

3.1.1 INTRODUCTION

This section describes the existing visual setting, focusing on the visual character of the Sycamore Crossing and Hill Town sites and views from surrounding public areas, and the potential for the project to affect those conditions. The analysis of the project's potential visual effects is based on field observations of the project site and surroundings in addition to a review of the project's conceptual land uses that would occupy the sites, aerial and ground-level photographs of the project area, and public planning documents.

No comments related to aesthetics have been received in response to the Notice of Preparation (NOP) for this draft environmental impact report (EIR).

3.1.2 ENVIRONMENTAL SETTING

3.1.2.1 Project Site and Vicinity Visual Setting

Sycamore Crossing

The approximately 14-acre, triangular-shaped Sycamore Crossing site is located east of the San Pablo Avenue and Sycamore Avenue intersection and is bounded to the north by Sycamore Avenue, to the south by San Pablo Avenue, and to the west by Tsushima Street. The Sycamore Crossing site is dominated by a flat-topped soil mound occupying the west half of the site that rises 10 to 25 feet above the surrounding streets. It was created through use of the property as a spoils site for soil excavated during construction of nearby developments. The east side of the site is characterized by two natural topographic features: (1) a north-south-trending canyon/ravine, which contains the west branch of Refugio Creek and (2) a gentle knoll to the east of the canyon ravine. The creek bisects the site in a north-south direction. Mature vegetation exists on either side of the creek and continues to the southern boundary of the site and then to the west. The majority of the site is disturbed land characterized by grassland and low-lying shrubs and weeds. See **Figure 2.0-3, Aerial Photograph of the Sycamore Crossing Site**.

The site served as part of the Hercules Powder Works in the early 1900s, at which time buildings and munitions bunkers were located on site. However, all the structures associated with this facility have been removed. A 45-foot utility right-of-way (ROW) exists along the southern boundary of the site and contains a 20-foot East Bay Municipal Utility District (EBMUD) and a 25-foot Pacific Gas & Electric (PG&E) easement. Visible indicators of this easement included a PG&E-owned 12-kilovolt (kV) overhead

power line. A gravel-surface access road is located west of the creek and an asphalt road is located east of the creek.

Hill Town

The approximately 44-acre Hill Town site is located northeast of the San Pablo Avenue and John Muir Parkway intersection, northwest of Interstate 80 (I-80). See **Figure 2.0-4, Aerial Photograph of the Hill Town Site**. The site slopes from the northeast to southwest with elevations ranging dramatically from approximately 30 to 240 feet above mean sea level (msl). The topography of the site is characterized by a low-lying area in the southern portion of the site and an elevated area in the northern portions of the site, separated by a steep north-south-trending slope.

Approximately half of the site has been developed with detention basins, a cell tower, and petroleum storage tanks. The detention basins were developed to treat stormwater runoff from the storage tank area; they consist of two approximately 50-foot-by-160-foot detention basins on an asphalt pad. Equipment associated with the detention basins is located in this portion of the site as well. A cell tower is located in the northeastern portion of the site on a 30-foot-by-50-foot pad. Four large storage tanks, two smaller tanks, and associated buildings and industrial equipment were located in the northern portion of the site. As of November 2008 (the date the NOP was issued for this EIR), three of the four large storage tanks have been removed, with the tank nearest San Pablo Avenue remaining. Only the large circular earth pads on which the other three storage tanks were located remain on site; they are not visible from public viewpoints. Access to the on-site facilities and utility improvements is provided by a network of paved roads. A paved access road extends from the western edge of the tank farm location, crosses at the base of the earthen berm, and travels in a loop around the southwestern portion of the site, encircling the detention basins. A turnoff from the northern side of this looped road provides access to the detention basins. A second branch, beginning where the looped road branches off from the main access road, leads to the cellular tower facility.

The remainder of the site, specifically the central and northeastern portions of the site, is undeveloped. The central portion of the site consists of a largely undeveloped steep north-to-south slope that separates the storage tank area from the detention basins. The northeast portion of the site contains a largely undeveloped knoll. The undeveloped portions of the site are primarily covered with non-native grassland that is studded with eucalyptus groves and oak trees.

Surrounding Land Uses - Visual Setting

Sycamore Crossing

The Sycamore Crossing site is surrounded by residential neighborhoods, commercial development, and vacant land (see **Figure 2.0-9, Surrounding Land Uses**). Bayside, a 400-unit residential community, is located north of Sycamore Avenue. A vacant, approximately 2-acre parcel is located just north of Sycamore Avenue. This parcel is planned for mixed-use commercial retail development. Open space that includes the west branch of Refugio Creek is located to the northeast. A multi-use trail, the Burlington Northern and Santa Fe (BNSF) Railway, and residential development are located south of the site. Retail commercial development and a Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) Park and Ride facility are located to the east, and residential homes are located to the west of the site.

