

## **4.10 VISUAL QUALITY AND AESTHETICS**

This section addresses the visual quality and aesthetics issues related to the implementation of the Specific Plan. The existing visual environment is described first, followed by a discussion of Specific Plan policies and the aesthetic effects of the project, and mitigation measures for any identified significant impacts. The information presented in this section is based on observation of the Specific Plan area and on review of City documents.

### **4.10.1 EXISTING SETTING**

#### **REGIONAL SETTING**

The city of Larkspur is situated in the southern portion of Marin County, below Mt. Tamalpais and about 14 miles north of San Francisco. The Southern Heights Ridge separates the city from San Rafael, to the north, and the Corte Madera Ridge separates Larkspur from Mill Valley, to the south. Corte Madera Ridge, the city's southern and western boundary, lies on the northeastern slopes of Mt. Tamalpais, to the west of the city. U.S. 101, one of the gateways to the city and San Francisco Bay, is located on the east side of the city; the city has about 0.5 mile of bay frontage, from the Larkspur Landing ferry terminal to Remillard Park. Corte Madera Creek, the major open-space resource in Larkspur's flatlands, divides north Larkspur from south Larkspur. (City of Larkspur 1990.)

#### **LOCAL SETTING**

The Specific Plan area is a flat, low-lying area adjacent to the existing historic downtown of Larkspur. To the north and west, it is bordered by two major travel routes: Doherty Drive and Magnolia Avenue. To the south and east it is bordered by Larkspur Creek, a narrow tidal slough contained within a straightened human-made channel. The eastern two-thirds of the Specific Plan area consists of disturbed open land, abandoned structures, and the remaining greenhouses of the Niven Nursery. The western third of the Specific Plan area is a patchwork of largely outdated commercial structures at the edge of downtown Larkspur.

The Specific Plan area has several significant visual attributes:

- < views of Mt. Tamalpais from various locations throughout the Specific Plan area (Exhibits 4.10-1 and 4.10-2);
- < views of Larkspur Creek and creekside vegetation (Exhibit 4.5-2 in Section 4.5, Biological Resources);
- < the railroad station and warming house (Exhibit 4.10-3); and
- < views across Magnolia Avenue to several buildings outside the Specific Plan area that are historically significant—the art deco Lark Theater, the Blue Rock Inn, and two adjacent buildings that date back more than a century (Exhibit 2-3).

< Exhibit 4.10-1

Exhibit 4.10-2

Exhibit 4.10-3

Views of the service buildings and yards of the Tamalpais Union High School District across Larkspur Creek to the east of the Specific Plan area are generally regarded as unattractive (Exhibit 2-3).

## **REGULATORY SETTING**

### **Federal Agency Methods for Evaluating Visual Resources**

Federal agencies that have well-established methods for evaluating visual resources and project-related effects on those resources include the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) and the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA). Visual impact assessment involves consideration of several elements, including the visual resources of the region and the immediate area, important viewing locations (e.g., roads) and the general visibility of potentially distracting elements, and viewer groups and their sensitivities. The visual character and quality of the region and a particular area are assessed based on three criteria:

- < Vividness: The visual power or memorability of landscape components as they combine in striking or distinctive visual patterns.
- < Intactness: The visual integrity of the natural and human-built landscape and its freedom from encroaching elements; this factor can be present in well-kept urban and rural landscapes as well as natural settings.
- < Unity: The visual coherence and compositional harmony of the landscape considered as a whole; it frequently attests to the careful design of individual components in the artificial landscape.

The appearance of the landscape is assessed using these criteria and descriptions of the dominance of elements of form, line, color, and texture. These elements are the basic components used to describe the visual character and quality (USFS 1974, FHWA 1983).

Another important element of visual impact assessment is viewer sensitivity or concern. Viewer sensitivity is gauged based on the visibility of resources in the landscape, the proximity of viewers to the visual resource, the elevational position of viewers relative to the visual resource, the frequency and duration of views, the number of viewers, and the type and expectations of individuals and viewer groups.

