

4.1 AESTHETICS

This section describes the existing visual resources within the planning area and analyzes the potential impacts to vital resources that could result from the implementation of the 2012 General Plan. Specifically, impacts associated with scenic resources, scenic vistas, visual character, and light and glare are discussed.

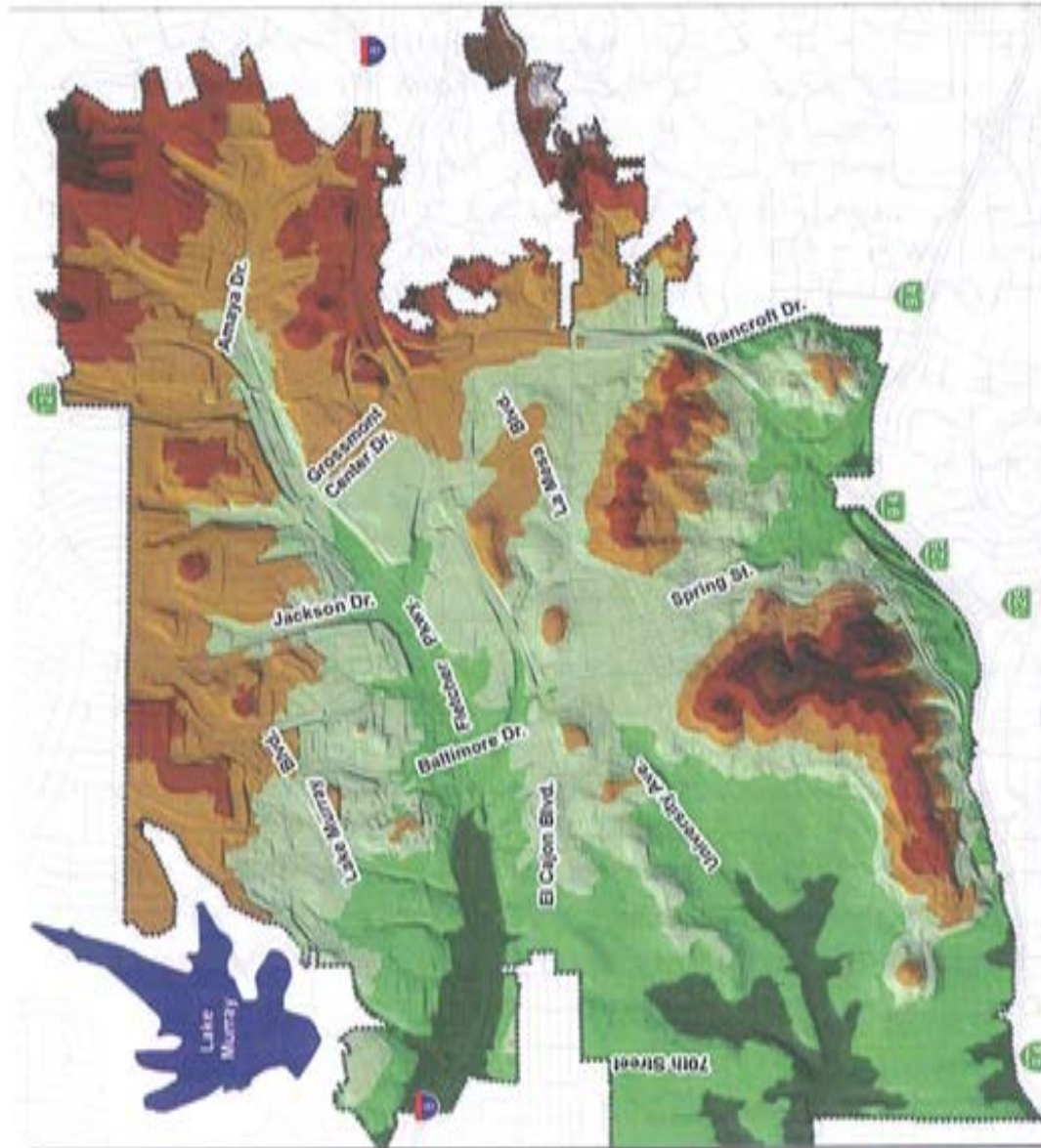
4.1.1 Existing Environmental Setting

Scenic Vistas and Scenic Resources

The City of La Mesa is 9.2 square miles and is located 14 miles inland from the Pacific Ocean within an ecological transition zone between the coast and foothills. This part of western San Diego County is dominated by a series of geologic features known as marine terraces. Canyons such as those containing Alvarado Creek and Chollas Creek cut through these terraces and define the community's subregions. The terraced topography results in significant topographical variation and provides panoramic views of much of the City from a variety of locations (Figure 4.1-1). Major transportation corridors and natural scenic resources such as Mt. Helix and Mt. Nebo further define the geography of the City and surrounding areas.

