

## 4.1 AESTHETICS

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### INTRODUCTION

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This section of the EIR describes the existing aesthetic values of the study area and assesses the impacts on aesthetics created by the approval of the General Plan Update. The California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) describes the concept of aesthetic resources in terms of scenic vistas, scenic resources (such as trees, rock outcroppings, and historic buildings within a state scenic highway), and the existing visual character or quality of the study area site. The following impact assessment is based on information provided by the *Wheatland General Plan Update Background Report*<sup>1</sup> (2004).

### ENVIRONMENTAL SETTING

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#### Regional Setting

The City of Wheatland's rural setting provides views of open agricultural areas to the south and west, and the foothills and mountains to the west and north. The urbanized area generally consists of a mix of homes, businesses, churches, and schools of various architectural styles representing different periods dating back to the turn of the century. Wheatland is located in Northern California's Central Valley along State Route (SR) 65 in Yuba County. The City is located approximately one mile north of the Bear River and the tri-county boundary of Sutter, Placer, and Yuba Counties. Marysville (the county seat) and Yuba City, which are both about twelve miles to the north of Wheatland, are the closest cities of significant size. Sacramento is approximately forty miles to the south and Beale Air Force Base is located eight miles to the northeast. Wheatland is also the gateway city to Camp Far West, recreation area of regional significance. From the City's nineteenth century agrarian roots to the community of today, Wheatland has remained valued by its residents for its small town atmosphere and rural setting.

#### Local Setting – Study Area

##### Jones Ranch

Wheatland falls within the center of a land grant that dates to 1844 when Don Pablo Gutierrez, a Mexican who had been in the employ of Sutter, obtained a grant of five leagues on the north side of Bear River, now known as the Johnson grant. The Gutierrez grant, dated December 22, 1844 and initially known as Rancho de Pablo, was sold at auction a year later by Sutter following the death of Gutierrez. William Johnson and Sebastian Kyser, who settled there the same year, purchased the grant for \$150. After the purchase, the grant was divided, Johnson taking the east half and Kyser the west.

The Rancho soon became known as Johnson's Ranch, and for several years after 1845 was well known as the first settlement reached by overland immigrants after the difficult Sierra Nevada crossing. Considered to be the western terminus of the Overland Emigrant Trail, Johnson's Ranch served as a base for immigrants to recuperate and re-provision, and in 1847 it was the base from which survivors of the Donner Party were rescued.

The boundaries of the ranch are still visible in the pattern of land division and use over 150 years later as shown in Figure 1-7 of the Wheatland General Plan Background Report<sup>1</sup>. The approximate boundary of the Ranch is defined by the Bear River (South), Forty-Mile Road (West – in its north-south alignment), Dairy Road (and its easterly extension – North), and the confluence of the Bear River and Camp Far West Reservoir (East). The entire Sphere of Influence and study area are contained within this historic Ranch boundary. Note that the road and parcel pattern within the Rancho are generally parallel or perpendicular to the original external boundary lines.

As shown in Figure 1-8 of the *Wheatland General Plan Background Report*, the pattern of land division outside the Ranch boundary is in accordance with the uniform system of land division created by the 1805 Public Land Survey System. This system of land division consisted of major divisions into Range and Township designations, as well as finer-grained divisions into "sections" consisting of 640 acres or a square mile in area. 1862 marked the passage of the Homestead Act, and the process of land division in the west started in earnest, including the lands adjacent to Johnson's Ranch. In contrast to these lands, the roads and parcels contained within the area defined by the pre-existing Ranch boundary are predominately aligned approximately 25 degrees counterclockwise to the Public Land Survey System.

#### Original City Plat

The town of Wheatland was originally laid out in 1866. Figure 1-8, from the General Plan Background report, shows this original city plat. Rather than follow either the Public Land Survey System grid or the predominant orientation within the Johnson Ranch boundaries, this initial grid street system was perpendicular/parallel to the railroad line, completed to Wheatland in 1866 as described below. As a result, the street pattern of the historic core of the City is itself rotated approximately 25 degrees counterclockwise off the predominant road and parcel pattern within the study area, and some 50 degrees counterclockwise from the north-south alignments of the Public Land Survey System.