The criteria for identifying the importance of views are related in part to the position of the viewer relative to the resource. An area of the landscape that is visible from a particular location (e.g., an overlook) or series of points (e.g., a road or trail) is defined as a viewshed. To identify the importance of views, a viewshed may be divided into distance zones (i.e., foreground, middleground, and background). Generally, the closer a resource is to the viewer, the more dominant it is and the greater is its importance to the viewer. Although distance zones in viewsheds may vary between different geographic regions or types of terrain, a commonly used set of criteria identifies the foreground distance zones as 0.25–0.5 mile from the viewer, the middleground zone as extending from the foreground zone to 3–5 miles from

the viewer, and the background zone as extending outward beyond the middleground zone (USFS 1974).

Visual sensitivity also depends on the number and type of viewers and the frequency and duration of views. Generally, visual sensitivity increases with an increase in total number of viewers, the frequency of viewing (e.g., daily or seasonally), and the duration of views (i.e., how long a scene is viewed). Also, visual sensitivity is higher for views seen by people who are driving for pleasure; people engaged in recreational activities such as hiking, biking, or camping; and residents. Sensitivity tends to be lower for views seen by people driving to and from work or as part of their work (USFS 1974, FHWA 1983). Views from recreational trails and areas, scenic highways, and scenic overlooks are generally assessed as having high visual sensitivity.

#### 4.10.2 ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

##### THRESHOLDS OF SIGNIFICANCE

Implementation of the Specific Plan would have a significant impact if it were to result in:

- < a substantial adverse effect on a scenic vista;
- < substantial damage to scenic resources, including, but not limited to, trees, rock outcroppings, and historic buildings within a state scenic highway;
- < substantial degradation of the existing visual character or quality of the site and its surroundings; or
- < the creation of a new source of substantial light or glare that would adversely affect daytime or nighttime views in the area.

##### PROJECT-LEVEL IMPACTS

Impact  
4.10-1

**Potential Interference with Scenic Vistas.** *There are no formally identified scenic vistas within the Specific Plan area. Residential development on the Niven property has the potential for some obstruction of views of Mt. Tamalpais, but the obstruction would not be substantial, and this area would be newly accessible to the public. Overall, the Specific Plan would retain a view corridor and would not substantially block mountain views from offsite public spaces. This impact is considered **less than significant**.*

The Specific Plan area is not located within an area that has been formally identified as having a scenic vista. The area is relatively flat, and although Mt. Tamalpais is visible from a number of locations, these views of the mountain are partially obstructed and are not specifically regarded as “scenic vistas.” The Niven property (Subarea 3), which does have scenic views of the mountain, does not currently have any public spaces. Residential development in Subarea 3 has the potential for some obstruction of views of Mt. Tamalpais (e.g., from public streets that would be developed); however, the obstruction would not be substantial, and views from this area would be newly accessible to the public as new development occurs. Development in the area as a whole would not eliminate all views of the mountain (e.g., by pedestrians on Magnolia

Avenue), and the Specific Plan would retain a view corridor between the west façade of the railroad station building and Magnolia Avenue, and provide views of the railroad plaza area from the north, east, south, and west. In addition, Specific Plan General Design Policy 5 (Views) states that development within the Specific Plan area would “Protect and enhance views of the railroad buildings, Larkspur Creek, and Mt. Tamalpais as a means of visually linking the Plan subareas with each other and the larger community.” Moreover, development would not substantially block views of the mountain from public spaces beyond the Specific Plan area. This impact is considered less than significant.

Impact  
4.10-2

**Potential Damage to Scenic Resources.** *Under the Specific Plan policies, conservation of the two historic railroad structures would be an integral element of future development; heritage trees would be integrated with pedestrian and bicycle routes, and the scenic values of Larkspur Creek would be enhanced. This impact is considered **less than significant**.*

The proposed development of the Specific Plan area is intended to minimize potential effects on scenic resources (e.g., existing trees, the railroad station and warming house, and Larkspur Creek). Several General Design Policies from Chapter 7, Community Design, of the Specific Plan are intended to ensure that these scenic resources in the Specific Plan area are protected:

**Policy 9. Creek Resources.** Protect and enhance the natural resource and scenic values of Larkspur Creek and make the creekside corridor accessible for passive use by the entire community.

**Policy 10. Open Space Network.** Integrate the area’s major natural elements (the creek, creekside vegetation, and heritage trees) with a system of pedestrian and bicycle routes to define the entire area visually and tie the individual parcels together into a site-wide open space network.

