



5.2 AESTHETICS/LIGHT AND GLARE

Visual resources information for this Section was compiled from site photographs and site surveys conducted by RBF Consulting in the fall of 2002 through May 2004. This analysis is based upon reference data from the Madera County and the Project Applicant. The purpose of this Section is to describe the existing aesthetic environment on-site and in the site vicinity and analyze potential project impacts to the aesthetic character of the site. Consideration of public scenic vistas and views, impacts to scenic resources and the introduction of new sources of light and glare are addressed in this Section.

EXISTING CONDITIONS

VISUAL SETTING/CHARACTER

On-Site

The 467-acre project area is irregularly shaped and adjacent to the existing Sierra Meadows Golf course. Exhibit 5.2-1, *Existing Conditions Photos*, provides photographs of typical site conditions. The Sierra Meadows Golf Course is an 18-hole golf course located on approximately 142 acres. The golf course includes a clubhouse, restaurant, pool and associated amenities (refer to Exhibit 5.2-1, *Existing Conditions Photos*, View E). As of fall 2004, approximately 58 residential sites have been developed adjacent to the golf course (refer to Exhibit 5.2-1, *View F*).

The project area incorporates a variety of terrain types, including flat mesas, ridgelines, stream courses and associated valleys, and moderately to very steep terrain along the fairly narrow canyon at the northern end of Carter Creek. Elevations within the site range from a low of approximately 1,640 feet near the confluence of Miami and Peterson Creeks, to a maximum of approximately 2,450 feet in the northeastern portion of the project area. Natural slopes adjacent to Miami and Carter creeks and the tributary drainages within the project area display surface gradients of approximately five (5) to 30 percent, except along the margins of the portions of Miami and Carter Creeks, where slopes can vary from 30 percent to near vertical (refer to Section 5.8, *Geology and Soils*). The topographical setting of the project area creates a variety of views to the distant foothills and mountain ranges. Additionally, numerous small rock outcroppings are located throughout the project area.

There are two perennial creeks located within the project boundaries. Carter Creek flows southerly through the western portion of the project area, while Miami Creek flows generally westerly-northwesterly through the southern portion of the property (refer to Exhibit 5.2-1, *View D*). The two creeks actually converge between lots 288 and 292 on the west side of the golf course. In addition, there are several small ponds in the project vicinity (refer to Exhibit 5.2-1, *View C*).

The project site is within a transitional area between the rolling foothills and mountain ranges of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Habitat types occurring on the project site include foothill woodland, open water/impoundment, riverine watercourses (ephemeral and perennial drainages), riverine seasonal wetland and valley foothill



riparian, with open ponds associated with the golf course. Exhibit 5.2-1, *View A*, illustrates typical on-site vegetation. Section 5.6, *Biological Resources*, of this document provides more detail of the existing biological resources on the site. Disturbed areas in the project vicinity include uses and facilities associated with the Sierra Meadows Golf Course, ponds, trails and local roadways.

Opah Drive traverses the project area in a circular direction. Generally, Opah Drive meanders through the project site in a winding fashion from the southern portion of the site, near Harmony Lane, to the northwestern portion of the site. The location of Opah Drive allows travelers to have views of the golf course and distant foothills and mountains in various areas (refer to Exhibit 5.2-1, *View B*). The meandering nature of Opah Drive causes reduced vehicle speeds; thus, allowing increased viewing time of the golf course and varying topography of the area. Numerous other private paved roadways, dirt roadways and trails traverse the project site.

On-site views along Opah Drive within the southern portion of the project site (south of Fairway 3) consist mostly of undeveloped land on varying foothill/mountainous topography that supports typical on-site vegetation. In some areas along Opah Drive, in the southern portion of the project site, views of the distant foothills/mountain ranges are available. Short- and long-range views across the southern portion of the project site are at times limited by the size and location of existing vegetation.

On-site views along Opah Drive (public right-of-way) within the northern portion of the project site (north of Fairway 3) also consist generally of undeveloped land on varying foothill/mountainous topography that supports typical on-site vegetation. However, on the southern side of Opah Drive, views consist of the Sierra Meadows Golf Course and associated facilities (refer to Exhibit 5.2-1, *Views B and E*). Short- and long-range views across the project area from the northern portion of the Project site are also at times limited by the size and location of existing vegetation.