Hill Town

The Hill Town site is bordered by a master-planned community named Victoria by the Bay and by the North Shore Business Park (see **Figure 2.0-9**). The Victoria by the Bay community consists of residential homes, a vacant commercial lot, and park facilities. The North Shore Business Park, located along the west side of San Pablo Avenue, consists of professional offices and light industrial uses. A BART Park and Ride lot is located south of the site, adjacent to John Muir Parkway. Residential homes are located east of I-80.

Existing Light and Glare

There are no substantial sources of light and glare on the project sites. Night lighting, which was once used throughout the Hill Town oil storage site for security purposes, is maintained at minimal levels. No light and glare sources exist on the Sycamore Crossing site.

The majority of lighting sources in the project area are from the existing residential uses that surround the Sycamore Crossing site to the north, west, and southwest, and northeast and southeast of the Hill Town site, as well as security lighting in the business park northwest of the Hill Town site. Other sources of light and glare surrounding the sites include car headlights and streetlight associated with vehicles in the project area is significant along San Pablo Avenue and I-80 due to the high volume of vehicles that use those roadways. Sources of glare include daytime reflections off existing structures surrounding the sites and vehicles traveling on the surrounding roadways.

3.1.2.2 Public Views of the Project Site

The project sites are not visible from most areas within the western portion of the City due to screening provided by intervening vegetation and hilly topography in the project area. Public views of the site are predominately limited to the roadways bordering the sites, including San Pablo Avenue, John Muir Parkway, and Sycamore Avenue. A description of how the sites are visible from these local roadways is provided below. **Figures 3.1-1, Sycamore Crossing Photographs**, and **Figure 3.1-2, Hill Town Photographs**, represent photographs taken from San Pablo Avenue toward each site, as well as photographs taken on the site looking off site at adjacent areas.

San Pablo Avenue

San Pablo Avenue, a winding two-lane roadway, generally runs in a north-south direction within the project area. Scenic vistas with expansive views of the San Pablo Bay and beyond are available from certain places along San Pablo Avenue, which is designated as a Scenic Roadway Corridor in the *Hercules General Plan*. On clear days, views of the hills of Marin, Sonoma, and Napa Counties, including Mount Tamalpais, are available in the background when looking west across the coastal subarea through various landform gaps and structures. San Pablo Avenue forms the southern property line of the Sycamore Crossing site and the northwestern property line of the Hill Town site.

Sycamore Crossing

The Sycamore Crossing site is visible from the immediately surrounding areas and, because of the elevation of the soil mound on the site, is visually prominent from the immediately adjacent streets and residences. **Figure 3.1-1** shows four views of the Sycamore Crossing site from San Pablo Avenue: (1) view north from San Pablo Avenue toward the west branch of Refugio Creek, (2) view west from San Pablo Avenue and Sycamore Avenue toward the eastern side of the site, (3) view northeast toward the eucalyptus stand along San Pablo Avenue at Tsushima Street, and (4) view northwest from San Pablo Avenue and Sycamore Avenue. The gentle knoll on the southeastern portion of the site is the most prominent topographical visual feature when viewing the site from the intersection of Sycamore Avenue and San Pablo Avenue. Expansive areas of grassland, a dirt access road, telephone poles, and mature oak trees atop the knoll are also visible from this viewpoint. A row of trees, varying in maturity and height, traverse the western portion of the site along the southern boundary, providing limited views of the site to motorists, bicyclists, and pedestrians traveling north or south along San Pablo Avenue. Additionally, intervening topography and the vegetated street median screens views of the site from this viewpoint.



View north from San Pablo Avenue toward west branch of Refugio Creek



View west from San Pablo Avenue and Sycamore Avenue toward eastern knoll



View northeast toward eucalyptus stand on San Pablo Avenue frontage



View northwest from San Pablo Avenue and Sycamore Avenue;
residential development in right background

SOURCE: Impact Sciences, Inc. - 2008

FIGURE 3.1-1





View northeast from San Pablo Avenue near Sycamore Avenue;
Hill Town site in background



View north along San Pablo Avenue with Hill Town site on the right



View northeast from John Muir Parkway and San Pablo Avenue



View northeast from San Pablo Avenue near John Muir Parkway

SOURCE: Impact Sciences, Inc. - 2008

FIGURE 3.1-2



Hill Town Site

Figure 3.1-2 shows four views of the Hill Town site from San Pablo Avenue: (1) view northeast from San Pablo Avenue near Sycamore Avenue (Hill Town site in the background), (2) view north along San Pablo Avenue with the Hill Town site on the right, (3) view northeast from John Muir Parkway and San Pablo Avenue, and (4) view northeast from San Pablo Avenue near John Muir Parkway. The most expansive view of the site is from San Pablo Avenue at the Sycamore Avenue crossing looking northwest at the site, as shown in view 1. Closer to the site, motorists and bicyclists traveling either north or south along San Pablo Avenue have limited views of the Hill Town site. A raised vegetated berm studded with shrubs and trees that vary in maturity and height transverses almost the entire length of the property boundary adjacent to the roadway. The berm gradually lowers to street level near the northern corner of the site where the storage tanks were located. As shown in **Figure 3.1-2** (view 1), there are unobstructed views of the Hill Town site's natural landscape from San Pablo Avenue for viewers traveling north from Sycamore Avenue. Similar unobstructed views of the upper portions of the Hill Town site are available from I-80 for viewers traveling northbound.