There is one scenic highway corridor in La Mesa, a 2-mile-long section of SR-125 from SR-94 to I-8 that passes through residential and commercial areas, with Mt. Helix as the focal point. This area is included within the Scenic Preservation Overlay Zone. The Scenic Preservation Overlay Zone contains regulations for the recognized scenic areas in the City, the character of which could be permanently damaged by actions involving the development and use of land without special regulations (Figure 4.1-2 and Figure 4.1-3).

The City's Urban Design Program identifies specific vistas and panoramic views that contribute to the community's image (Figure 4.1-2). These scenic resources include a vista of Lake Murray from Jackson Drive in the northwest portion of the City, views along La Mesa Boulevard in the downtown village, and views along Fletcher Parkway. Panoramic views from SR-125 near Fletcher Parkway and from Mt. Helix provide an overall scenic image of a large portion of the City; this area is identified and designated as a Scenic Preservation Overlay Zone. In addition, the City has identified five visually sensitive areas where all new development is required to be compatible with the site's physical characteristics and the surrounding environment (Figure 4.1-3).



Source: City of La Mesa

**Figure 4.1-1
Topography**



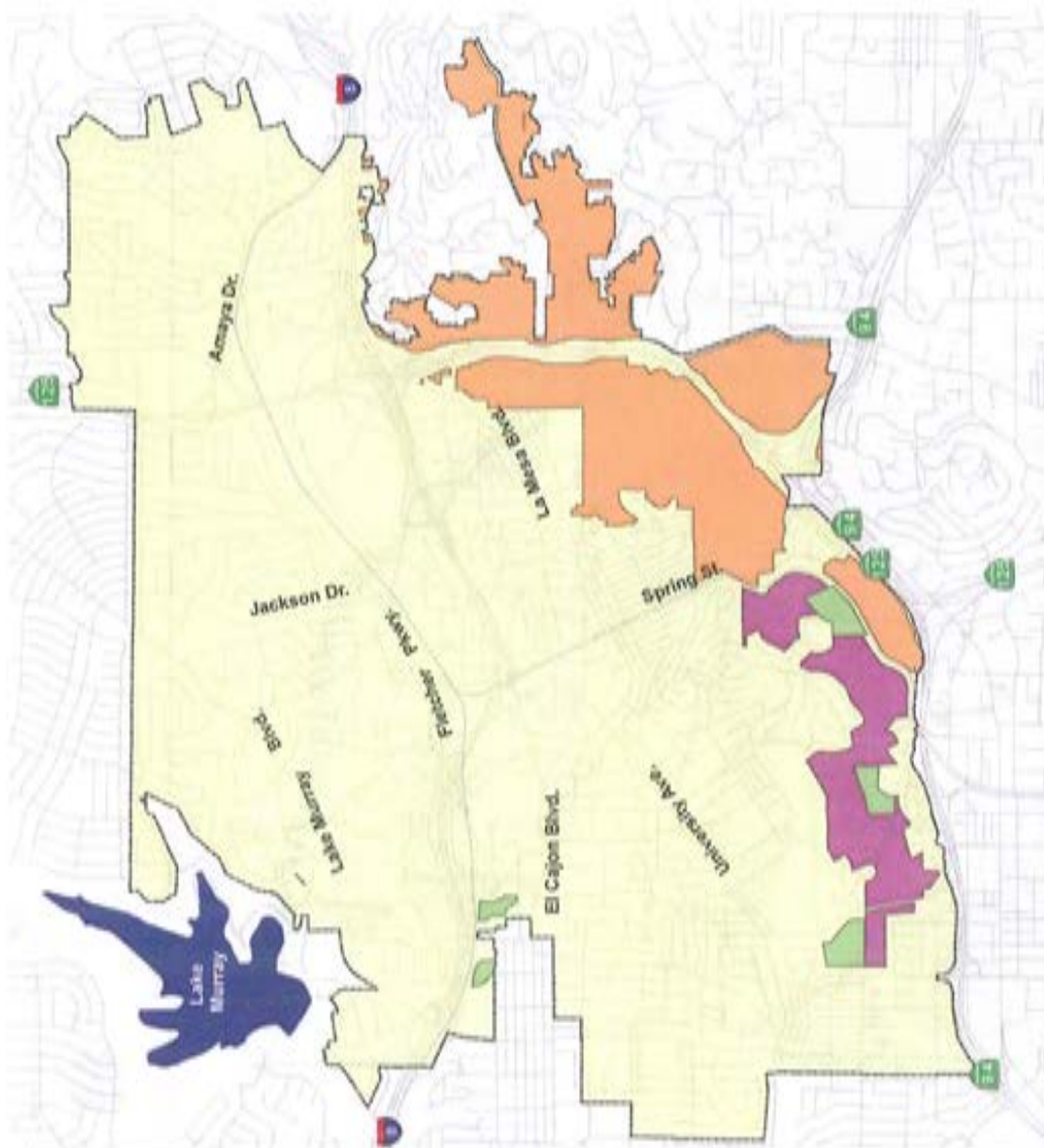
LEGEND

- Landmarks / Nodes**
- ▲ Major Landmark
 - △ Minor Landmark
 - ⊙ Major Node
 - Minor Node
 - ★ Panoramic View
 - ☆ Vista
- Paths and Edges**
- Gateway
 - ▨ Major Edge
 - ▧ Minor Edge
 - Major Path
 - Minor Path
- Districts & Groupings**
- ▨ District
 - ▧ Grouping
 - ▭ Municipal Boundary

Source: City of La Mesa



Figure 4.1-2
Scenic Resources



Legend

- Scenic Preservation Overlay Zone
- Hillside Overlay Zone
- Other Visually Sensitive Areas
- Roads

Source: City of La Mesa



Figure 4.1-3
Visually Sensitive Areas

Visual Character

Much of La Mesa is urbanized, with residential neighborhoods, commercial shopping centers, a pedestrian-oriented downtown village, mixed-use commercial corridors, and a regional medical campus. A wide variety of built and natural features contribute to the character of La Mesa. Parks and open space areas are located throughout the community, including Harry Griffin