

3.3 Aesthetics

This section examines whether implementation of the General Plan will impact aesthetic and visual resources in the project area. The introduction of light and glare from new development is also addressed in this section.

ENVIRONMENTAL SETTING

Aesthetics

Rancho Santa Margarita is located within a natural setting that provides a unique visual character. The City has developed as a series of Planned Communities among natural features such as slopes, ridgelines, bluffs, natural vegetation and surface water sources. Development within each Planned Community is designed to be compatible and form a consistent visual image. Residential development dominates the Planned Communities. Low-scale commercial development is concentrated east of the Foothill Transportation Corridor and Santa Margarita Parkway while business park uses are west of the Corridor. Open space surrounds the developed portions of the City to maintain the natural landscape as well as enhance public safety from natural hazards (please refer to Sections 3.9, Geology and 3.10, Hydrology). Approximately 66% of the land area within the City is designated for some form of passive open space or active park use.

The visual character of the City includes the following features:

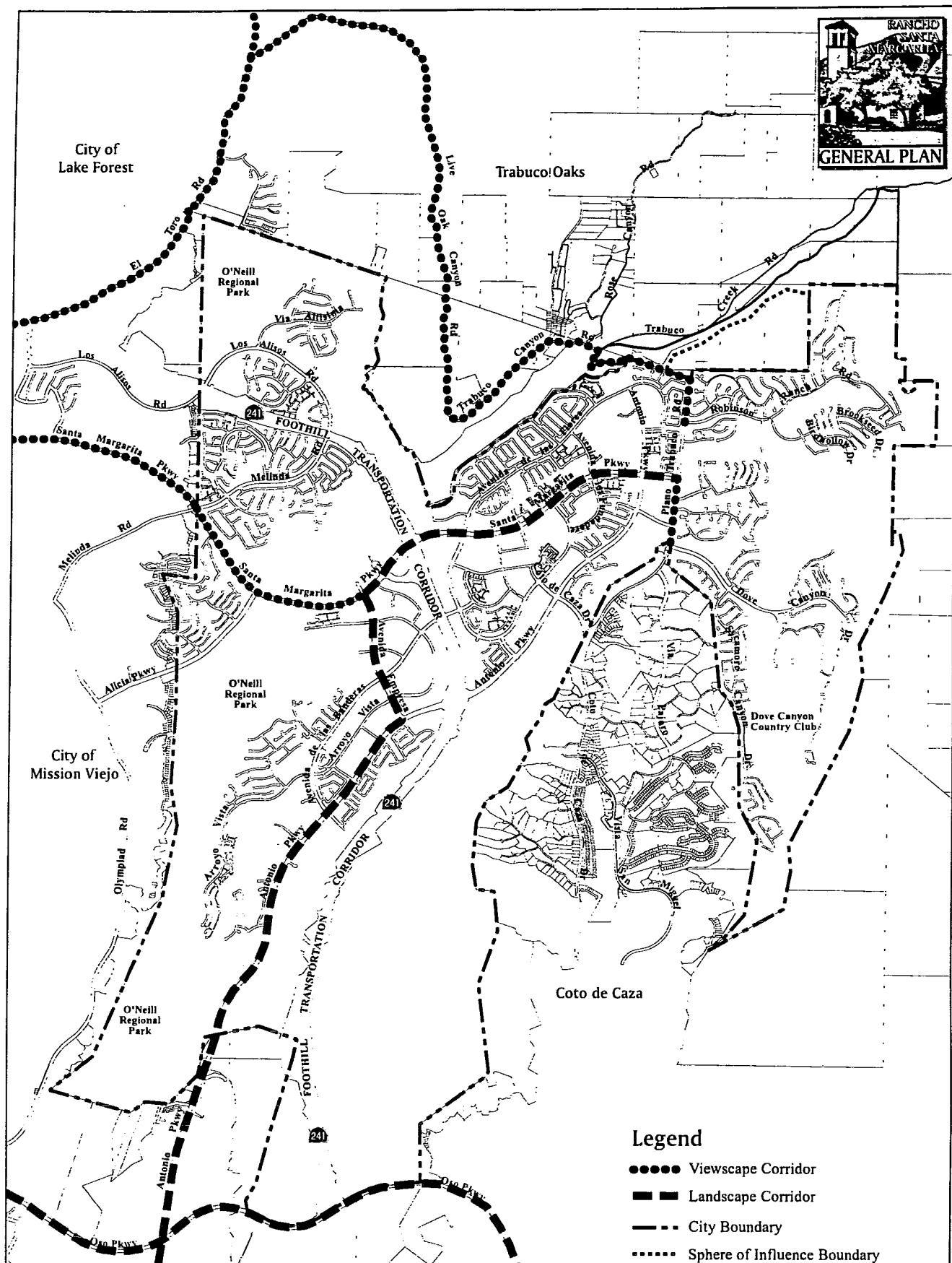
- ◆ Ridgelines
- ◆ Native vegetation (described in Section 3.7, Biological Resources)
- ◆ Natural watercourses
- ◆ Viewpoints from within the area and scenic roadways