The Madera County General Plan, as well as Caltrans, does not identify the project area within a designated Scenic Overlay Zone or scenic highway corridor. Additionally, no historic buildings are located on-site or in the immediate vicinity of the project area. However, numerous small rock outcroppings are located throughout the project area.

OFF-SITE

Surrounding land uses, as designated in the Ahwahnee/Nipinnawasee Area Plan, and views to the project site include the following:

- **North:** As illustrated in Exhibit 3-3, *Aerial Photo*, the land to the north of the project site consists primarily of undeveloped vacant land. Areas designated for Rural Estate Residential (RER) uses exist to the immediate north of the project area. Areas designated for RER uses consist of five (5) acres minimum parcel sizes. The Ahwahnee Country Club Estates Subdivision is located to the northeast of the project site, and has been subdivided into rural residential lots similar to those of the proposed Project. Land uses within the Ahwahnee Estates are designated for Very Low Density Residential (VLDR)



A Looking southerly at typical on-site vegetation.



B View to the west from Opah Drive of the Sierra Meadows Golf Course (adjacent to Hole No. 2).



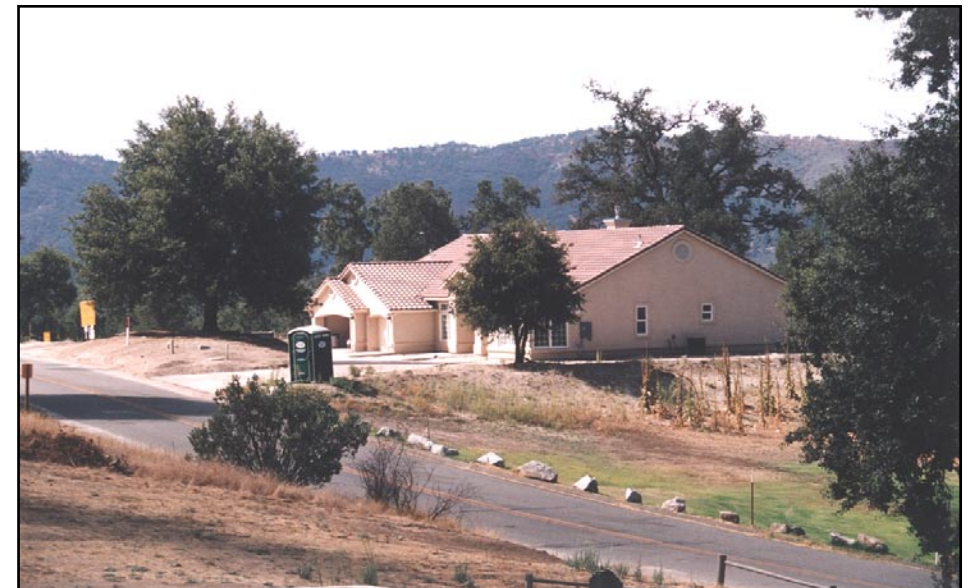
C View of pond within the project area (adjacent to Hole No. 14).



D Looking southeasterly from Opah Drive at Carter Creek.



E Looking westerly at Sierra Meadows Golf Course clubhouse facility.



F View of typical residence located within the project area.



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land uses. VLDR land uses consist of a minimum one (1) acres parcel size. Short-range views to the project site from the north consist primarily of the Sierra Meadows Golf Course and existing residences within the Ahwahnee Estates. Long-range views from the north to the project site are limited by the size and location of existing vegetation.

- East: To the east of the project site, a large portion of the land is designated for Open Space (OS) uses. Typical open space uses include agriculture, golf courses and utility easements. Currently, the area designated for OS uses to the east of the project site consists primarily of undeveloped vacant land (refer to Exhibit 3-3). Additionally, the area east of the southern portion of the project area, along Miami Highlands Drive, consists of land designated for RER uses. This area, referred to as the Miami Creek Estates, has been partially built-out with residential uses. Short-range views to the project site from the east consist primarily of the Sierra Meadows Golf Course, existing residences located within the Ahwahnee Country Club Estates and undeveloped vacant land. Long-range views from the east to the project site are limited by the size and location of existing vegetation.
- West: Uses to the west of the project area are designated for Rural Residential (RR) land uses. RR designated areas consist of two and one-half (2.5) acres minimum parcel sizes. As illustrated in Exhibit 3-3, land to the west of the project site consists primarily of undeveloped vacant land. Short- and long-range views of the project site are limited by the size and location of existing vegetation, as well as the topography. Additionally, due to the topography, no views to the project area exist from SR-49.
- South: Uses to the south of the project area include areas designated for Agricultural Residential (AR), Public Institutional (PI) and Agricultural Exclusive (AE) uses. The AR designation allows for a minimum parcel size of ten (10) gross acres and two (2) single-family homes per parcel. The PI designation provides for institutional uses such as schools, hospitals, libraries, government offices and facilities, churches, parks, etc. The AE designation allows for a minimum parcel size of 36 acres and generally provides for agricultural, timber production, mineral extraction, and/or recreational uses. Currently, the area to the south of the project site consists primarily of undeveloped vacant land (refer to Exhibit 3-3). Short- and long-range views are limited by the size and location of existing vegetation, as well as the topography. Additionally, due to the topography, no views to the project area exist from SR-49.