Park and MacArthur Park. The southern and eastern portions of the City are characterized by suburban residential development on larger lots, while the northern and western portions of the City are characterized by a denser pattern of urban single-family and multiple-family housing. The City is divided by SR-125 (north/south) and I-8 (east/west). La Mesa is known as the “Jewel of the Hills” with its tree-lined neighborhoods, downtown village, and walkable streets.

Light and Glare

Much of the planning area is urbanized, with existing sources of light and glare such as street lights and parking lights, walkway lights, lighted recreational facilities, and light emitted from residential and nonresidential buildings. While the City’s single-family residential neighborhoods are generally not subject to substantial night lighting, most commercial areas such as the Grossmont Specific Plan area do experience greater lighting effects.

4.1.2 Regulatory Setting

Regulations exist at local and state levels that guide development and influence the physical form and aesthetic character of the City. These regulations include the following:

Federal

No federal regulations apply to aesthetics resources in La Mesa.

State

California Scenic Highway Program

Caltrans manages the California Scenic Highway Program. The goal of the program is to preserve and protect scenic highway corridors from changes that would affect the aesthetic value of the land adjacent to highways.

Local

La Mesa Municipal Code and Zoning Ordinance

The La Mesa Municipal Code, which includes the Zoning Ordinance, is the primary tool used to implement the goals and policies of the 2012 General Plan. The Zoning Ordinance provides more detailed direction related to design and development standards; permitted, conditionally permitted, and prohibited uses; and other regulations such as parking standards and lighting. The land uses specified in the Zoning Ordinance are based on, and should be consistent with, the land use policies set forth in the 2012 General Plan. The Scenic Preservation Overlay Zone contains regulations for the recognized scenic areas in the City (Figure 4.1-3), the character of which could be permanently damaged by actions involving the development and use of land without special regulations.

