

### 5.1 AESTHETICS

This section of the Draft Environmental Impact Report (DEIR) describes the existing landform and aesthetic character of the project area and discusses the potential impacts to the visual character of the City of Menifee from implementation of the proposed General Plan. This section includes a discussion of the qualitative aesthetic characteristics of the existing environment that would be potentially degraded by the proposed project's implementation and the consistency of the project with established relevant visual resources policies.

#### Methodology

The evaluation of aesthetics and aesthetic impacts is highly subjective. It requires the application of a process that objectively identifies the visual features of the existing environment and their importance. The characterization of aesthetics involves establishing the existing visual characteristics—including visual resources and scenic vistas—unique to the City. Visual resources are determined by identifying existing landforms (e.g., topography and grading), views (e.g., scenic resources such as natural features or urban characteristics) viewing points/locations, and existing light and glare (e.g., nighttime illumination). Changes to the existing aesthetic environment from implementation of the proposed General Plan are identified and qualitatively evaluated based on the proposed modifications to the existing setting and the viewers' sensitivity. It should be noted, however, that there are no locally designated or defined standards or methodologies for the assessment of aesthetic impacts. The project-related impacts are compared to the existing setting using the threshold criteria discussed in Section 5.1.2, *Thresholds of Significance*. Potential land use effects of the proposed General Plan on land uses are considered in the discussion of land use compatibility in Section 5.10, *Land Use and Planning*.

#### 5.1.1 Environmental Setting

The City encompasses numerous brush-covered hills and low mountains surrounded by a series of interconnected, broad, nearly flat-bottomed valleys. The steepest slope and largest cluster of hillsides can be found north of Menifee Lakes, traveling northward across McCall Boulevard. Quail Valley also has a significant number of steep hillsides that influence development patterns in the area. Elevations in the City range from about 1,400 feet above mean sea level (amsl) for the valley floor to approximately 2,600 feet amsl for the local hills; Bell Mountain is 1,850 amsl. Menifee includes parts of three valleys: the Perris Valley in the north end of the City, the Menifee Valley in the central part of the City, and the Paloma Valley in the southeast area.

#### Visual Character

Land cover on valley floors includes developed land uses, farm fields, and open undeveloped areas. Most hillsides are covered with coastal sage scrub interspersed with boulder outcrops (see Figures 5.1-1a and 5.1-1b, *Natural Environment and Visual Resources*) The development pattern in the parts of the City with suburban density—Menifee Lakes, Quail Valley, Romoland, and Sun City—consists mostly of one-story detached single-family homes. Romoland contains some industrial uses near the former Burlington Northern Santa Fe (BNSF) railroad tracks extending northwest-southeast. Commercial uses are in several areas throughout Menifee but concentrated along the I-215 corridor, Newport Road, and McCall Road. The City has four golf courses, two in Sun City and another two in Menifee Lakes. Most of the remainder of the City consists of vacant land, rural residential development, and farms (see Figure 5.1-2, *Visual Resources*). Farms scattered through several parts of the City represent the region's agricultural past and the ongoing transition from a rural agricultural character to a developed urban city. Sun City, built in 1960, was an early master-planned senior citizen community.



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#### **Light and Glare**

Sources of light and glare in Menifee include building lights (interior and exterior), security lights, sign illumination, and parking-area lighting. Other sources of nighttime light and glare include street lights and vehicular traffic along roadways. Menifee's night skies benefit from being surrounded by uses that emit little or no light: open space lands, vacant land, farmland, and rural residential development. In addition, land uses that generate significant amounts of light pollution, such as shopping centers, are limited and concentrated in limited areas in the City.

The City of Menifee is approximately 30 miles northwest of the Mount Palomar Observatory in northern San Diego County and is therefore within Zone B (45-mile radius) of the Mount Palomar Nighttime Lighting Policy Area. The 200-inch reflector telescope at Mount Palomar was the largest optical telescope in the world for years after its opening in 1949. The Mount Palomar Observatory also contains four smaller telescopes, and remains a leading center of astronomical research. Dark skies are required for observations through the telescopes.

#### **Visual Resources**

##### **Landform and Topography**

Menifee is within the San Jacinto Basin, a broad area of valleys and hills bounded by the San Jacinto Mountains and San Geronio Badlands on the northeast; the Box Springs Mountains on the north; and the Santa Ana Mountains on the southwest. Topographically, the City encompasses numerous brush-covered hills and low mountains surrounded by a series of interconnected, broad, nearly flat-bottomed valleys. The hills and mountains within the Menifee area are rugged and moderately steep, generally ranging in elevation from about 1,400 feet to slightly more than 2,600 feet above mean sea level. The steepest slopes and largest cluster of hillsides can be found north of Menifee Lakes, and south of McCall Boulevard. Quail Valley also has a significant number of steep hillsides that influence development patterns in the area. Menifee's two tallest peaks—Quail Hill at 2,164 feet and Bell Mountain (in the City's southeast area) at 1,850 feet—are important landmarks in the City.