LIGHT AND GLARE

There are two primary sources of light: light emanating from building interiors passing through windows and light from exterior sources (i.e., street lighting, building illumination, security lighting, and landscape lighting). Light introduction can be a nuisance to adjacent residential areas, diminish the view of the clear night sky, and if uncontrolled, can disturb wildlife in natural habitat areas. Perceived glare is the unwanted and potentially objectionable sensation as observed by a person as they



look directly into the light source of a luminaire. Light spill is typically defined as the presence of unwanted light on properties adjacent to the property being illuminated.

Existing interior and exterior lighting occurs from residential uses adjacent to the northeast of the project area within the Ahwahnee Country Club Estates Subdivision, as well as the Miami Creek Estates to the east of the project area. Existing exterior lighting sources also include the golf course facilities (i.e., clubhouse, parking lot, etc). Additionally, light and glare is caused by car headlights and streetlights associated with Opah Drive, Miami Highlands Drive and other roadways within and adjacent to the project area.

IMPACTS

SIGNIFICANCE CRITERIA

Appendix G of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) Guidelines contains the Initial Study Environmental Checklist form which includes questions relating to aesthetics. The issues presented in the Initial Study Checklist have been utilized as thresholds of significance in this Section. Accordingly, a Project may create a significant environmental impact if it causes one or more of the following to occur:

- Have a substantial adverse effect on a scenic vista (refer to Impact Statement 5.2-3);
- Substantially damage scenic resources, including but not limited to, trees, rock outcroppings, and historic buildings within a State scenic highway (refer to Impact Statements 5.2-2 and 5.2-3);
- Substantially degrade the existing visual character or quality of the site and its surroundings (refer to Impact Statement 5.2-2); and/or
- Create a new source of substantial light or glare which would adversely affect day or nighttime views in the area (refer to Impact Statements 5.2-1 and 5.2-4).

The evaluation of aesthetic impacts can be termed a subjective exercise due to widely varying personal perceptions. Nevertheless, development on-site would permanently alter the appearance of the project area. Potential impacts are categorized below according to topic. Mitigation measures at the end of this Section directly correspond to the numbered impact statements below.

CONSTRUCTION-RELATED AESTHETIC/LIGHT AND GLARE IMPACTS

- 5.2-1 *Grading and construction activities associated with Project implementation would alter the visual character/quality of the site and the surrounding area. Analysis has concluded with implementation of the recommended mitigation, impacts would remain significant and unavoidable.*



Construction-related aesthetic impacts have been analyzed for light and glare, and construction activities. The proposed Project would involve grading for new roads, residential lots, water reservoir facilities, as well as installation of utilities. Future residences would be constructed in twelve (12) phases (refer to Section 3.5, *Phasing*). Construction of the twelve phases would occur over approximately five years. However, it is most likely that construction would not be continuous over five years, but would cease upon completion of each phase and startup again when the proceeding phase begins. Construction activities would alter existing conditions, thereby, modifying views across the project site and the character of the existing foothill woodland habitat. More specifically, construction of the proposed residences, roadways and associated infrastructure would result in direct visual impacts, as undeveloped foothill woodland habitat areas would be replaced with graded surfaces, construction debris, stockpiled soil, construction equipment and heavy truck traffic. Although mitigation has been recommended that pertains to the location of construction equipment staging areas and screening, impacts would remain significant and unavoidable, as the site character would be substantially degraded during construction activities.