The blocks in the downtown area are rectangular, approximately 200-250 feet by 400 feet, and laid out in a traditional grid pattern. The historic core of the City consists of an area bounded by A Street on the east and E Street on the West, 1<sup>st</sup> Street on the North and 6<sup>th</sup> Street on the South. Due to the particular geometry and geography of the city, these streets define an area containing approximately 18 blocks. These blocks are divided into irregularly sized parcels, although most of the older lots are 50-foot wide.

## Landforms and Important Visual Features

In terms of ecological factors, the study area falls within the Lower Sonoran Zone. The area is historically characterized by a Savannah landscape consisting primarily of native grasslands interspersed with valley oak and riparian corridors. Willows, blackberry, and other riparian species still occur along Bear and Dry Creeks, Grasshopper Slough, and other remnant slough channels. The dominant annual grasses such as wild oats, brome grasses, and fescue are dense during the winter and early spring, but dry up rapidly after the season of annual precipitation.

Surface hydrology and the fluvial processes of erosion and deposition are central to the character of the landscape and are readily apparent throughout much of the study area. The Dry Creek-Bear River valley is primarily a level floodplain, with the City of Wheatland occupying an upland erosional remnant between the two watercourses. As shown in Figure 1-9 of the General Plan Background Report, Bear River, Dry Creek, North and South Grasshopper Slough, Best Slough, and a host of smaller, unnamed sloughs constitute natural edges and barriers within the pattern of human settlement and land use, as well as providing important visual features within the study area. Much of the study area falls roughly between the Bear River on the south and Dry Creek on the north, with Grasshopper Slough meandering through the central portion of the area. Unnamed remnant slough channels, also drained the area in recent times.

The bottomlands along the Bear River, Dry Creek and Grasshopper Slough are depositional lands, and are especially fertile as a result of continual flooding. Historically, Dry Creek and Grasshopper Slough were reported to be miles wide and the adjacent country was flooded to a depth of from one to four feet.

Topographic variation is quite modest throughout the study area, ranging from approximately 60 feet elevation where Dry Creek crosses the west boundary to 120 feet elevation at a pronounced hilltop along the east boundary. The City of Wheatland ranges from 70-85 feet in elevation, and most of the study area slopes gently from east to west, with an elevation change of only 20 feet in approximately four miles. As a result, significant topographic features, which dominate the visual landscape, do not exist, and in areas with tree cover and/or buildings, all but the most immediate foreground views are obscured.

## Agricultural and Ranching Influences

Due to the fertile land along rivers and creeks, the Wheatland area was one of the first regions in Yuba County to undergo a conversion to agriculture. During the 1860s through 1880s, Wheatland was a significant agricultural trading center concentrating on wheat, potatoes, and barley. Hops replaced these crops in the 1890s, and by the 1920s Wheatland was known for having the largest independently owned hop ranch in the world. In the late 1920s frequent slumps in the hops commodity markets caused the landowners and growers to turn to fruits and vegetables; fruit and nut orchards soon replaced hops in importance. During the 1930s and early 1940s peaches overshadowed

the hop industry, and in recent years the peach industry has since given way to almonds, walnuts, and rice.

Lands surrounding the present day city continue to support agricultural pursuits. Over ninety (90) percent of the study area is rural and in some form of agricultural production. Agricultural parcels range in size from 13 to nearly 400 acres, and create a decidedly rural character for Wheatland and the study area.

In addition to the system of levees that protect both agricultural and urbanized lands, the study area also contains a system of canals and ditches. These ditches and canals, along with the meandering sloughs, create a fine-grained system of barriers to development, and constitute natural edges and barriers that can serve to differentiate and define neighborhood units.