La Mesa Sign Ordinance

The intent of La Mesa's Sign Ordinance is to regulate signs in a way that balances their means of conveying information against the needs to protect the visual environment. Sign regulation serves the interest of community aesthetics, commerce, tourism, and traffic and pedestrian safety.

Urban Design Program

The Urban Design Program uses principles of design during a review process that is intended to ensure that new development fits into the fabric of the community. The program includes guidelines for evaluating public and private projects based on the community image concept and hierarchy of land use ranging from regional to site-specific plans. Projects subject to design review include new or substantially renovated commercial properties, multi-unit residential developments, projects within the City's mixed-use corridors, and sites within the Downtown Village Specific Plan area.

Specific Plans

While the 2012 General Plan provides overall guidance for the physical development of the City, specific plans are used to provide more detailed regulatory guidance for special areas. Specific plans are generally composed of a land use plan, circulation plan, development standards, design guidelines, phasing plan, infrastructure plan (water, sewer, drainage), and implementation plan.

The Downtown Village Specific Plan, adopted in 1992, establishes policies for development within the City's symbolic center—the shopping, cultural, governmental, and housing center of

the community. The Grossmont Specific Plan Overlay Zone, which was adopted in 1985, establishes standards and regulations for the area of the City consisting of the Grossmont Hospital, Grossmont Shopping Center, two transit station sites, and related surrounding uses.

Parks Master Plan

The Parks Master Plan creates a roadmap for upgrades, expansions, and potential additions to the City's parks system to meet current and future community needs for parks, open space, and urban respite areas. It includes an overview of the policies of the City and of existing parks, in addition to recommendations designed to improve access to parks and park facilities, and identify funding sources to implement the Parks Master Plan.

4.1.3 Thresholds for Determining Significance

Based on Appendix G of the CEQA Guidelines, a significant impact related to aesthetics would occur if implementation of the 2012 General Plan would do any of the following:

- Have a substantial adverse effect on a scenic vista.
- Substantially damage scenic resources, including trees, rock outcroppings, or historic buildings within a state scenic roadway.
- Substantially degrade the existing visual character or quality of the site and its surroundings.
- Create a new source of light or glare that would adversely affect day or nighttime views in the area.

4.1.4 Analysis of Environmental Impacts

Impacts to Scenic Vistas and Scenic Resources

Redevelopment of the 64-acre Grossmont Shopping Center would have the greatest potential to affect nearby panoramic views. Existing development consists of one-story pad retail buildings around a sprawling 1960s one- and two-story shopping mall surrounded by surface parking. The 2012 General Plan identifies this site as suitable for more intense urban activities that draw customers from outside and inside the City. Intensification would likely result in taller and more densely clustered buildings than currently exist, which could result in a potentially significant impact to scenic resources.

Other opportunity sites would be less likely to affect scenic resources. Anticipated infill development around the City's five transit stations would generally occur within an already established urban setting; for example, around existing multi-story (five-plus stories) buildings at the La Mesa Boulevard trolley station and Grossmont Transit Center. Neither the Coleman College site nor the Waite Drive/Massachusetts Avenue site is located near areas identified as sensitive scenic resources or vistas. None of the opportunity sites listed in the Land Use and Urban Design Element are located in visually sensitive areas.

The Housing Element includes an extensive analysis of properties that satisfy the City's need for sites to accommodate new housing development. Three of these sites are located within areas identified by the City as visually sensitive; however, design review is required for development of these sites.

New development and redevelopment activities, as well as landscaping and infrastructure improvements in opportunity sites such as the Grossmont Shopping Center and in other visually sensitive areas, may impact existing scenic vistas and visual resources within the planning area. This is a **significant impact**, and Mitigation Measure ABS-1 is required.

Impacts to Scenic Resources within a State Scenic Highway

The segment of SR-125 between SR-94 and I-8 is designated as a scenic highway, and a limited amount of new infill development or redevelopment is expected in this area. The Scenic Preservation Overlay Zone applies to recognized scenic areas in the City, including along the State Scenic Highway corridor, where the visual character could be permanently damaged by actions involving the development and use of land without special regulations.