Light and glare impacts associated with construction activity would likely be limited to nighttime lighting necessary for security purposes. Residences located in the Ahwahnee Country Club Estates and Miami Creek Estates may be impacted by limited nighttime lighting. Mitigation has been recommended to minimize light intrusion to surrounding residential uses from construction-related activities. Implementation of the recommended mitigation measure would reduce potential construction-related light and glare impacts to less than significant levels.

SITE CHARACTER

5.2-2 *Implementation of the proposed Project would permanently change the visual character of the site from undeveloped, foothill woodlands to residential. Analysis has concluded that impacts would be significant and unavoidable.*

The visual analysis of an area must consider visual quality and visual sensitivity. Currently the proposed project site's visual quality is best described as undeveloped vacant land consisting primarily of foothill woodland vegetation. Other habitats such as open water/impoundment, riverine watercourses (ephemeral and perennial drainages), riverine seasonal wetland and valley foothill riparian also exist within the project area. As such, it provides visual relief and a moderate to dense, naturally vegetated atmosphere, with exception to existing roadways within the project area. With project implementation, up to approximately 500 acres of undeveloped foothill woodland habitat would be replaced with the proposed residential development, associated infrastructure facilities and roadway improvements.

It is acknowledged that project development would be subject to the regulations set forth in the Madera County Development Code, including setback requirements, height limitations, lot coverage, etc. The individual property owners would provide landscaping within their residential lots. Utilities, parking and storage would likely be screened from view to the maximum extent possible. Additionally, minimal grading would be a goal of the project design of the residential lots to avoid extreme grading



of slopes. Typical construction of the residential lots would include cut and fill areas to provide a level building pad area. Cut slope areas not anticipated for lot development would be landscaped with native grasses to minimize visual impacts of exposed earthen materials. The smaller lots would consist of a greater ratio of graded area to undisturbed area when compared to the larger lots. For example, lots designated for Low Density Residential (LDR) uses would be almost entirely graded to accommodate the building pad. These lots would range in size from 7,000 sf. to one (1) acre. In contrast, a typical lot designated for Rural Estate Residential (RER) land uses would be a minimum of five (5) acres and would be graded upon determination of the pad size by the prospective lot buyer.. These lots could consist of approximately 4.5 acres of undisturbed area, depending on the pad size. This would allow for large portions of the existing foothill woodland habitat to be preserved within the southern/eastern portion of the project area, which would include RR and RER residential uses. Despite the necessary grading for construction of the local streets and residences, and excavation of the proposed water reservoir, the site would maintain varying topography, which is consistent with a rural residential community setting. Also, no designated scenic resources would be substantially damaged by project implementation.

However, the proposed Project would alter the nature and scope of existing conditions, thereby, permanently altering the visual character of the existing environment. More specifically, implementation of the proposed roadways and associated infrastructure would result in direct visual impacts, as undeveloped foothill woodland habitat would be replaced with these improvements. Visual impacts from residential development would involve the replacement of undeveloped vacant areas with residential building pads, driveways, landscaping, and fuel modification zones. Implementation of these improvements would permanently alter portions of the existing undeveloped area resulting in impacts to the visual character of the project site. Although the project design would minimize the amount of grading to reduce cut and fill slopes, which would reduce the overall visual impacts resulting from development of the site, the site character would be permanently changed with implementation of the proposed project. Thus, due to the permanent change in visual character of the site, it is concluded that impacts are significant and unavoidable.

AREA VIEWSHED

5.2-3 *Implementation of the proposed Project would adversely impact scenic vistas. Analysis has concluded that impacts would be significant and unavoidable.*

The following section includes a discussion of views across the project site and of distant foothill/mountain ranges with implementation of the proposed Project. The analysis is based upon buildout of 315 residential lots, a 210-acre-foot water reservoir, and necessary roadways and infrastructure associated with the proposed Project. As stated in the Existing Conditions section, above, the project area consists primarily of undeveloped foothill/mountainous topography with the central portion developed with the Sierra Meadows Golf Course. According to the Madera County General Plan, there are no designated State scenic routes or resources that extend through the project area. Additionally, no designated scenic vistas exist in



the project vicinity. Although, no areas of the project site are officially designated within a scenic area, the varying topography within the project area does provide for short-range scenic views of the existing undeveloped foothill woodland habitat and long-range views of the distant foothills/mountains.

Analyses of public views to the project area are analyzed from surrounding land uses. Views from surrounding uses to the north, south, east and west of the project area are similar in that views to the project area are limited by the foothill/mountainous topography and by the size and location of existing vegetation. Thus, views are generally described for all surrounding uses and not for specific locations respective to the project area, with the exception of the Ahwahnee Country Club Estates Subdivision.