### Trails, Roads, and Highways

The Overland Emigrant Trail, with its western terminus at Johnson's Ranch, was one of the main wagon roads used by the emigrants from the eastern states to California. Travel along the trail during the 1840s, and particularly following the discovery of gold in 1849, brought thousands of people through the area that is now Wheatland and environs. The trail was first used by wagons in 1844 when the Stevens-Townsend-Murphy party crossed Donner Summit on their way to the Sacramento Valley. After the discovery of gold in Coloma in 1848, the wagon road was used by the miners and their families to get to the California gold fields. More than 30,000 people – pioneers, miners, trappers, and adventurers – used the Emigrant Trail in 1849 alone.

Among the early travel routes depicted on maps of Johnson's Ranch and the early General Land Office (GLO) Survey Plats dating from the 1850s is the Sacramento and Nevada Road, shown on the 1856 GLO plat as trending northeast-southwest through the study area. Other early roads include the Spenceville Road (Wheatland-Smartville Road) that accessed Johnson's Ranch and Camp Far West, and Wheatland Road that linked Wheatland to communities to the west.

As early as 1909, the California Legislature had identified specific roads as part of the State Highway System. These roads were designated as "Legislative Route Numbers" (LRN), and the road connecting Sacramento to the Oregon state line, designated as LRN 3, passed through Wheatland. This important north-south state route has since had a series of route number designations, including Route 99E, 99, and since 1934, State Route 65. A number of other secondary and tertiary roads are shown on early USGS quad maps (1949 and 1953) as crossing through the study area. At present, State Route 65 remains the primary north-south road, with Wheatland Road extending to State Highway 70 approximately 10 miles to the west, and Spenceville Road extending east to Beale Air Force Base.

Due to the problems of flooding, State Route 65 was elevated during the 1930s. Low-lying topography and flooding still characterize the area, and a number of roads within the study area are built on top of levees, including Levee Road and Jackson Road.

### Rail Lines

During 1857, the center of activity in railroad construction in California shifted from Sacramento to Marysville. In 1858 the California Central Railroad Company started a rail connection from Sacramento to Lincoln via Junction (now Roseville). This line was completed in 1861. A year later (operating as the Yuba Rail Road Company), work commenced to extend the line further north as finances became available. The line opened to Wheatland on June 27, 1866. In 1868 the Central Pacific Rail Road rescued the financially strapped operation, and completed the line to Marysville. The first trains did not run from Sacramento to Marysville until 1864.

This rail line, now a main line of the Union Pacific Railroad transects the study area, bisecting the City of Wheatland. Two other rail lines – the remnant grade of the Sacramento Northern RR and the Western Pacific RR – run in a north-south alignment approximately three miles west of the study area, attesting to the historical competition for rail service during the height of US rail transportation.

Freight and passenger trains pass through Wheatland at speeds in excess of 50 miles per hour. On average, there are 30 trains per day, with the nearest passenger stop in Roseville to the south. Presently, four streets in the City cross the railroad tracks – Second Street, Third Street, Fourth Street, and Main Street. Each of these crossings is protected by traffic warning devices. In other areas, such as the end of Sixth Street, the tracks are raised above the level of the surrounding streets creating a barrier that prevents through-traffic. An underpass crossing also exists at the southern City limits, and a private, at-grade ranch access east of McDevitt Drive.

### Commercial Core

Wheatland developed outward from its traditional center east of the railroad tracks between Front Street, "A" Street, Main Street and Fourth Street. The main stores along Front Street faced the train depot. The remaining downtown has a compact form with most of the commercial development concentrated within a few blocks of this area.

