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Questionnaire to Determine Visual Impact Assessment (VIA) Level

Use the following questions and subsequent score as a guide to help determine the appropriate level of VIA documentation. This questionnaire assists the VIA preparer (i.e. Landscape Architect) in estimating the probable visual impacts of a proposed project on the environment and in understanding the degree and breadth of the possible visual issues. The goal is to develop a suitable document strategy that is thorough, concise and defensible.

Enter the project name and consider each of the ten questions below. Select the response that most closely applies to the proposed project and corresponding number on the right side of the table. Points are automatically computed at the bottom of the table and the total score should be matched to one of the five groups of scores at the end of the questionnaire that include recommended levels of VIA study and associated annotated outlines (i.e., minor, moderate, advanced/complex).

This scoring system should be used as a preliminary guide and should not be used as a substitute for objective analysis on the part of the preparer. Although the total score may recommend a certain level of VIA document, circumstances associated with any one of the ten question-areas may indicate the need to elevate the VIA to a greater level of detail. For projects done by others on the State Highway System, the District Landscape Architect should be consulted when scoping the VIA level and provide concurrence on the level of analysis used.

[The Standard Environmental Reference, Environmental Handbook, Volume I: Chapter 27-Visual & Aesthetics Review](#) lists preparer qualifications for conducting the visual impact assessment process. Landscape Architects receive formal training in the area of visual resource management and can appropriately determine which VIA level is appropriate.

Preparer Qualifications:

"Scenic Resource Evaluations and VIA's are performed under the direction of licensed Landscape Architects. Landscape Architects receive formal training in the area of visual resource management with a curriculum that emphasizes environmental design, human factors, and context sensitive solutions. When recommending specific visual mitigation measures, Landscape Architects can appropriately weigh the benefits of these different measures and consider construction feasibility and maintainability."

Calculate VIA Level Score

Project Information

Project Name**Project Identification #****Preparer Name****Caltrans District Landscape Architect (DLA)**

For projects on State Highway System Only, Name of Caltrans District Landscape Architect (DLA) providing VIA Questionnaire Score Concurrence - if different than above.



Change to Visual Environment

1. Will the project result in a noticeable change in the physical characteristics of the existing environment?

Consider all project components and construction impacts - both permanent and temporary, including landform changes, structures, noise barriers, vegetation removal, railing, signage, and contractor activities.

Low Level of Change (1 point) ▼

2. Will the project complement or contrast with the visual character desired by the community?

Evaluate the scale and extent of the project features compared to the surrounding scale of the community. Is the project likely to give an urban appearance to an existing rural or suburban community? Do you anticipate that the change will be viewed by the public as positive or negative? Research planning documents, or talk with local planners and community representatives to understand the type of visual environment local residents envision for their community.

High Compatibility (1 point) ▼

3. What level of local concern is there for the types of project features (e.g., bridge structures, large excavations, sound barriers, or median planting removal) and construction impacts that are proposed?

Certain project improvements can be of special interest to local citizens, causing a heightened level of public concern, and requiring a more focused visual analysis.

Moderate Concern (2 points) ▼

4. Will the project require redesign or realignment to minimize adverse change or will mitigation, such as landscape or architectural treatment, likely be necessary?

Consider the type of changes caused by the project, i.e., can undesirable views be screened or will desirable views be permanently obscured so a redesign should be considered?

Mitigation Likely (1 point) ▼

5. Will this project, when seen collectively with other projects, result in an aggregate adverse change (cumulative impacts) in overall visual quality or character?

Identify any projects (both Caltrans and local) in the area that have been constructed in recent years and those currently planned for future construction. The window of time and the extent of area applicable to possible cumulative impacts should be based on a reasonable anticipation of the viewing public's perception.

Cumulative Impacts Unlikely to Occur (1 point) ▼

Viewer Sensitivity

1. What is the potential that the project proposal will be controversial within the community, or opposed by any organized group?

This can be researched initially by talking with Caltrans and local agency management and staff familiar with the affected community's sentiments as evidenced by past projects and/or current information.

Low Potential (1 point) ▼

2. How sensitive are potential viewer-groups likely to be regarding visible changes proposed by the project?

Consider among other factors the number of viewers within the group, probable viewer expectations, activities, viewing duration, and orientation. The expected viewer sensitivity level may be scoped by applying professional judgment, and by soliciting information from other Caltrans staff, local agencies and community representatives familiar with the affected community's sentiments and demonstrated concerns.

Moderate Sensitivity (2 points) ▼



To what degree does the project's aesthetic approach appear to be consistent with applicable laws, ordinances, regulations, policies or standards?

Although the State is not always required to comply with local planning ordinances, these documents are critical in understanding the importance that communities place on aesthetic issues. The Caltrans Environmental Planning branch may have copies of the planning documents that pertain to the project. If not, this information can be obtained by contacting the local planning department. Also, many local and state planning documents can be found online at the California Land Use Planning Network.

High Compatibility (1 point) ▼

4. Are permits going to be required by outside regulatory agencies (i.e., Federal, State, or local)?

Permit requirements can have an unintended consequence on the visual environment. Anticipated permits, as well as specific permit requirements - which are defined by the permitted, may be determined by talking with the project Environmental Planner and Project Engineer. Note: coordinate with the Caltrans representative responsible for obtaining the permit prior to communicating directly with any permitting agency.

Yes (3 points) ▼

Will the project sponsor or public benefit from a more detailed visual analysis in order to help reach consensus on a course of action to address potential visual impacts?

5. consensus on a course of action to address potential visual impacts?

Consider the proposed project features, possible visual impacts, and probable mitigation recommendations.

No (1 point) ▼

Calculate Total

It is recommended that you print a copy of these calculations for the project file.

Project Score: 14

Select An Outline Based Upon Project Score

The total score will indicate the recommended VIA level for the project. In addition to considering circumstances relating to any one of the ten questions-areas that would justify elevating the VIA level, also consider any other project factors that would have an effect on level selection.

Score 6-9

No noticeable visual changes to the environment are proposed and no further analysis is required. Print out a copy of this completed questionnaire for your project file or Preliminary Environmental Study (PES).

Score 10-14

Negligible visual changes to the environment are proposed. A [brief Memorandum\(see sample\)](#)addressing visual issues providing a rationale why a technical study is not required.

Score 15-19

Noticeable visual changes to the environment are proposed. An abbreviated VIA is appropriate in this case. The assessment would briefly describe project features, impacts and any avoidance and minimization measures. Visual simulations would be optional. Go to the [Directions for using and accessing the Minor VIA Annotated Outline](#).

Score 20-24

Noticeable visual changes to the environment are proposed. A fully developed VIA is appropriate. This technical study will likely receive public review.Go to the [Directions for using and accessing the Moderate VIA Annotated Outline](#).

Score 25-30

Noticeable visual changes to the environment are proposed. A fully developed VIA is appropriate that includes photo simulations. It is appropriate to alert the Project Development Team to the potential for highly adverse impacts and to consider project alternatives to avoid those impacts.Go to the [Directions for using and accessing the Advanced/Complex VIA Annotated Outline](#).



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