John Muir Parkway

Views from John Muir Parkway, which borders the Hill Town site on the south, include upslope views of the Hill Town site from the roadway elevation. These views consist of eucalyptus groves and wetland vegetation in the foreground, with the grassy slope of the Hill Town site in the background. Due to the line of sight, the top of the hill (i.e., the tank farm location) is masked from John Muir Parkway.

Sycamore Avenue

Views from Sycamore Avenue toward the northern portion of the Sycamore Crossing site mainly consist of vacant and sparsely vegetated land. The only prominent visual feature on the Sycamore Crossing site is the soil mound on the western half of the site. Most of the site appears as a vacant undulating lot covered primarily with grasses and shrubs and an isolated area of dense, mature vegetation along the West Branch of Refugio Creek.

3.1.3 REGULATORY CONSIDERATIONS

3.1.3.1 State Framework

Scenic Highway Program

The California Scenic Highway Program was created by the California State Legislature in 1963 to preserve and protect scenic highway corridors from changes that could diminish the aesthetic value of

adjacent lands. *Streets and Highways Code* Section 260 et seq. contains the state laws governing the Scenic Highway Program. There are no state-designated scenic highways in the vicinity of the Sycamore Crossing or Hill Town sites. However, the Circulation Element of the City's *General Plan* identifies State Route (SR) 4 between I-80 and SR-84 in Antioch as a City Scenic Route and San Pablo Avenue as a Scenic Thoroughfare. The local regulatory setting discussion below describes the City's scenic route designations in detail.

3.1.3.2 Local Framework

Hercules General Plan

The following goals, objectives, policies, and programs in the *General Plan* relevant to visual quality would apply to the proposed project.

Open Space/Conservation Element

Objective 1.d: Plan for the preservation and enhancement of visual qualities as viewed from scenic routes.

Objective 13: Preserve and enhance scenic views within the community.

Policy 13a: Development proposals shall be reviewed in terms of natural objects in the vicinity that have aesthetic significance. This may include open space, eucalyptus groves, or vegetation that serves as a view corridor or has important visual attributes. Development proposals shall be sited to ensure that these features are retained or replaced to the extent feasible, resulting in minimal view impairment.

Policy 13b: Plantings that serve to screen views of residential development, or that help to maintain a natural-appearing landscape, shall be retained to the extent feasible. Such plants could be thinned selectively if thinning would improve view corridors. If specific trees are to be removed, such as eucalyptus trees, replace with trees, preferably native species, that will provide suitable screening while retaining important view corridors, especially along San Pablo Avenue which is a designated scenic corridor.

Policy 13d: Development shall preserve important view corridors, where feasible, by identifying and preserving the attributes of the view corridor that characterize its significance (e.g., framing elements, surface water reflections, presence or absence of impinging details) as seen from roadways, pedestrian paths, or other public vantage points to avoid view obstruction. Buildings shall be sited so as to minimize view obstruction from sensitive viewpoints.

Program 13d.1: The following views, from publicly accessible viewpoints, shall be preserved to the maximum extent feasible as the City evaluates new development on a parcel-specific basis as identified within the Land Use Plan EIR:

- iv. San Pablo Avenue views of specimen oak tree stands and, where feasible, eucalyptus;
- v. views of San Pablo Bay, Hills of Marin, Sonoma and Napa Counties, and inland of the Briones Hills.

Policy 13e: New development shall be designed to minimize light and glare impacts.

Program 13e.1: The City of Hercules shall evaluate the light and glare potential of new development on a parcel-specific basis and apply the following measures:

- Screening of parking areas by using vegetation or trees. This will reduce the amount of glare generated from painted and chrome automobile surfaces and prevent expanses of stationary and moving automobiles.
- Hooded lights for nighttime illumination should be used for parking areas, shipping and receiving docks, and industrial development. Hooded lights direct the light beam towards the ground, which if a dark pavement, will not reflect light and cause spillage into neighboring uses.
- Regular windows should be used instead of the glass walls or massive reflective windows often used for research and development and office park developments.

Land Use Element

Objective 7: Achieve a pattern of development that is consistent with the City's desired image.

Program 7.A.1: Provide landscaping along major regional streets and highways. This landscaping should soften the appearance of traffic and parking along those routes, while allowing view corridors to retail and other businesses.

Objective 9: Promote attractively designed and economically feasible development.

Circulation Element

Objective 2: Plan for the preservation and enhancement of visual qualities as viewed from designated scenic routes.

Policy 2d: Proposed elements within view of designated scenic routes in the City should be reviewed in terms of their visual impact.

