

## CHAPTER 15

### VISUAL IMPACTS / AESTHETICS

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## 15. VISUAL IMPACTS/AESTHETICS

### 15-1 OVERVIEW

The National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA) requires Federal agencies to take into consideration the effects of proposed Federal actions on the human environment. The Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations identify aesthetics as one of the factors in the human environment which must be considered in determining the effects of a Federal action. Title 23 U.S.C. 109(h) and Technical Advisory T 6640.8A cites the aesthetic effect of the proposed project as a matter which must be fully considered in the preparation of environmental documents.

The aesthetic quality of a community is composed of visual resources; that is those physical features that make up the visible landscape, including land, water, vegetation and man-made features (i.e., buildings, roadways and structures).

It is the Federal Highway Administration's (FHWA) policy to emphasize quality design, art and architecture, and quality engineering in the development of highways. FHWA supports the many Departmental programs concerned with the visual quality of highways (i.e., highway landscaping, wildflowers, scenic strips and overlooks, scenic highways, preservation of parks and historic places, rest areas which may accommodate sculpture and other original art forms, junkyard screening and control, outdoor advertising control and joint development facilities on the highway right-of-way).

FHWA will participate with State and local governmental agencies and organizations to provide opportunities for the display of original works of art within the highway right-of-way. Federal funding participation is to be limited to the site facilities and accommodations required for their placement within the right-of-way.

The Florida Legislature has directed the Department to include aesthetics into the development of all highway projects and suggests local governments and municipalities require aesthetics in their comprehensive plans. Specific legislation is:

**ss 334.044(25) F.S. 1997, Department; powers and duties-**?To provide for the conservation of natural roadside growth and scenery and for the implementation and maintenance of roadside beautification programs.”

**ss 336.045 (1) F.S. 1997, Uniform minimum standards for design, construction, and maintenance; advisory committees.** ... ?the department shall consider design approaches which provide for the compatibility of such facilities with the surrounding natural or man-made environment; the safety and security of public spaces; and the appropriate aesthetics based upon scale, color, architectural style, materials used to construct the facilities, and the landscape design and landscape materials around the facilities.”

**ss 336.045 (6) F.S. 1997, Uniform minimum standards for design, construction, and maintenance; advisory committees.** "If the governing body of a county or municipality has adopted a design element as part of its comprehensive plan ...the department shall consider such element during project development of transportation facilities."

**ss 339.155 (2)(k) F.S. 1997, Transportation planning.** - "In developing the Florida Transportation Plan, the Department shall consider....the total social, economic, energy, and environmental effects of transportation decisions on the community and region."

As with FHWA and the Florida Legislature, it is the intent of the Department to incorporate aesthetic design, art and architecture in roadway and bridge design. The Department adopted an Environmental Policy to assure design solutions are compatible with the surrounding environment and community desires while preserving natural vegetation and the human environment. The results of this design effort is to provide the road user and community road viewer with a transportation system that is pleasing to the senses, assimilates the visual qualities of a community's visual resources into its design, and makes the highway system compatible with the community-at-large.

To design a facility which meets the aesthetic needs and desires of a community, the District must coordinate with the community, state, federal, regional and local agencies, and private interest groups, to ensure that full consideration is given to designing a facility which meets the aesthetic needs and desires of the community.

Visual impacts affect communities from two perspectives: 1). the view from the road and 2). the view of the road. The view from the road is from the user's perspective and leaves a lasting impression of the community, area or region on the visitor as well as residents. The view of the road by the resident contributes to the feeling of community value and pride. Visual impacts of an area are ascertained by defining the visual environment, identifying key views, analyzing the resources and community responses, depicting the project appearance, assessing the visual impacts, and then developing mitigation measures.

## **15-2 PROCEDURE**

### **15-2.1 Documentation**

The Type 2 CEs, EAs, EISs or SEIS's should discuss the visual impacts of the project. The discussion should address the visual impacts of a proposed facility as expressed by a community as being important through their local comprehensive plan, legislation, local designation, surveys or ordinances. The discussion should include both the existing and proposed environmental features surrounding the project.

### **15-2.1.1 Affected Environment**

The Affected Environment section of an EIS should provide a concise summary of the existing environment in terms of its visual resources (land form, land cover and man-made elements). This summary should be addressed from both user and viewer perspectives.

### **15-2.1.2 Alternative Section**

For EAs, EISs, Type 2 CEs and SEISs the Alternatives section (or Impacts Section support documentation) should describe the proposed aesthetic design; art, landscape and architectural elements of the project which are being incorporated into the design to accommodate significant visual resources adjacent to or within the project. The discussion should also include a description of the way these aesthetic design elements are being included for visual quality. This will often mean referring the reader to the Comments and Coordination sections of those documents. If a commitment regarding aesthetics is made by the Department then this commitment must be included in the Commitments and Recommendations Sections of the final documents.

### **15-2.1.3 Environmental Consequences or Impacts Section**

For Type 2 CEs, EAs, EISs, and SEISs the Environmental Consequences Section or Impacts Section should discuss the aesthetic effects a project has on an area. This generally depends on the activity, exposure and sensitivity of road users and viewers. There are areas that are generally recognized as critical or sensitive . These include:

- 1.residential areas,
- 2.areas of recognized beauty (local, state, national),
- 3.parks and recreation areas,
- 4.historic or other culturally-important resources,
- 5.entry to urban areas,
- 6.water bodies,
- 7.public facilities (hospitals, colleges, universities),
- 8.business centers, and
- 9.office complexes.