Several ridgelines and vista points are located in Rancho Santa Margarita. These include Trabuco Canyon, Live Oak Canyon, Plano Trabuco, Ashbury Canyon, Cochise Canyon and Bell Canyon, among others.

Surface watercourses in the City include Lake Santa Margarita, the Upper Oso Reservoir, Tijeras Canyon Creek and Trabuco Creek. Several small tributaries are also located within the open space areas of the City.

The County of Orange has a Scenic Highways Plan included in the General Plan Transportation Element. The County's designated scenic highways have been divided into two categories: Viewscape Corridors and Landscape Corridors:

As shown in Figure 5, the project area has viewscape and landscape corridors designated on the County Scenic Highway Plan.



- Legend**
- Viewscape Corridor
 - ■ ■ Landscape Corridor
 - - - City Boundary
 - Sphere of Influence Boundary
 - Future Planned Community Boundary

Sources: Orange County Land Base, 2001;
Cotton/Bridges/Associates, 2001

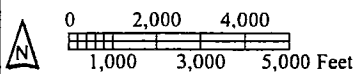


Figure 5
Scenic Highways

Viewscape Corridors:

- ◆ Santa Margarita Parkway: west of City boundary; between city boundary and Avenida Empresa
- ◆ Plano Trabuco Road: south of Santa Margarita Parkway; north of Robinson Ranch Road
- ◆ Trabuco Canyon Road between Live Oak Canyon Road and Plano Trabuco Road
- ◆ Live Oak Canyon Road between El Toro Road and Trabuco Canyon Road
- ◆ El Toro Road adjacent to the project area

Landscape Corridors:

- ◆ Santa Margarita Parkway between Avenida Empresa and Plano Trabuco Road
- ◆ Antonio Parkway between Oso Parkway and Avenida Empresa
- ◆ Avenida Empresa between Santa Margarita Parkway and Antonio Parkway
- ◆ Oso Parkway throughout project area

During development of the planned communities that are now the City of Rancho Santa Margarita, the Feature Plans, Area Plans, Specific Plans, Site Plans, and corresponding environmental documentation evaluated the visual resources within and around each plan area. Each plan was designed to complement the natural landscape and preserve the vistas and ridgelines to the extent feasible. Another component that was included throughout development was high-quality architecture and landscape design standards to complement the natural setting that surrounds the city. Development of the Planned Communities that now comprise the city included landscape and design standards in the Feature Plans, Area Plans and Specific Plans.

The 261-acre Northeast Future Planned Community is predominantly undeveloped land with two wholesale nurseries. This area has prominent landscape features including hillsides and the Trabuco Creek.

Light and Glare

Light is generated by various sources in the City. Night lighting is used in commercial districts, parking areas, outdoor sport facilities and roadways. Light is also generated by the headlights of traveling vehicles. The central part of the City is most developed and experiences the greatest light levels from the Foothill Transportation Corridor and commercial centers. Light levels are very low in the undeveloped Northeast Future Planned Community.