City Scenic Routes

City Scenic Routes include SR-4 between I-80 and SR-84 (Scenic Freeway) and San Pablo Avenue from Pinole Valley Road to I-80 in Crockett (Scenic Thoroughfare). The *General Plan* stipulates that development proposals along designated scenic routes in the City be reviewed in terms of their visual impact and aesthetic compatibility with the following scenic corridors objectives:

- Encourage aesthetically attractive architecture and design of new or expanded structures within the Scenic Road and Highway Overlay District through including provisions for clustering, reducing visual impact of building mass and glare, maintaining scenic view corridors through the site and avoiding use of designs and materials that are inconsistent with the visual quality of a scenic corridor.
- Encourage attractive landscaping of development projects that is consistent with the existing terrain and landscaping of the scenic road or highway, softens the visual mass of building frontages and parking areas, provides attractive usable open space areas within the project, and meets the water conservation requirements of the City.
- Encourage attractive and low-profile signage fitting into the design theme of the buildings and landscape.

Housing Element

Goal 5: Neighborhood Quality

Maintain the quality of existing neighborhoods and encourage the development of attractive, viable new neighborhoods.

Zoning Ordinance

Scenic Road and Highway Overlay District (Chapter 25)

The purposes of the Scenic Road and Highway Overlay District of the City's Zoning Ordinance are to implement the scenic road and highway designations of the *General Plan*; review the visual impact of development proposals within view of designated scenic routes; and encourage aesthetically attractive architecture, design, landscaping, and signage for new or expanded development. The overlay district requires that a number of specific performance standards be met for architecture and design, landscaping, and signage. Performance standards for architecture and design include, but are not limited to, the clustering of structures around a common plaza or other open space entry feature, and to articulate elevations to reduce the visual impact of building mass and bulk. Desirable landscape and hardscape qualities consist of front and side yards landscaped with groundcover and trees that soften building edges, landscaped and screened parking areas, and plazas or other open space entry features. Finally, a sign plan is required for all new or expanded development within the overlay district. Signage should be attractive and low profile, fitting into the design theme of the buildings and landscape.

Performance Standards (Chapter 31)

This chapter establishes specific performance standards for development, uses for certain zoning districts, and general performance standards that apply to all zoning districts. The performance standards relevant to aesthetics require potential light and glare from new development to be attenuated on a parcel-specific basis. The measures listed below help to keep glare on site and prevents it from "spilling over" to adjacent uses.

- Screen parking areas with vegetation or trees to reduce the amount of glare generated from painted and chrome automobile surfaces.
- Use hooded lights for nighttime illumination at parking areas, shipping and receiving docks, and industrial development. Hooded lights direct the light beam towards the ground where dark pavement will not reflect light and cause spillage into neighboring uses.

Design Review (Chapter 42)

The “Design Review” chapter has the following purposes:

- Improve the general standards of orderly development in the City through design review of individual buildings, structures, and their environs.
- Improve and augment planning and building controls to promote development that is in the best interest of public health, safety, and welfare.
- Establish standards and policies that promote and enhance good design, site relationships, and other aesthetic considerations in the City.
- Preserve and enhance property values and the visual character of the City.

The “Design Review” chapter requires that the Hercules Planning Commission approve the design of a public or private building, fence, structure, or sign prior to the issuance of any construction permit. The Planning Commission's design review approval must be supported by a number of findings: the approval is in the best interest of public health, safety, and general welfare; general site considerations (layout, open space, orientation, and location of buildings, setbacks, height, walls, fences, etc.) have been designed to provide a desirable environment; general architectural considerations have been incorporated to ensure the development's compatibility with its design concept and the character of adjacent buildings; and general landscape considerations have been taken to ensure visual relief, compliment buildings and structures, and provide an attractive environment for the enjoyment of the public.

Hercules Central Plan Regulating Code

The Regulating Code for the Central Hercules Plan was adopted on July 24, 2001. The code regulates development based on traditional standards for buildings. Traditional urban design conventions are applied to create a palette of street types that form four districts: the Waterfront District, the Central Quarter, the Civic Center/Hospitality Corridor, and Hill Town. Sycamore Crossing is located in the Central Quarter.

As discussed in **Section 2.3.1**, in the **Project Description**, compliance with the Regulating Code is optional within the Added Area. If a developer chooses to comply with the Regulating Code, development is subject to the standards identified in the Regulating Code. The development standards are based on the types of streets (i.e., two-lane, three-lane, four-lane) that will serve the respective developments. San Pablo Avenue, for example, is described in the Regulating Code as a Four-Lane Avenue. Specific development standards (reflecting the street width and character of a Four-Lane

Avenue) have been developed for projects that front on such a street, including building placement, height, and volume. Building placement, height, and volume standards have also been developed for other streets included in the code's street classification system, including Two-Lane Avenue, Main Street, Town Center Street, Neighborhood Street, Neighborhood Lane, Two-Way Edge Drive, and One-Way Edge Drive.

The Regulating Code also establishes requirements pertaining to projecting façade elements on buildings. These include building elements such as awnings and marquees, balconies, front porches, colonnades and arcades, stoops, and bay windows. In addition, the Regulating Code contains a comprehensive set of architectural regulations pertaining to features such as building walls, building façade treatments, windows, skylights, doors, roof treatments, and signs.