The town suffered three disastrous fires, one in 1880, another in 1898, and another in 1903. These fires destroyed most of the buildings in downtown Wheatland, and in the aggregate had a significant adverse effect on the urban quality of downtown, particularly along Front Street. Some historical structures still exist, including the Odd Fellows Hall at the corner of Front and Fourth Streets (now the Masonic Temple), which was rebuilt in 1899 (after the fire in 1898). Only a few remaining two-story buildings exist in the downtown, and architectural styles and building materials vary from ornamented masonry to wood siding (after the 1903 fire, most of the larger structures in the town were built with brick).

At present, the commercial core is but a shadow of its previous scale, vitality, and colorful history. Present commercial uses include markets, a pharmacy, offices, video store, hair salon, auto parts store, bank, restaurants, laundromat, and other businesses. Due largely to the immediacy of the UPRR and the noise, dust, and vibrations associated with the passing trains, this area no longer supports thriving commercial activities, as the impacts of the rail traffic impose significant limitations on pedestrian activity. Similarly, the high commuter traffic volume on State Route 65 creates an unfriendly pedestrian environment for retail shopping.

### Urban Character

#### *Landmarks*

One feature that distinguishes the City from the surrounding region is its water tower. The Wheatland water tower stands approximately 50 feet high and is visible from many areas within the City and as one enters the City from the east. The tower is located east of State Route 65 and the railroad tracks on Fourth Street, near the Public Works building.

Another City landmark is the Pioneer Memorial Hall on the corner of Fourth and "B" Streets. The Hop Sheds and abandoned kilns at the E. Clemons Horst Ranch and the Damon Estate, while outside the City limits, are reminders of a colorful and exciting period of Wheatland history, and remain important landmarks within the built environment.

## **REGULATORY CONTEXT**

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Specific Federal or State regulations do not directly pertain to the visual quality of an area. The project involves establishment of goals and policies aimed at preserving visual resources within the City of Wheatland. These applicable goals and policies have been included in the following impact discussions, where appropriate, in order to mitigate potential impacts.

## **IMPACTS AND MITIGATION MEASURES**

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### **Standards of Significance**

An impact to the aesthetic values of the General Plan Update study area would be considered significant if any of the proposed project would:

- Have a substantial adverse effect on a scenic vista;
- Substantially damage scenic resources, including, but not limited to, trees, rock outcroppings, and historic buildings within a state scenic highway;
- Substantially degrade the existing visual character or quality of the site and its surroundings; or

- Create a new source of substantial light or glare that would adversely affect day or nighttime views in the area.

### **Method of Analysis**

This section gives full consideration to the development of the study area, and acknowledges the physical changes to the existing setting. Impacts to the existing environment in the project site are to be determined by the contrast between the site's visual setting before and after proposed development. In this analysis, emphasis has been placed on the transformation of the existing predominant rural setting into a landscape characterized by urban buildout. Although few standards exist to singularly define the various individual perceptions of aesthetic value from person to person, the degree of visual change can be measured and described in a reasonably objective manner in terms of visibility and visual contrast, dominance, and magnitude. Current residents are considered to be sensitive to the visual and aesthetic transformations in the study area attributed to future development.

### **Project-Specific Impacts and Mitigation Measures**

#### **4.1-1 Development associated with the proposed General Plan Update would have substantial adverse impacts on scenic vistas and natural resources within the City of Wheatland.**

The rural setting surrounding the study area provides views of open agricultural areas to the south and west, and the foothills and mountains to the west and north. The scenic vista and visual natural resources within and around the City of Wheatland contribute to the quality of the community. The proposed General Plan would allow for development at urban densities and intensities in portions of the Wheatland study area that are currently open space or agricultural land. Much of the City's surrounding landscape is designated for buildout, which would result in a loss of open space that is considered a principal scenic resource. The alteration of the views is due to the replacement of open space and agricultural areas, including orchards, with urbanized densities and intensities.

