be retained as identified in the Tree Preservation Plan, and would visually obscure proposed structures on the project site from Underhill Drive. Viewpoint A2 offers limited views of two proposed structures, but views of the project site from this public road would generally retain their existing wooded characteristic.

Viewpoint B2 – Proposed Visual Conditions from Ironwood Place

The trees in Viewpoint B2 (see **Figure 4.1-3b**) are not as dense as those in Viewpoint A2, and allow a longer sight distance into the project site. As such, the proposed custom home located near the property boundary is highly visible from Ironwood Place. However, **Mitigation Measure AES-1** would ensure that the mass and scale of this structure does not conflict with the current visual character of the existing adjacent neighborhoods. Other proposed structures located deeper in the project site are more visually obscured by trees that would be retained as part of the Tree Preservation Plan, although several visible trees are proposed for removal. The proposed Emergency Vehicle Access gate and wall would extend slightly higher than the existing fence, but would not dramatically impact this viewpoint.

[2] Trees could potentially be cleared from the upper open space areas to create a wetland mitigation area, staging area, and connector trail to Madrone Trail. However, this area represents 1 percent of the open space area, which would predominantly retain its natural character.

The potential exists for new custom homes on the project site to conflict with the existing character of the surrounding neighborhoods, which would degrade the visual quality of the project area. This potentially significant impact would be reduced with implementation of **Mitigation Measure AES-1**.

> ***Mitigation Measure AES-1:*** Custom homes must undergo an administrative design review, as required by conditions of approval, to ensure consistency with the existing character of the surrounding area. This process would examine elements of each proposed custom home, including size, scale, massing, setback, and color. In addition, the HOA Design Review Guidelines and Landscape Design Plan will include specific provisions regarding setbacks, backyard structures, and vegetative buffers along the perimeter of Madrone Trail. Compliance with these procedures will be required by the project's covenants, conditions, and restrictions, which will be reviewed by the County.

Significance after Mitigation: Mitigation Measure AES-1 will ensure compliance with the project's architectural and landscaping design guidelines, reducing this potential impact to a less-than-significant level.

Create a new source of substantial light or glare which would adversely affect day or nighttime views in the area?

Impact AES-2: New exterior lighting from the project could adversely impact nighttime views in the area.

The project would add 35 new custom homes to a predominately vacant site, clustered adjacent to existing single-family homes. Daytime glare would occur when sunlight reflects off rooftops, windows, and other surfaces of the proposed structures. Nighttime light would be produced from exterior houselights and vehicles traveling to, from, and within the project site. Therefore, the project may increase the amount of daytime glare and nighttime light in the vicinity.

As discussed above, the project site generally has low visibility from public viewpoints. Mature trees retained around the project perimeter would screen and diffuse much of the glare produced by the project. With respect to daytime glare, residential glass typically has a low reflectivity rate. Insofar as glare may also occur from on-site vehicles, glare from parked vehicles would primarily affect future project users and, with respect to mobile vehicles, such glare would be transient, depending upon the time of day and location of the vehicle. This increase in glare would be virtually unnoticeable given the surrounding residential development.

With respect to new sources of automobile lights, traffic levels would be few during peak hours, and very few during nighttime hours, as established in **Chapter 4.16, Transportation and Traffic**. Lights from headlights would represent a minor contribution to existing nighttime lighting in the surrounding residential area. Trips associated with new development under the project would be similar with trips to

and from surrounding neighborhoods, and would not result in light beyond levels generated by these existing residences

Development of 35 new residential homes in a currently undeveloped area could increase lighting above existing levels. Implementation of **Mitigation Measure AES-2** would minimize this impact.

> ***Mitigation Measure AES-2:*** A lighting plan for any proposed exterior lighting must be submitted to the Contra Costa County Department of Conservation and Development, Community Development Division for review and approval.
>
> Exterior lighting must be directed downward and away from adjacent properties and public/private right-of-way to prevent glare or excessive light spillover. Lighting bulbs must be limited to low intensity lights, including lighting for identification purposes.
>
> No free standing light poles will be allowed within the residential property. Landscaping lights must be limited to ground-level for walking/safety purposes.
>
> If any lighting is proposed for the staging area, lighting must be also directed downward and away from adjacent properties. Lighting intensity may not be greater than what is reasonably required to safely illuminate the staging area.

Significance after Mitigation: Mitigation Measure AES-2 would reduce lighting impacts associated with the project to a less-than-significant level.

Viewpoint A1 - Existing Visual Conditions from Underhill Drive

Viewpoint A2 - Proposed Visual Conditions from Underhill Drive

Location of Viewpoint A

Simulations of Propsed Visual Conditions

Figure 4.1-3a

Source: Square One Productions, 2015

Viewpoint B1 - Existing Visual Conditions from Ironwood Place

Viewpoint B2 - Proposed Visual Conditions from Ironwood Place

Location of Viewpoint B

Simulations of Proposed Visual Conditions

Figure 4.1-3b

Source: Square One Productions, 2015

4.1.4 CUMULATIVE IMPACTS

The recent, current, and foreseeable future projects listed in **Chapter 4.0, Setting, Impacts, and Mitigation Measures**, could cumulatively impact the County's scenic quality in the following ways:

- Loss of visual resources within a state scenic highway
- Loss of scenic vistas, such as hillsides, ridges, and the Bay and Delta shoreline
- New sources of excessive light or glare
- Degradation of the County's visual quality

As discussed in this section, project is not within a state scenic highway, and would not develop on or within the viewshed of hillsides, ridgelines, or other scenic vistas. The project, along with recent, current, and foreseeable future projects, is located within developed portions of the County. These 'infill' developments are similar in type, density, and quality to the surrounding urban/suburban context, and would not generate excessive sources of light or glare or significantly degrade the County's visual quality.[3] No cumulative impact would occur.

4.1.5 REFERENCES

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[3] As discussed in **Section 4.11, Land Use and Planning**, the project is considered infill development because it is located within the County's Urban Limit Line.

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