Nearly all of the area surrounding the State Scenic Highway is developed with single-family residences at a density of 2 to 7 units per acre. The 2012 General Plan Housing Element identifies approximately 35 vacant sites within the Scenic Preservation Overlay Zone in the vicinity of the scenic portion of SR-125. New development of these vacant sites could affect scenic resources; however, building height, setback, grading limitations, and additional discretionary review requirements are already in place to avoid significant impacts associated with scenic resources within a State Scenic Highway.

The 2012 General Plan would change the land use designation of a 0.8-acre area of undeveloped land adjacent to the State Scenic Highway at the intersection of Lemon Avenue and Bancroft Drive to Local Serving Commercial. This land-use designation is assigned to retail commercial and personal service activities that respond to the needs of nearby residential neighborhoods. This designation generally includes shopping centers that offer potential for redevelopment as

mixed-use and auto-oriented uses limited to gas dispensing and minor maintenance services. Building types permitted in this designation generally include one- and two-story buildings, either freestanding or in small-scale neighborhood shopping centers. Rezoning would be required if the site were developed under the Local Serving Commercial land-use standards. However, design review would be incorporated into future development projects on this or any other rezoned site in the area surrounding the State Scenic Highway to avoid significant impacts associated with scenic resources.

Given the discretionary review requirements in place within the Scenic Preservation Overlay Zone and the opportunity for design review, implementation of the 2012 General Plan would result in a **less-than-significant impact** to scenic resources within a State Scenic Highway.

Impacts to Visual Character

Potential redevelopment sites, referred to as “opportunity sites” in the Land Use and Urban Design Element, include the 64-acre Grossmont Shopping Center, areas near transit stations and along the mixed-use corridors, and smaller individual sites located throughout the City. New development occurring in these areas as a result of the 2012 General Plan would result in a change to the visual character of the City.

Of all the opportunity sites, redevelopment of the Grossmont Shopping Center would have the greatest potential to impact visual character. This site, which is currently developed with one-story pad retail buildings around a sprawling 1960s one- and two-story shopping mall, is suitable for more intense urban activities that draw customers from outside and inside the City. Grossmont Shopping Center is a regional-serving mall containing approximately 940,000 square feet of building area and including major anchor stores and a movie theater. The center is located on a 64-acre site bounded by Center Drive to the north, Grossmont Center Drive to the east, Murray Drive to the south, and Jackson Drive to the west. Grossmont Shopping Center was first developed in the early 1960s, with mall buildings surrounded by surface parking lots and smaller satellite buildings. Since most buildings are located in the middle of the property, various options exist for future expansion or redevelopment with new uses. There is an opportunity for new development on this property to define new vehicular and pedestrian access and circulation patterns, locate new buildings and landmarks within the highly visible site, and unify the architectural and landscape design of the site through the City’s design review process as remodeling occurs. Nearby Grossmont Hospital and the Pravada/Alterra apartments are more densely clustered and have building heights of four to six stories compared to the low-density shopping center. Intensification of the shopping center site could result in considerably higher building lot coverage and taller buildings, consistent with the surrounding area.

La Mesa transit stations are anticipated to be used more intensively in coming years. New infill development is encouraged around the City's five transit stations. For example, the downtown location of the La Mesa Boulevard station intersects major bus routes and provides transit access to the Civic Center, downtown village commercial area, and surrounding residential areas. The former police station site, old post office site, and Civic Center parking lot areas offer opportunities to develop compact new uses that complement the variety of uses in the heart of downtown. There is redevelopment potential for more intense mixed-use projects near the 70th Street trolley station in the Alvarado Creek area. Sites in this area are designated for regional-serving commercial uses to contribute to the local economy such as office, hotel, multi-family, or mixed-use development. There is also potential for infill development on the north side of Amaya Drive where there is an underused shopping center with plenty of surface parking. The south side of the trolley station features older properties with redevelopment potential. All of the areas surrounding transit stations are located in the Urban Design Overlay Zone and are subject to the requirements of the Urban Design Program and approval by the Design Review Board and City Council. Individual projects near transit stations are already subject to the aesthetic standards of the Urban Design Program to reduce visual impacts.