The General Plan Update includes the following goals and policies related to scenic vistas and natural resources:

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| Goal 1.J     | To maintain and enhance the quality of Wheatland's major travel corridors, city entrances, landscape, and streetscape. |
| Policy 1.J.5 | The City shall promote efforts to improve the visual quality of entrances to Wheatland and to Downtown.                |
| Goal 8.D     | To preserve and enhance open space lands to maintain the natural resources of the Wheatland area.                      |

Policy 8.D.1 The City shall support the preservation and enhancement of natural landforms, natural vegetation, and natural resources as open space to the maximum extent feasible.

Policy 8.D.4 The City shall support the maintenance of open space and natural areas that are interconnected and of sufficient size to protect biodiversity, accommodate wildlife movement, and sustain ecosystems.

Policy 8.D.5 The City shall encourage the development of natural open space areas in regional, community, and neighborhood parks.

Policy 8.D.7 The City shall plan and establish natural open space parkland as a part of the overall City park system.

Implementation of the goals and policies above would reduce the impact to a *less-than-significant* level.

Mitigation Measure(s)

*None required.*

**4.1-2 Development associated with the proposed General Plan Update would substantially damage scenic resources.**

The development associated with the proposed General Plan Update would have adverse scenic impacts along State Route (SR) 65. The rural setting directly adjacent to SR 65 provides views of open agricultural areas to the south and west, and the foothills and mountains to the west and north. The development anticipated within and along the perimeter of the City of Wheatland would extend the existing community onto current open space and agricultural areas. More specifically scenic resources can be categorized as important natural features, including rock outcroppings, ponds and marshes, riparian zones, and significant trees or groups of trees. Many of these resources exist within the City of Wheatland, such as significant groves of native oak trees, as well as riparian zones along existing creeks and sloughs throughout the study area. Buildout of the proposed General Plan Update could substantially damage some of the resources and block views of these aesthetic resources from neighboring properties and roadways. See Chapter 4.5 for a detailed discussion regarding historic buildings within the City of Wheatland study area.

The General Plan Update includes the following goals and policies related to scenic resources:

Goal 1.J To maintain and enhance the quality of Wheatland's major travel corridors, city entrances, landscape, and streetscape

- Policy 1.J.2. The City shall encourage increased building setbacks and wider landscape areas along major corridors.
- Policy 1.J.6. The City shall work with state highway officials concerning landscaping maintenance of state highway property.
- Goal 8.C To preserve and protect the valuable vegetation resources of the Wheatland area.
- Policy 8.C.2. The City shall support the preservation of outstanding areas of natural vegetation, including, but not limited to, oak woodlands and riparian areas.
- Policy 8.C.3. The City shall require that new development preserve natural woodlands to the maximum extent possible.
- Policy 8.C.4. The City shall encourage the planting of native trees, shrubs, and grasslands in order to preserve the visual integrity of the landscape, provide habitat conditions suitable for native wildlife, and ensure that a maximum number and variety of well-adapted plants are maintained.
- Goal 8.D To preserve and enhance open space lands to maintain the natural resources of the Wheatland area.
- Policy 8.D.1. The City shall, where appropriate, permanently protect as open space areas of natural resource value, including wetlands preserves, riparian corridors, woodlands, and floodplains.
- Policy 8.D.3. The City shall require that new development be designed and constructed to preserve significant stands of vegetation and any areas of special ecological significance as open space to the maximum extent feasible.

Implementation of the goals and policies above would reduce the impact to a *less-than-significant* level.

Mitigation Measure(s)

*None required.*

**4.1-3 Development associated with the proposed General Plan Update would not substantially degrade the existing visual character or quality of the City or its surroundings.**

The development associated with the proposed General Plan Update may have impacts on the quality of the built environment of Wheatland. Currently, the character of Wheatland is that of a primarily low-density residential community, without an incorporated downtown area. The proposed General Plan Update includes significant amounts of planned residential communities, and large parcels of regional commercial, business, and employment development, which includes light industrial. This development would substantially change the visual character of Wheatland.

The General Plan Update includes the following goals and policies applicable to visual impacts:

*Citywide Growth and Development*

Goal 1.A To grow in an orderly pattern consistent with economic, social and environmental needs, while preserving Wheatland's small town character, and historic significance.