In order to document these features the District should obtain community input into the process. The following is a list of community characteristics usually treasured by residents. In analyzing visual impacts, these topics should be evaluated in their fullest sense of meaning so that the impacts of the project can be better understood and addressed by the Department. Analysis of these types of project impacts shall involve a determination of public opinion, community interest group definitions and sensitivity perceptions.

- 1.Speed control
- 2.Tree cover
3. Vegetation screening
- 4.Green space

5. Distance between objects
6. Safety
7. Clutter
8. Design compatibility with neighborhood setting
9. Color coordination
10. Simplicity of Signage
11. Light and lighting
12. Sense of ownership
13. Noise level
14. Odors
15. Clean air
16. Specific historic or cultural features
17. Lake and stream cleanliness

Whenever there exists a potential for significant visual impacts, the Type 2 CE, EA, EIS, SEIS should contain a comprehensive summary of the visual impact analysis of all project alternatives under detailed consideration. The inclusion of a discussion on the visual effects of a proposed project in a Type 2 CE, EA, EIS or SEIS depends on the visual characteristics of the area through which the project passes. If the visual environment encompasses significant visual elements or it is unique due to the sensitivity of its affected viewers, a visual analysis would be warranted. The summary should be commensurate in scope with the impact analysis findings. A transportation facility can be instrumental in improving the visual quality of an otherwise unattractive area and, therefore, not require mitigation measures. For a Type 2 CE, mitigation measures must be described which render the potential significant impact as a minimal impact.

The visual impact analysis should contain, at a minimum, the following information:

1. Sufficient information to briefly describe the significant visual resources (topography, water bodies, man-made development, vegetation, etc.);
2. Identify viewers and/or viewer groups which would be impacted most by the project;
3. Describe the visual impacts of the project on these resources and viewers; and
4. Identify appropriate measures to mitigate or minimize harm.

The volume and type of information necessary to summarize these concerns will vary from project to project.

Adverse visual impacts can be mitigated through a variety of actions in design, construction and maintenance. Some of the more common measures include location, alignment, use of color, unique or significant construction materials, landscaping, screening, the incorporation of architectural features, earthwork and litter control. Highway corridors should be located so as to avoid or minimize visible impact upon visual resources that are controversial or exceptional in quality. The removal of the natural or existing vegetation is the single most noticeable visual impact of a project and shall be held to a minimum to achieve community acceptance. Clearing only what vegetation is necessary for the construction can eliminate or reduce the need to mitigate. However, proper sight distances, clear zones, and horizontal clearance requirements must be considered. Coordination with

appropriate utility companies should be performed early in the project development. The placement of above and below ground utilities can adversely affect the existing vegetation many years after construction activities have been completed. Mitigation measures must always address the specific visual impact caused by the proposed project and the reaction to the mitigation measures by viewers. Historic resource mitigation must be coordinated with the State Historic Preservation Officer and other appropriate agencies according to the requirements of the National Historic Preservation Act and Chapter. 267 F.S. (See Part II, Chapter 12).

The environmental process serves as an aid to decision making in planning highway projects. Environmental concerns serve as a determining factor in the location and design of a project. It is important that these concerns be identified early so they can be incorporated in the subsequent project phases even though all the design details cannot be finalized during the PD&E phase. Documenting the environmental impacts of a proposed project and the inclusion of locally desired design elements, as noted in information gathered from the public involvement and the local comprehensive plan, will ensure compliance with state statutes.

#### **15-2.1.4 Comments and Coordination Section**

The Type 2 CE, EA, EIS or SEIS should address in the Comments and Coordination section the following:

- 1.Design quality, art and architecture proposed by the Department in cooperation with the community;
- 2.Compatibility of the project’s design, art and architecture within the environmental setting;
- 3.Document all coordination with local governments, State and Federal agencies and private groups (neighborhood associations, cultural groups, etc.); and
- 4.Describe any commitments resulting from the coordination. (These are to be included in the Commitments and Recommendations Section of the final document).

#### **15-3 REFERENCES**

1. U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration, “Guidance for Preparing and Processing Environmental and Section 4(f) Documents”, FHWA Technical Advisory T6640.8A, October 30, 1987
- 2.U.S. Department of Transportation, “Aesthetics in Transportation”, Contract No. DOT-OS-90040; Report No. DOT.OST.P-20.30, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington D.C., November 1980

- 3.AASHTO Highway Subcommittee on Design Task Force for Environmental Design, “A Guide for Transportation Landscape and Environmental Design”, June 1991
- 4.U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration, “Flexibility in Highway Design”, Publication No. FHWA-PD-97-062; HEP-30/7-97(10M)E, June 1997
- 5.Florida Department of Transportation, “Florida Highway Landscape Guide”, April 1995
- 6.Florida Department of Transportation, “Plans Preparation Manual”, Chapters. 1, 4, 9, Topic #625-000-005, January 1998.
- 7.Florida Statutes, State of Florida 1997.