Glare is generated by sunlight reflecting off polished surfaces such as windows, pavings, building surfaces and automobile windshields. The Planned Communities were designed with building materials, landscaping and other features to try to reduce the impact of glare.

THRESHOLDS USED TO DETERMINE LEVEL OF IMPACT

Implementation of the General Plan will result in a significant impact if it will 1) have a substantial adverse effect on a scenic vista, 2) substantially damage scenic resources, 3) substantially degrade the existing visual character or quality of the site and its surroundings or 4) create a new source of light or glare which would adversely affect day or nighttime views in the area.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

Aesthetics

Development pursuant to General Plan policy over the life of the Plan will result in the addition of approximately 687 net new units to the City's housing stock, for a total of 17,327 units, and an additional 712,000 square feet of nonresidential development (see Table 1 in the Project Description of this EIR), for a total of 13.66 million square feet. Due to the built-out nature within the City, most of the new development will occur in the Northeast Future Planned Community.

Rancho Santa Margarita is rich with scenic resources such as Lake Santa Margarita, its ridgelines, creeks, open space and views of the surrounding hillsides. To work towards minimizing potential impacts on visual resources in the project area, the General Plan includes a Conservation/Open Space Element that addresses the community character and identity. This Element includes the following goal and policies:

Goal 2: *Maintain community character and identity by protecting the City's scenic resources and vistas.*

Policy 2.1: Maintain scenic resources, such as the City's hillsides, ridgelines and surface water resources as open space.

Policy 2.2: Encourage and maintain high-quality architectural and landscaping design to preserve the community's visual character.

The development of the 29 acres of vacant land within the City will occur in established planned communities and surrounded by existing development. This new residential and non-residential development will be subject to the architectural standards outlined in the planned community documents. This will maintain the high-quality design that is found throughout the community. With implementation of these requirements, impact that would otherwise be potentially significant, can be reduced or avoided.

The majority of development pursuant to the General Plan will occur in the Northeast Future Planned Community. As part of the General Plan Land Use Element, provisions are made for an allowable land use mix in the Northeast Future Planned Community. The land use mix for the area includes 35% open space, including preservation of bluffs

located southeast of Trabuco Creek and north and east of the Porter Ranch area. Trail linkages to the existing trails network are also required. In addition, most of the residential development would be low density (not to exceed 4.0 du/acre and 7.0 du/acre). These guidelines aim for development to blend with the natural landscape to the extent possible. Since this future development cannot be viewed from the majority of the areas within the City, the overall character of Rancho Santa Margarita will not change. However, this development will change the natural landscape of the future planned community area with urban uses. This impact is potentially significant.

Light and Glare

Light and glare levels will increase in the Northeast Future Planned Community as development occurs. Existing dark skies in this area could be impacted by vehicle headlights and night lighting for streets, parks, and parking lots. Light levels in the established areas of the City will not substantially increase since little new development is identified in the General Plan. The planned community documents also addressed ways to reduce lighting impacts on neighboring uses. This impact is potentially significant.

MITIGATION MEASURES

The City will implement Implementation Programs LU-7, LU-10 and COS-7, which minimize aesthetic and light and glare impacts from new development and redevelopment pursuant to the General Plan. Implementation Program LU-7 requires the City to (a) review development proposals and amendments for consistency with Planned Community development plans and agreements; and (b) review proposed amendments to approved Planned Communities to avoid unacceptable impacts to the surrounding development and natural characteristics of the amendment site.

The development of the Northeast Future Planned Community will require preparation of a Specific Plan prior to annexation, as stated in Implementation Program LU-10. This plan will indicate how the provisions of the Land Use Element are met in the design of the new community.

Implementation Program COS-7 requires the assessment of development proposals, including those in the Northeast Future Planned Community, for potential impacts to important visual resources pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act, such as ridgelines, creeks, open space, views of the surrounding hillsides and light and glare affects. This assessment is to include appropriate mitigation measures for all significant impacts.

3.3 Aesthetics

LEVEL OF IMPACT AFTER MITIGATION

With the implementation of Implementation Programs LU-7, LU-10 and COS-7, impacts to aesthetics and light and glare levels will be reduced to less-than-significant.