Policy 1.A.1. The City shall strive to preserve Wheatland's traditional small-town qualities and historic heritage, while expanding its residential and employment base.

*Residential Development*

Goal 1.B To accommodate the housing needs of all income groups expected to reside in Wheatland.

Policy 1.B.1. The City shall require residential project design to reflect and consider natural features, noise exposure of residents, visibility of structures, circulation, access, and the relationship of the project to surrounding uses. Residential densities and lot patterns will be determined by these and other factors.

*Commercial Land Use*

Goal 1.E To designate adequate commercial land for development of local and regional commercial uses compatible with surrounding land uses, that will meet the present and future needs of Wheatland residents and visitors, and enhance Wheatland's economic vitality.

Policy 1.E.6. The City shall require new commercial development to be designed to minimize the visual impact of parking areas on public roadways.

*Landscape and Streetscape*

Goal 1.J To maintain and enhance the quality of Wheatland's major travel corridors, city entrances, landscape, and streetscape

Policy 1.J.1 New development within major transportation corridors must comply with the following minimum building requirements:

- a. All outdoor storage of goods, materials, and equipment, and loading docks areas shall be screened from major roadways.
- b. Developments with multiple buildings should have a uniform design theme and sign program.
- c. Earth tones shall be used as the dominant color; colors such as white, black, blue, and red should be used as accents. Building surfaces should have color schemes that reduce their apparent size.
- d. Metal buildings will be allowed only with enhanced architectural and landscaping treatment (such as use of trim bands, wing walls, parapets, and reveals).
- e. All exterior elevations visible from major roadways should have architectural treatment to alleviate long void surfaces. This can be accomplished through varying setbacks, breaking buildings into segments, pitched roof elements, columns, indentations, patios, and incorporating landscaping into architectural design

Policy 1.J.2. The City shall encourage increased building setbacks and wider landscape areas along major corridors.

Policy 1.J.3 The City shall require that all new development incorporate the planting of trees and other vegetation that extends the vegetation pattern of older adjacent neighborhoods into new development.

Policy 1.J.4. As a condition of the approval of larger development projects, the City shall require establishment of funding mechanisms for the ongoing maintenance of street trees and landscape strips. The City shall explore the potential for putting all new development in a master landscape and lighting district for maintenance of street trees and landscape strips.

Implementation of the goals and policies above would reduce the impact, though, the impact would remain *significant*.

Mitigation Measure(s)

Feasible mitigation measures do not exist to reduce the above impact; therefore, the impact would remain *significant and unavoidable*.

**4.1-4 Development associated with the proposed General Plan Update would create new sources of substantial light and glare that would adversely affect day or nighttime views in the City of Wheatland.**

The development associated with the proposed General Plan Update would create new sources of light and glare. The proposed General Plan Update allows for development in portions of the Wheatland study area that are currently open space or agricultural land. The introduction of street lighting throughout the City in newly developed areas would alter the currently unlit conditions in the area. Night lighting associated with commercial, residential, and industrial developments would be easily evident to neighboring properties that are not accustomed to nearby development; however, the types of lighting would be typical of residential, commercial, and industrial uses.

The General Plan Update includes the following goals and policies applicable to impacts related to new sources of light and glare:

Goal 1.E To designate adequate commercial land for development of local and regional commercial uses compatible with surrounding land uses, that will meet the present and future needs of Wheatland residents and visitors, and enhance Wheatland's economic vitality.

Policy 1.E.7. New commercial development adjacent to residential development shall provide buffers from noise, trespassing, lighting, or other annoyances, through methods such as landscaping or fencing.

Implementation of the goals and policies above would reduce the impact to a *less-than-significant* level.

Mitigation Measure(s)

*None required.*

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**Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> City of Wheatland, Wheatland General Plan Update Background Report, July 2004.