The City expects a mix of allowed uses to occur in all neighborhoods and blocks governed by the Regulating Code. The City will require a mix of uses within the buildings along designated Main Street (a stretch of Sycamore Avenue) and Four-Lane Avenue streets. The City will not, however, require particular distribution of uses, but will require the integration of residential and commercial uses, and will require a variety of architectural styles along all street types.

3.1.4 IMPACTS AND MITIGATION MEASURES

3.1.4.1 Significance Criteria

For the purposes of this document, the proposed project would result in a significant impact to area aesthetics if it would

- have a substantial adverse effect on a scenic vista; or
- substantially damage scenic resources, including, but not limited to, trees, rock outcroppings, and historic buildings within a state scenic highway corridor; or
- substantially degrade the existing visual character or quality of the site and its surroundings; or
- create a new source of substantial light or glare, adversely affecting day or nighttime views in the area.

3.1.4.2 Methodology

Project conditions were evaluated against the existing visual character of the project sites in the context of existing uses, vegetation, and visual character. The potential impacts to the visual character of the site and surroundings were evaluated in terms of the type of projected land uses for each site. For example, the

uses contemplated for the Sycamore Crossing site include, but are not limited to, a combination of some or all of the following:

- 140,000 square feet (sf) of retail commercial space;
- 25,000-sf supermarket;
- 170,000 sf of office space;
- 180-room hotel;
- 170 attached residential units; and
- 2 parking garages.

The uses contemplated for the Hill Town site are:

- a multi-family residential community containing 640 dwelling units on approximately 28 acres,
- approximately 4,000 square feet of retail commercial,
- passive open spaces and recreational spaces on approximately 13 acres, and
- approximately 3 acres for major roadways

The proposed project's potential to introduce substantial new lighting and/or create new sources of glare that could affect nearby existing uses was also evaluated in order to determine potential impacts to visual resources.

3.1.4.3 Project Impacts and Mitigation Measures

Impact Aes-1: The proposed project would not result in a substantial adverse effect on scenic vistas. (*Less than Significant*)

A scenic vista is generally defined as an expansive view of highly valued landscape as observable from a publicly accessible vantage point. Views of the San Pablo Bay and distant views of the coastal range in Marin County are considered scenic vistas and are available to higher areas east of I-80 and some areas west of I-80. The project sites are located west of I-80 in an area of varying topography. San Pablo Avenue generally runs in a north-south direction within the project area and provides limited views of the San Pablo Bay due to intervening topography and development. On clear days, views of the hills of Marin, Sonoma, and Napa Counties, including Mount Tamalpais, are available in the background when looking west across the coastal subarea through the various gaps in the hills and structures along San Pablo Avenue. San Pablo Avenue forms the southern property boundary of the Sycamore Crossing site and the

northwestern property boundary of the Hill Town site. Views of the bay are not available from San Pablo Avenue while traveling either north or south while passing the Sycamore Crossing site given the mature stand of trees fronting the southern property line and the knoll located in the northeast portion of the site. Development on the Hill Town site would not obstruct views to the west from any publicly accessible viewpoint as San Pablo Avenue is located on the west side of that site. Scenic vistas to the west and northwest beyond the Hill Town site are also limited for motorists using I-80 given the intervening topography of the site itself. Therefore, the development on the Hill Town site would not obstruct scenic vistas from motorists traveling along I-80.

There are currently no public viewpoints within the Hill Town project site, which is not accessible to the public. Once the site is developed, public viewpoints would exist from roadways and plazas within the site. The proposed development would partially block scenic vistas to the northwest and west from these public viewpoints. The conceptual development plan for the Hill Town site would maintain some view corridors to the west and southwest for viewers on site. In addition, buildings and streets on the east side of the Hill Town site would generally be at higher elevations than those on the west, allowing viewers in those locations some views to the west. Given this, and the absence of existing public viewpoints, the project would have a less than significant impact to scenic vistas.

Impact Aes-2: The proposed project could adversely affect scenic resources within a state scenic highway corridor. (*Potentially Significant; Significant and Unavoidable*)

Although no scenic highway corridors are located within the project area, San Pablo Avenue is identified as a Scenic Roadway Corridor in the *Hercules General Plan*. Furthermore, the *General Plan* identifies open space, eucalyptus groves, and vegetation that serve as a view corridor or has important visual attributes as scenic resources. San Pablo Avenue forms the southern property line of the Sycamore Crossing site and the northwestern property line of the Hill Town site. Stands of vegetation, including eucalyptus groves and other trees, exist on the property line of both sites fronting San Pablo Avenue. The proposed project would have a significant impact if it results in damage to or removal of such scenic resources, including substantial modifications to natural landform features resulting from cut-and-fill grading and removal of trees and vegetation.

Sycamore Crossing

Notable visual features of the Sycamore Crossing site include vacant hillside areas with sparse vegetation, a natural drainage channel and associated riparian area, and a row of mature eucalyptus trees along the southwestern border of the site fronting San Pablo Avenue.