As described in the Existing Conditions section, above, land uses adjacent to the project area are designated for a variety of uses including residential, agriculture, open space and public/institutional uses. Although surrounding land uses include low-density residential uses (Ahwahnee Estates and Miami Creek Estates) to the northeast and southeast of the project site, the majority of the surrounding area is undeveloped and retains the area's natural character.

Due to the existing vegetation and topography, the majority of surrounding land areas have partially obstructed views of the project area. For those surrounding uses that are immediately adjacent to the project area and have views of the project area, the short- and long-range views are limited by the size and location of existing vegetation, as well as the topography. Long-range views of the distant foothill/mountain ranges from surrounding areas could be impacted by future residences associated with the proposed Project. However, since the existing on-site foothill woodland habitat, including a variety of oak trees, would be taller than the proposed residences, it is anticipated that not all long-range views from surrounding land areas would be impacted by project implementation. Potentially, where trees are removed, long-range views of the distant foothills/mountains may be enhanced. Additionally, although short-range views are limited by the topography and by the size and location of existing vegetation, short-range views of the existing foothill woodland habitat would be replaced with low-density residential uses. Thus, the proposed residential uses would permanently alter off-site views to and across the project site from surrounding land uses.

The closest residential uses to the project area are the Ahwahnee Country Club Estates, generally located to the north-northeast of the project area. These residential uses are located adjacent to the existing golf course. Development of the proposed Project would be visually compatible with these residential uses, as both developments would have a low-density residential character and would be located in and around the existing golf course. Similar to other residential uses in the Project vicinity, residences in the Ahwahnee Country Club Estates would have the short- and long-range views of the project area that are limited by the size and location of existing vegetation, as well as the topography. Since project implementation would result in the conversion of undeveloped foothill woodland habitat to residential uses, short-range views of and across the project site would be permanently altered. Additionally, long-range views of the distant foothills/mountain ranges for existing



and future residences located immediately adjacent to the project site, in close proximity to Opah Drive, could be partially obstructed by the proposed residences.

The proposed water reservoir and associated facilities would be located in an area currently designated for open space uses. Since the elevation of the proposed water reservoir is higher than that of the adjacent stretch of Opah Drive, only the downstream portion of the earthen dam feature would be visible from Opah Drive. This portion of the dam would likely consist of riprap that would integrate the vegetative characteristics of the existing natural environment. The proposed water reservoir would not obstruct short- or long-range views from surrounding land uses across the project site of the existing foothill woodland habitat or the distant foothill/mountain ranges. Potentially, removal of vegetation associated with the water reservoir would enhance long-range views.

In conclusion, the proposed residential uses would permanently alter existing views of and across the project site for surrounding land uses, including the Ahwahnee Country Club Estates, from undeveloped foothill woodland habitat to low-density and rural residential uses. The proposed residential uses would substantially affect both short- and long-range views to the project site. Thus, it is concluded that long-term aesthetic impacts to the viewshed of surrounding land uses and future off-site residents of the project site are significant and unavoidable. No mitigation measures are available to reduce long-term impacts to the area's viewshed to less than significant levels.

LONG-TERM LIGHT AND GLARE IMPACTS

5.2-4 *The proposed Project would introduce additional light and glare on-site that could affect the surrounding land uses and future residents. Analysis has concluded with implementation of the recommended mitigation, impacts would be less than significant.*

Long-term impacts are associated with the construction of new residences and street lighting, which may create nighttime light or daytime glare.

Nighttime lighting impacts are significant when they interfere with or intrude into sensitive land use areas, which include private residences, and public access areas. Glare impacts can cause daytime interferences with activities at sensitive land use areas, as defined above, as well as public roadways where automobile drivers can be temporarily blinded by glare thus causing a safety concern. As the project would serve as an extension to the existing Sierra Meadows Golf Course, the lighting scheme and characteristics would be similar to and compliment the existing lighting of the adjacent residences/golf course uses. Furthermore, residential uses as part of the Ahwahnee Country Club Estates to the northeast and Miami Creek Estates to the east would be shielded from new light sources by the existing vegetation and natural topography of the site.