The 2012 General Plan identifies the Mixed Use Overlay Zone as an important opportunity area for redevelopment and infill development. In 2003, the City adopted a Mixed Use Overlay Zone for lots designated "Mixed Use Urban" along University Avenue, El Cajon Boulevard, portions of La Mesa Boulevard, and near the Spring Street trolley station. The Mixed Use Overlay Zone is intended to revitalize older commercial corridors; increase opportunities for infill housing; encourage innovative retail that is less automobile dependent; and help create pedestrian-oriented neighborhoods where local residents have services, shops, jobs, and access to transit within walking distance of their homes. New development and major renovations within the Mixed Use Overlay Zone are subject to design review by the City's Design Review Board. Additional design guidelines for properties within the Mixed Use Overlay Zone intend to ensure quality design that is sensitive to surrounding properties.

A handful of other opportunity sites, including the former Coleman College site on Parkway Drive, the former Caltrans right-of-way at the intersection of Bancroft Drive and Lemon Avenue, and a former public works yard at the corner of Murray Hill Road and Waite Drive are likely to be redeveloped. As development proposals are received by the City, the appropriate land use will be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. Land use reclassification could result in the application of new development standards (e.g., affecting building height and setback), which could cause development that will vary from the surrounding community. New development and infrastructure improvements could also include the installation of street lighting and/or security lighting to address safety concerns related to access and use of park facilities. This new development and redevelopment, although limited, has the potential to differ in design and scale

from immediately adjacent uses, resulting in perceived visual impacts to residents and visitors. Future development on these sites could be subject to design review by the City's Design Review Board to ensure that development is visually sensitive to the surrounding community.

New development and redevelopment activities, as well as landscaping and infrastructure improvements at the Grossmont Shopping Center site and in the miscellaneous opportunity sites described above, may impact existing visual character. This is a **significant impact**. La Mesa has regulations in place to preserve the existing visual character of the community. These measures require the City to preserve existing neighborhoods by incorporating policies that protect their character. All development projects would be required to meet the City's zoning requirements, landscaping standards, and the regulations of any applicable specific plan. Most new development is subject to the Urban Design Program, which promotes and ensures design excellence. The continued application of these regulations and programs, as well as Mitigation Measure AES-1, is required.

Light and Glare

The City is estimated to be approximately 97 percent built out, with more than half (55 percent) of the City's area in residential use and 8 percent in commercial uses. Additional residential, commercial, and mixed-use infill and redevelopment would increase light and glare contributors. Since a greater concentration of light and glare is associated with commercial uses than with residential uses, new development of nonresidential projects under the 2012 General Plan has the greatest potential to increase light and glare.

Development would occur in areas that are currently urbanized and commonly experience the impacts of existing light. Adjacent residential areas are already impacted by light and glare from commercial sources; however, more intense uses could potentially increase adverse light and glare impacts. With adherence to the City's Zoning Code, which requires that lighting be designed, installed, and maintained to project light primarily on the owner's property, impacts related to light and glare from new development would be avoided and are, therefore, **less than significant**.

4.1.5 Mitigation Measure

Implementation of the 2012 General Plan would result in significant impacts related to scenic vistas, scenic resources, and visual character; however, the following mitigation measure is designed to lessen these impacts.

AES-1 The City shall require that as new development and revitalization projects come forward, the City shall work with developers to preserve scenic views and vistas of natural and built landmarks that are visible from public locations and streets. For proposed buildings taller than four stories, visual simulations and shadow studies shall be required to be provided by the applicant during the development review process so that the City can effectively evaluate visual impacts. In response to City review of the simulations and studies, if significant visual impacts are identified by the City, building designs shall be modified by the applicant to reduce such impacts.

4.1.6 Significance after Mitigation

Scenic Vistas and Scenic Resources

Implementation of Mitigation Measure AES-1 would ensure the ongoing preservation of scenic views and vistas by requiring that developers prepare visual simulations and shadow studies for proposed buildings taller than four stories high. Where visual impacts are identified, building design will be modified as necessary to minimize negative effects. As such, impacts associated with scenic vistas and scenic resources would be reduced to a **less-than-significant** level.

Visual Character

Implementation of Mitigation Measure AES-1 would reduce impacts associated with visual character to a **less-than-significant** level.

Light and Glare

Impacts are **less than significant** based on adherence by new development to existing regulatory requirements.