**Policy 11. Historic Railroad Buildings.** Retain the former railroad station and warming house buildings and provide an appropriate setting for them that allows them to serve as a focus for future development and a readily apparent link to the city’s origin.

Other policies and standards for Specific Plan area parcels are intended to provide additional protection. Policies 32 (Railroad Plaza) and 33 (Railroad Plaza Design) state that a centrally located and publicly oriented open space would be provided adjoining the retained railroad buildings, which would be designed to serve as both a focus and amenity for adjacent commercial and residential uses and a setting for community-oriented activities and events. Policy 34 (Plaza Landscaping) states that the landscape design of this plaza should acknowledge and commemorate the original alignment of the railroad right-of-way.

The Specific Plan also indicates, in Standard 18 (Railroad Station and Warming House), that the original character-defining features of the railroad station and warming house buildings should be documented, to the extent possible, and restored using the following sequence of actions:

1. Protect and maintain those features that are extant and in good condition.
2. Repair those features that have been damaged or covered by other construction using the least amount of intervention possible. Do not replace building features that can be repaired.
3. Replace missing historic features using the following order of priorities:
  - < Recover, if possible.
  - < If unrecoverable, reproduce using photographs or other documentation.
  - < If documentation is inadequate, design a new feature that is compatible with the remaining character-defining elements of the building. The new feature should be clearly differentiated to avoid creating a false historical appearance.

Specific Plan Policy 48 (Open Space Corridor Design) states that an open-space corridor would be maintained along Larkspur Creek to protect water quality, natural habitat and scenic values and may be improved to provide public access to and passive use of retained open space. In addition, as mentioned above and indicated in Mitigation Measure 4.5-2, Protect Sensitive Salt Marsh Habitat Associated with Larkspur Creek, no bikeways or footpaths would be constructed within the Larkspur Creek buffer area, and permanent fencing designed to discourage people and their pets from entering restored habitat in the buffer area would be installed. The new policies proposed by Mitigation Measure 4.5-2 are not necessary to reduce the potential damage to scenic resources to a less-than-significant level, but they would reinforce policies in the plan that will act to protect scenic resources. Under Policy 66 (Heritage Trees) and Standard 68 (Trees to be Retained), several heritage trees located along the western edge of Subarea 3, adjoining the former railroad right-of-way, would be retained and incorporated into the design of the redeveloped areas. These large trees are:

- < the Oregon white oak (*Quercus garryana*) located immediately southeast of the warming house,
- < the Valley/white oak (*Quercus lobata*) located approximately 80 feet south of the warming house,
- < the small grove of redwood trees (*Sequoia sempervirens*) between the warming house and East Ward Street, and
- < the Valley/white oak located in the southwest corner of Subarea 3 adjoining East Ward Street.

The Specific Plan contains policies that would retain the two historic railroad structures in an appropriate setting as the focus of future development in that portion of the Specific Plan area, employ views of the railroad buildings as a means of visually linking the Specific Plan area with



the larger community context, integrate heritage trees with a system of pedestrian and bicycle routes, and protect and enhance the scenic values of Larkspur Creek. This impact is considered less than significant.

Impact  
4.10-3

**Potential Degradation of Visual Character.** *In most of the Specific Plan area development would result in a change in visual character but no degradation. Numerous Specific Plan policies related to building design and design elements, storefront downtown standards, building location and height, pedestrian-oriented frontage, neighborhood design, and other elements would ensure continued protection of the visual quality of central Larkspur. This impact is considered **less than significant**.*

In most of the Specific Plan area, development would result in a change in visual character but no degradation. Several General Design Policies from Chapter 7, Community Design, of the Specific Plan are intended to preserve the visual character of the Specific Plan area:

**Policy 3. Focal Point.** Coordinate the design of the contiguous portions of Subareas 1, 2, and 3 to create a sense of place and a focal point for Downtown.

**Policy 4. Linkages to the Surrounding Area.** Functionally and visually link major areas and destinations within the Plan area to Downtown, Piper Park, Hall Middle School, Redwood High School, and neighboring residential areas.

**Policy 7. Building Design.** The design of buildings should incorporate the best architectural traditions of Larkspur in terms of scale, building materials, and forms in a manner that expresses the evident historic progression within the community.