Glare impacts are typically related to the use of modern, highly reflective surfaces such as gold, or silver glass, acrylic, and broad, flat surfaces that are painted with highly reflective colors. The residential uses associated with the proposed Project would not likely incorporate highly reflective glass, or broad, flat surfaces. The new



residences would be in keeping with the historical uses of the surrounding area. Future homes are anticipated to utilize similar architectural themes as seen in the Ahwahnee Country Club Estates. Implementation of the recommended mitigation measures would reduce potentially significant long-term light and glare impacts to less than significant levels.

CUMULATIVE IMPACTS

5.2-5 *Buildout of the proposed Project, together with development anticipated by the Madera County General Plan, would alter the nature and appearance of the area and contribute to the loss of undeveloped areas. Analysis has concluded that cumulative impacts would be significant and unavoidable.*

The Madera County General Plan EIR does not address aesthetic impacts in a stand-alone section of the EIR. However, Chapter 3, *Land Use, Housing and Population*, does include analysis of “Visual and Scenic Resources” (Policies I.H.1 to I.H.4) that address impacts to land uses, which includes the types and quality of development, and visual and scenic environmental implications. The General Plan EIR concludes that that buildout in accordance with the General Plan would result in substantial changes to the present and planned uses in the southern portion of the County where new growth areas are designated from agricultural and open space uses to urban and suburban development. This is concluded by the General Plan EIR to be a significant and unavoidable impact.

Construction of development anticipated by the Madera County General Plan would permanently alter the nature and appearance of the area through the loss of undeveloped areas and the increase in development, which would also increase the amount of light and glare impacts in the area. As identified in the Madera County General Plan EIR, buildout of the General Plan would result in significant land uses impacts, which include visual and scenic environmental implications, with the conversion of open area to urban and suburban development.

The proposed Sierra Meadows Project would contribute to the cumulative reduction of undeveloped land within Madera County. Implementation of the proposed project would develop approximately 500 acres of undeveloped vacant land with residential uses. As a result, changing the existing foothill woodland habitat to low-density residential uses would permanently alter the visual character of the site.

As development occurs throughout the County, residents and visitors in the area would notice the visual effects of urbanization. Development of the Sierra Meadows Project would contribute to the urbanization of the project vicinity, which includes open areas to the north, south, east and west. Therefore, the proposed project would result in an unavoidable significant cumulative aesthetic impact.

MITIGATION MEASURES

The following mitigation measures directly correspond to the identified impact statements in the Impacts discussion.



CONSTRUCTION-RELATED AESTHETIC/LIGHT AND GLARE IMPACTS

- 5.2-1a Construction equipment staging areas shall be located away from existing residential uses and appropriate screening (i.e., temporary fencing with opaque material), used to buffer views of construction equipment and material, when feasible. Staging locations shall be indicated on project Final Development Plans and Grading Plans and are subject to review and approval of Madera County. Compliance with this measure is subject to periodic field inspection by Madera County Staff.
- 5.2-1b All construction-related lighting associated with the construction of new roadways and the installation of utilities shall be located and aimed away from adjacent residential areas. Lighting shall use the minimum wattage necessary to provide safety at the construction site. A construction safety lighting plan shall be submitted to Madera County for review concomitant with Grading Permit applications for the subdivision of the lots.

SITE CHARACTER

- 5.2-2 No mitigation measures are recommended.

AREA VIEWSHED

- 5.2-3 No mitigation measures are recommended.

LONG-TERM LIGHT AND GLARE IMPACTS

- 5.2-4 Prior to final structural approval, the following design features shall be incorporated into applicable building plans:
- Project elevations and materials of proposed structures and facilities shall not produce excessive glare.
 - All security light fixtures and standards shall be either shielded or directed away from neighboring properties and streets. Exposed bulbs shall not be permitted. All new installation fixtures shall have glare control shields.
 - The type and location of lighting standards and the intensity of lighting shall be approved by Madera County Engineering and General Services Department, Building Division.

CUMULATIVE IMPACTS

- 5.2-5 No mitigation measures are recommended.



LEVEL OF SIGNIFICANCE AFTER MITIGATION

The following aesthetics/light and glare impacts would remain significant and unavoidable following mitigation:

- Construction-related aesthetic/light and glare impacts;
- Visual character or quality of the site;
- Effects on a scenic vista; and
- Cumulative aesthetic impacts.

If Madera County approves the proposed Project, the County shall be required to cite their findings in accordance with Section 15091 of CEQA and prepare a Statement of Overriding Considerations in accordance with section 15093 of CEQA.