In order to accommodate potential mixed uses on the site, the natural terrain of the site would have to be modified through grading. The type and extent of such grading, including the removal/alteration of existing vegetative resources, is not known at this time. Although San Pablo Avenue is not a state-designated scenic highway, San Pablo Avenue is considered a Scenic Roadway Corridor by the *General Plan*. Additionally, the portion of the site fronting San Pablo Avenue is characterized with scenic resources (i.e., trees, grassland area, and open space) as defined by the *General Plan*. Given this, this analysis conservatively concludes that the potential removal of trees and the change in visual character on the project site along San Pablo Avenue is a potentially significant impact.

Implementation of the mitigation measures described under **Mitigation Measures AES-2a** through **AES-2f** below would reduce this impact to a less than significant level for the Sycamore Crossing site.

Hill Town

Existing scenic resources on the Hill Town site include grassy hillside areas studded with oak trees and large stands of mature eucalyptus trees. The Hill Town site consists of approximately 44 developable acres, of which approximately 28 acres are envisioned to be developed with residential and commercial uses, approximately 3 acres as major roadways, and 13 acres retained as permanent open space and parks. Similar to the Sycamore Crossing site, in order to accommodate the mix of uses proposed for the site, the natural terrain of the site would have to be modified through grading. The type and extent of such grading, including the removal or alteration of existing vegetative resources, is not known at this time. As mentioned above, although San Pablo Avenue is not a state-designated scenic highway, San Pablo Avenue is considered a Scenic Roadway Corridor by the *General Plan*. The portion of the site fronting San Pablo Avenue is characterized with scenic resources (i.e., trees, grassland area, and open space) as defined by the *General Plan*. There are unobstructed views of Hill Town's scenic resources from the intersection of San Pablo Avenue and Sycamore Avenue that would be substantially altered by development. Given this, this analysis conservatively concludes that the removal of trees and the change in visual character on the project site along San Pablo Avenue is a potentially significant impact.

Implementation of the mitigation measures under **Mitigation Measures AES-2a** through **AES-2e** below would reduce this impact for the Hill Town site. Additionally, new development would be subject to the performance standards and design review process of the City of Hercules. However, given the extent of changes to the Hill Town project site, which would be highly visible from the San Pablo Avenue scenic corridor, impacts cannot feasibly be reduced to a less than significant level.

MM AES-2a: Development on the Sycamore Crossing site and Hill Town site shall retain or replace the existing trees on site to the extent feasible.

- MM AES-2b:** Plantings that serve to screen views of residential development, or that help to maintain a natural-appearing landscape, shall be retained to the extent feasible. Such plants could be thinned selectively if thinning would improve view corridors. If specific trees are to be removed, such as eucalyptus trees, replace with trees, preferably native species, that will provide suitable screening while retaining the view corridor along San Pablo Avenue.
- MM AES-2c:** Buildings on the Sycamore Crossing and Hill Town sites shall be sited so as to minimize view obstruction from sensitive viewpoints.
- MM AES-2d:** New development shall avoid use of designs and materials that are inconsistent with the existing development along San Pablo Avenue and Sycamore Avenue in the vicinity of the project sites.
- MM AES-2e:** New development on the Hill Town site shall be consistent in form and exterior finishes with the natural surroundings and topography. Building height and placement on the site shall be designed to avoid obstruction of views of the ridgelines on the east and north sides of the site. The materials and color of exposed retaining walls shall be chosen to blend visually with the natural terrain.
- MM AES-2f:** Landscaping consistent with the existing terrain and landscaping of San Pablo Avenue and Sycamore Avenue shall be incorporated to soften the visual mass of the building frontages and parking areas. The developer of each specific development proposed within the Updated 2009 Redevelopment Area shall provide usable open space areas within the project.

Significance after Mitigation: Implementation of **Mitigation Measures AES-2a through AES-2f** would reduce potentially significant impacts to a less than significant level for the Sycamore Crossing site. Impacts for the Hill Town site would be significant and unavoidable even with implementation of mitigation.

Impact Aes-3: **The proposed project would alter the existing visual character of the sites and could substantially degrade the existing visual character and quality of the site and its surroundings. (Potentially Significant; Significant and Unavoidable)**

Future development of the proposed Sycamore Crossing and Hill Town sites would permanently alter the existing visual qualities of the Added Area. Visual impacts associated with the project would occur during site grading, construction, and project operation.

Prior to construction of any structures on the sites, the sites would be graded and infrastructure would be installed to support the future land uses on the site. During construction, graded lots would transition to buildings and structures, with landscaping throughout the site. In general, motorists using San Pablo Avenue, John Muir Parkway, and Sycamore Avenue, as well as I-80 (for Hill Town only), would see construction equipment, piles of dirt, pipes, fencing, and structural materials instead of the undeveloped open grassland and trees that currently exist. The visual effects of construction activities are temporary and would be similar in character to other types of development construction that typically occurs within the Hercules city limits. Therefore, these activities would not represent a significant visual impact.

Upon project completion, the long-term visual characteristics of the sites would be established, including the final size and bulk of the structures, landscaping, and the project's compatibility with the surrounding land uses. Development would change the views of each site as currently seen from the adjacent roadways.