**Policy 8. Landscape Character.** Provide an informal, naturalistic landscape throughout the Plan area consistent with the prevailing landscape character of Larkspur.

In addition, specific policies and standards for the Specific Plan subareas are intended to preserve the area's visual character. Design policies and standards for Subarea 1, and other discussion contained in the Specific Plan for this subarea, are summarized below.

- < The former railroad right-of-way would retain the context of a railroad line including, where possible, elements of a passenger platform and evidence of the track alignment. (Policy 12 [Railroad Right-of-Way])
- < Buildings in Subarea 1 would be located so as to extend and maintain the continuity of the Downtown storefront pattern along Magnolia Avenue. (Policy 16 [Downtown Storefront Pattern])
- < Elsewhere in Subarea 1, where buildings adjoin community-serving outdoor spaces or pedestrian routes, they would be located so as to provide spatial definition, human scale, and visual interest. (Policy 17 [Buildings without Magnolia Avenue Frontage])

- < Building heights along Magnolia Avenue would be similar to those along the existing Downtown frontage of Magnolia Avenue; the modulation and articulation of buildings to replicate the scale and variation of existing Downtown facades would be promoted. (Policy 19 [Height and Scale])
- < A height allowance of 26 feet would be permitted; in certain cases, the Planning Commission may allow additional height up to 36 feet. (Policy 20 [Height Allowances])
- < Pedestrian-scale details would be incorporated in the ground-level facades. (Standard 9 [Pedestrian-Scale Details])
- < Where parking is located within a structure and adjacent to a designated pedestrian-oriented frontage, such parking would be encased by pedestrian-oriented uses or screened so that it does not interrupt or detract from the appearance of the designated frontages. (Standard 10 [Structured Parking Screening])
- < New buildings in Subarea 1 would be compatible with the historic materials, features, size, scale, and proportions of the older structures in the Downtown area, but would not attempt to replicate a specific historic style. (Policy 25 [Architectural Standards for Historic Context] and Standard 13 [Replication Discouraged])
- < Open space would be provided adjacent to the two preserved railroad buildings, at a size and design to accommodate community-oriented activities. (Policy 32 [Railroad Plaza])
- < The City intends to retain public parking at the site of the existing City parking lot in Subarea 1; this would allow continued views of the American Legion hall from Magnolia Avenue. An exception to this could arise if the sale, lease, or exchange of the property facilitates construction of other desired public facilities such as a library or expanded public parking serving Downtown. Any structure to be built on this parcel would be complementary in height and massing to the existing structures on the facing three corners of the Magnolia Avenue/East Ward Street intersection, and would need to be set back slightly at the corner to form a small plaza space. (Policy 35 [Standard for Northeast Corner of Magnolia Avenue and Ward Street] and Standard 19 [Northeast Corner of Magnolia Avenue and Ward Street])
- < The three structures located on the American Legion hall parcel would be retained in their current use under the Specific Plan. In the event that the existing buildings are demolished or removed, new construction would be required to maintain a scale and appearance consistent with existing and planned neighboring buildings and grounds. (Policy 36 [New Construction on the American Legion Property])
- < Doherty Park would be preserved in its current configuration, and the existing multipurpose pedestrian/bike path may be improved and realigned. (Policy 37 [Doherty Park Design])

Several protective policies and standards are also included in the Specific Plan for Subareas 2 and 3. Any alterations or additions to the Albertsons building in the Larkspur Plaza shopping center (Subarea 2) would be required to integrate the south-facing building elevation with the adjacent pedestrian/bicycle path and park development, and would need to protect future residents of the area from noise, unwanted light, and other potential nuisances that may be caused by any new service and loading facilities.

The Specific Plan encourages the retention of the existing service station at the corner of Magnolia Avenue and Doherty Drive (Subarea 2). However, if any changes were made to the service station or if it were converted to other purposes, building and landscape design would have to be integrated with the design of the adjacent Magnolia Avenue frontage, existing vehicle access would have to be modified to simplify and clarify traffic movements and minimize conflicting movements at the Magnolia Avenue/Doherty Drive intersection, and the architecture and landscaping of all structures and open areas would have to provide an attractive, well-defined entrance to Downtown Larkspur (Design Policy 43 and Standards 23 and 24).