Sycamore Crossing

The Sycamore Crossing site is characterized by vacant land covered with grasses and shrubs, with trees along the San Pablo Avenue edge of the site and in the ravine associated with the west branch of Refugio Creek. As proposed, the majority of the site would be converted and developed with multi-storied buildings, parking structures, landscaped areas, and public spaces. Although specific development plans have yet to be developed, given the topography of the Sycamore Crossing site, it is likely that development on this site would be constructed on flat building pads at elevations equal to, or slightly above, San Pablo Avenue. Under the proposed zoning designation, structures on this site would have a maximum height of 55 feet along San Pablo Avenue.

As described above, expansive views of the Sycamore Crossing site are limited. The Sycamore Crossing site is partially screened by trees and vegetation. Where there is a clearing from the vegetation—for example, looking west at the site from the Sycamore Avenue and San Pablo Avenue intersection—the knoll in the northeastern portion of the site obstructs expansive views across the site.

Conversion of the Sycamore Crossing site to a planned development consisting of a mix of residential, commercial, office, and public and quasi-public uses would not substantially degrade the visual quality or character of the area or its surroundings. Future development of this site would be generally consistent with the visual quality of surrounding area, which is developed and urban in nature. Implementation of **Mitigation Measure AES-2** would ensure that the Sycamore Crossing development would include architectural design, landscaping, and site planning compatible with the visual character of the

surrounding area, and would reduce potential impacts to a less than significant level. No additional mitigation is required.

Hill Town

The Hill Town site is characterized by vacant land covered with grasses, shrubs, and trees with some areas used in the past as part of a PG&E tank farm. One large oil storage tank and several areas of disturbed ground and equipment associated with past uses remain on site as of November 2008. As proposed, the Hill Town site would substantially alter the visual character of the site, which would be converted from open space with some industrial structures to a developed urban area with multi-storied residential buildings, landscaped areas, and public spaces. Development of the site would require extensive cuts and fills to create building pads and roadways, altering the natural landforms, and would require retaining walls in several areas. Given the topography of the Hill Town site, it is likely that new development would be constructed on a series of flat terraces, with portions of the site raised between 5 and 20 feet above the elevation of San Pablo Avenue. With lot pads located at elevations above the roadway, the proposed structures could potentially be up to four stories (55 feet) in height.

Views of the Hill Town site are available looking northeast from the Sycamore Avenue–San Pablo Avenue intersection and to viewers traveling north on San Pablo Avenue towards John Muir Parkway. The change from a partially undeveloped site to urban development would be apparent from these publicly accessible viewpoints (see **Figure 3.1-3, Hill Town Site – Conceptual View Pre- and Post-Development**). Views from the intersection of San Pablo Avenue and John Muir Parkway and northward along San Pablo Avenue are limited given that the majority of the site is at a higher elevation than street level and the significant number of trees and shrubs fronting San Pablo Avenue screen the site. The portions of the Hill Town site at higher elevations are also prominent in views available to viewers traveling northbound on I-80 near south of the I-80/SR-4 interchange (see **Figure 3.1-3**). The most visible elements of the proposed Hill Town project would be the “podium” townhouses in the east-central portion of the site; these are highlighted in green in the post-development views in **Figure 3.1-3**.

The west side of I-80 is predominately urban development with pockets of undeveloped lands. Development of the Hill Town sites would generally be similar to, but at a higher density and elevation than, the types of development that exist in the area. In some respects, development of the Hill Town project would improve the visual character of the site compared to existing views of the remaining tank and associated equipment on site, but these features are not prominent in most public viewpoints. As shown on **Figure 3.1-3**, the proposed development on site would be visually prominent to viewers from nearby public viewpoints, and would be dramatically different from the existing visual character

consisting primarily of open space. This alteration of the visual character of the Hill Town site would have a significant impact.

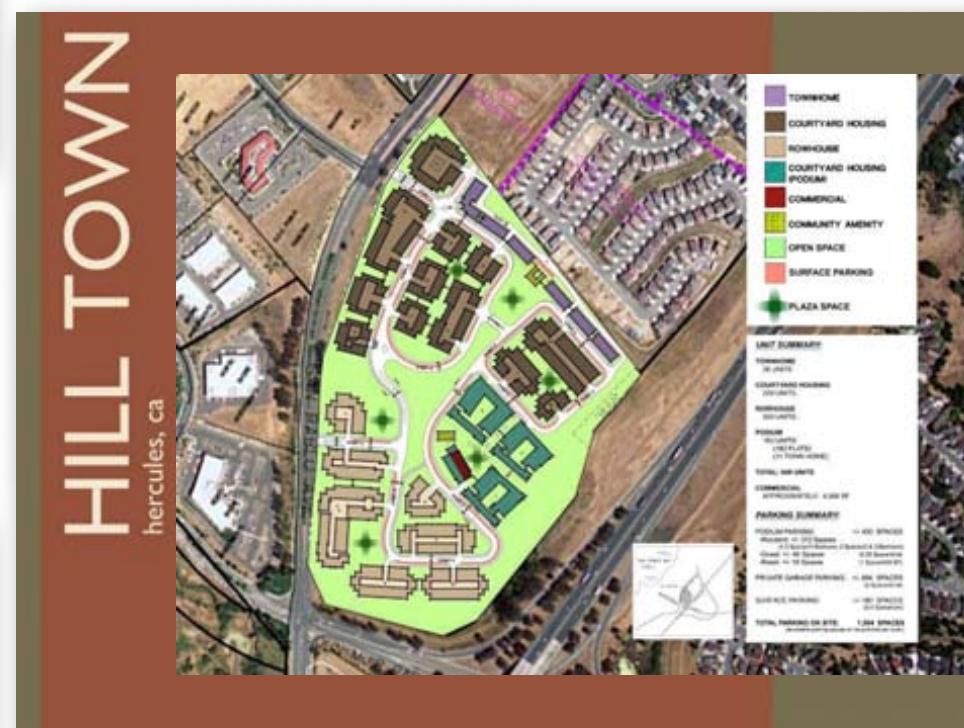
Implementation of **MM AES-2** would reduce the visual prominence of the proposed Hill Town project and reduce its visual impacts. In addition, future development would be governed by goals and policies contained in the City's *General Plan* relating to aesthetics, view preservation, and control of light and glare impacts (discussed below). Future development would also be required to be consistent with design regulations and the performance standards and design review required by the City of Hercules. These regulations are intended to promote high visual quality in design and compatibility with existing surrounding land uses. However, given the complete change in character of the site from mostly undeveloped land to urban development, impacts would remain significant even after mitigation is incorporated.

Mitigation Measures: Implement **MM AES-2**. No additional mitigation is feasible.

Significance after Mitigation: Significant and unavoidable.

Impact Aes-4: **The proposed project would create a new source of light or glare that could adversely affect day or nighttime views in the area. (Potentially Significant; Less than Significant with Mitigation)**

The proposed project would create new sources of light and glare at each site. The conceptually planned residential development on the Sycamore Crossing site and Hill Town site would result in new lighting, including street lights, automobile lights, landscape/accent lights, and other lighting characteristic of residential developments. Such lighting would be consistent with the illumination in the surrounding residential uses (north of the Hill Town Site and north, west, and south of the Sycamore Crossing site). Given the existing level of night lighting in areas adjacent to the project sites (both street lighting along San Pablo Avenue and Sycamore Avenue and illumination from surrounding development), the new sources of light associated with future residential development would not constitute a significant impact. However, the project could include retail and commercial uses that would be adjacent to or mixed with residential uses. Given that these uses tend to use higher-intensity night lighting for security reasons, night lighting could create some disturbance for nearby residences or motorists using adjacent roadways. Daytime glare would also increase above existing levels by the introduction of new buildings and vehicles on both sites. Reflective vehicle surfaces or retail and commercial buildings with reflective windows or signage could create glare from viewpoints along San Pablo Avenue. The introduction of new sources of light and glare on the project sites is considered a potentially significant impact prior to mitigation.



SOURCE: KTG Y 2007

MM AES-4a: The parking areas on the Sycamore Crossing and Hill Town sites shall be screened with vegetation and/or trees.

MM AES-4b: The developer for the Sycamore Crossing and Hill Town sites shall use hooded and down-directed lights for nighttime illumination in parking areas, shipping and receiving docks, and other areas of the site as applicable.

Significance after Mitigation: Implementation of **Mitigation Measures AES-4a** through **AES-4b** would reduce potentially significant light and glare impacts to a less than significant level. Additionally, new development on the Sycamore Crossings and Hill Town site would be subject to the performance standards and design review as outlined in the City's zoning requirements that would further reduce light and glare impacts.

3.1.4.4 Cumulative Impact

Impact Aes-5: Existing planned and approved projects in the City would not result in a cumulative visual resources impact. (*Less than Significant*)

The City of Hercules is predominately characterized by urban development with pockets of undeveloped or vacant parcels located among developed residential neighborhoods and commercial and industrial land uses. Currently planned and approved projects in the City would convert some of these undeveloped or vacant lots into urban development, thus changing the visual character of the site and of the project area. Although new development would change the visual character of a site, it would not substantially degrade the City's urban setting since the planned and approved projects are similar to the types of land uses that currently exist (i.e., residential and mixed use). Development of the planned and approved projects could, however, potentially affect valued aesthetic resources, such as eucalyptus groves, oak trees, and expansive open space as viewed from local roadways. New development would be subject to the goals and policies contained in the City's *General Plan* relating to aesthetics, view preservation, and control of light and glare impacts. These policies are intended to reduce impacts to visual resources and promote visual compatibility with adjacent land uses. Lastly, it is not expected that future projects would cause significant impacts to light and glare given the existing continuous light sources already present in the City. Therefore, cumulative impacts to visual resources are considered less than significant.

3.1.5 REFERENCES

City of Hercules. 1998. *General Plan*. Approved September 22.

City of Hercules. 2000. *Central Hercules Plan*. December.