The Niven property (Subarea 3), where residential development would occur, is currently dominated by abandoned greenhouses that are in a dilapidated condition. Specific Plan design policies for Subarea 3 would provide for a neighborhood design that is unique, yet compatible with surrounding residential neighborhoods. Most specifically, Policy 46 (Residential Architecture) calls for design of residences of varying size and architecture with a scale and appearance consistent with that of the city's older neighborhoods such as Baltimore Park, Monte Vista Avenue, and Heather Gardens. Policy 51 (Diversity in Size and Appearance, Single Family and Cottage Homes), notes that siting of homes in Subarea 3 shall provide a visually diverse appearance on individual street segments and among clusters of homes. The layout of streets and the design and landscaping of new homes would create a distinctive neighborhood appearance and pedestrian-oriented living environment.

Comments were received on the previous Draft EIR expressing concern about the design and location for a proposed 36-room hotel along Magnolia Avenue in Subarea 1. A 36-room hotel is one of many possible uses in this Specific Plan subarea, including retail and office. The hotel use would be subject to the same building design standards as other commercial development in the area: General Design Policy 7 (Building Design) and Subarea 1 Design Policies 15 (Storefront Downtown Standards) and 16 (Downtown Storefront Pattern). The hotel would also be subject to other policies on building location, building heights, pedestrian-oriented frontage, and architectural design. Because the hotel use, like any other commercial development in the area, would be required to conform with these protective policies, the visual character of Central Larkspur would not be degraded. This impact is considered less than significant.

Impact  
**4.10-4**

**Potential Changes in Views Associated with New Sources of Light or Glare.**

*New structures constructed on the site of currently unused greenhouses and vehicles parked in parking areas would represent new sources of light and glare. However, specific plan policies require street lighting to be installed in a manner to prevent light from spilling over onto facing residences. In addition, surrounding land uses currently generate light and glare, so the additional light and glare generated would not be more substantial than or inconsistent with existing sources. This impact is considered **less than significant**.*

Development of the Specific Plan area as proposed would result in the construction of new structures and parking areas on land that currently supports unused greenhouses and other commercial buildings. The proposed structures, and the vehicles that would be parked in the parking areas, would represent new sources of light and glare within the Specific Plan area. As indicated above, the Specific Plan incorporates policies and standards intended to reduce the effects associated with the development-related increase in street lighting within the Specific Plan area. Street lights would not exceed a height of 14 feet, would be spaced approximately 60 feet apart on alternating sides of the street, and would use traditional-style lampposts with simple acorn-style globes outfitted with cutoff lenses to prevent light from spilling over onto facing residences (Standard 56 [Street Lights]). In addition, Specific Plan Design Standard 11 (Structured Parking Lighting) states that all interior illumination sources in parking areas would be screened so that they would not be directly visible from the exterior. Because the Specific Plan area is located in the midst of existing land uses that currently generate light and glare, the amount of light and glare that would be added to the ambient environment with development of the Specific Plan area would not be regarded as substantial. This impact is considered less than significant.

**CUMULATIVE IMPACTS**

Larkspur and the surrounding area are predominantly built out, with little developable land remaining. There are currently no other development projects in the vicinity of the Specific Plan area that would result in a cumulative impact on visual resources. Therefore, there would be no cumulative impacts on visual quality and aesthetics as a result of implementation of the Specific Plan.

**4.10.3 MITIGATION MEASURES**

**PROJECT MITIGATION MEASURES**

**No mitigation measures are required for the following less-than-significant impacts.**

- 4.10-1: Potential Interference with Scenic Vistas
- 4.10-2: Potential Damage to Scenic Resources
- 4.10-3: Potential Degradation of Visual Character
- 4.10-4: Potential Changes in Views Associated with New Sources of Light or Glare

## **CUMULATIVE MITIGATION MEASURES**

There would be no cumulative impacts on visual quality as a result of implementation of the Specific Plan; therefore, no mitigation measures are required.

### **4.10.4 LEVEL OF SIGNIFICANCE AFTER MITIGATION**

No significant project or cumulative impacts on visual quality and aesthetics would result from implementation of the Specific Plan.