The City of Menifee is also home to a large collection of natural rock formations and pilings (see Figure 5.1-1b). These rock features are sometimes found in combination with more significant hillsides, but can also stand-alone on the side of major roadways or drainage features.

##### **Scenic Vistas**

The natural mountainous setting of the Menifee area is critical to its overall visual character, and provides scenic vistas for the community. Topography and a lack of dense vegetation or urban development offer scenic views throughout the City, including to and from hillside areas. Scenic features include gently sloping alluvial fans, rugged mountains and steep slopes, mountain peaks and ridges, rounded hills with boulder outcrops, farmland and open space. Scenic vistas provide views of these features from public spaces. Many of the scenic resources are outside the City limits and beyond the planning area boundary. Scenic views from Menifee include the San Jacinto Mountains to the northeast and east; the San Bernardino Mountains to the north; the San Gabriel Mountains to the northwest; and the Santa Ana Mountains to the west and southwest. The Canyon Lake Reservoir lies next to the west City boundary.

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*Natural Environment and Visual Resources*



Photo 1. Bell Mountain, low lying hills and open space.



Photo 2. Hills and rock outcrops.

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*Natural Environment and Visual Resources*



Photo 3. Typical rock outcrops.



Photo 4. Bell Mountain and Farmland.

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### *Visual Resources*



Photo 5. Visual corridor along street.



Photo 6. Residential neighborhood with hills in background.

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### **Unique Scenic Resources**

In addition to the natural features discussed above that make Menifee aesthetically unique, the Grandmother Tree, a coast live oak (*Quercus agrifolia*) tree on Scott Road, is one of the largest trees of its species and is thought to be over 500 years old.

### **Scenic Highways**

There are no officially designated scenic highways in or near the City of Menifee. State Route 74 (SR-74) passes through the northern part of the City and is considered an “Eligible State Scenic Highway – Not Officially Designated” by the California Department of Transportation. The nearest designated state scenic highway to the City is a portion of SR-74 in the San Jacinto Mountains about 17 miles east of the City (Caltrans 2010).

### **Regulatory Setting**

#### **State**

California Streets and Highways Code Sections 260 through 263 authorize the California State Scenic Highways Program, and set forth criteria and procedures for designation of scenic highways.

#### **City**

The City of Menifee Municipal Code identifies land use categories, development standards, and other general provisions that ensure consistency between the City’s new General Plan and proposed development projects. The following provisions from the City’s Municipal Code help minimize visual and light and glare impacts associated with new development projects and are relevant to the proposed project.

**Dark Sky; Light Pollution (Chapter 6.01).** The City’s ordinance establishes lighting standards for specific types of lamps, shielding, hours of operation, and outdoor advertising displays. Low-pressure sodium lamps are preferred. All outdoor lights, with certain exceptions, must be shielded. Security lighting may remain on all night; decorative lighting must be off between 11:00 PM and sunrise; and advertising lighting may remain on until midnight.

**Siting of Wireless Communication Facilities (Chapter 9.08).** This ordinance includes standards for concealed or disguised wireless facilities, along with screening and fencing for equipment.

**Administrative Nuisance Abatement (Chapter 11.20).** Chapter 11.20 of the Municipal Code addresses the mitigation of nuisances and includes provisions aimed at protecting the visual quality of neighborhoods. These regulations require the proper maintenance of buildings and property, including the abatement of overgrown vegetation, accumulation of debris, general neglect of property, and other visual nuisances.

### **5.1.2 Thresholds of Significance**

According to Appendix G of the CEQA Guidelines, a project would normally have a significant effect on the environment if the project would:

- AE-1 Have a substantial adverse effect on a scenic vista.
- AE-2 Substantially damage scenic resources, including, but not limited to, trees, rock outcroppings, and historic buildings within a state scenic highway.



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- AE-3 Substantially degrade the existing visual character or quality of the site and its surroundings.
- AE-4 Create a new source of substantial light or glare which would adversely affect day or nighttime views in the area.

#### 5.1.3 Environmental Impacts

The following impact analysis addresses thresholds of significance for which the Initial Study identified potentially significant impacts. The applicable thresholds are identified in brackets after the impact statement.

**IMPACT 5.1-1: FUTURE DEVELOPMENT UNDER THE GENERAL PLAN WOULD ALTER THE VISUAL APPEARANCE OF THE CITY BUT WOULD NOT SUBSTANTIALLY DEGRADE THE EXISTING SCENIC VISTAS, VISUAL CHARACTER, OR QUALITY OF THE CITY OR ITS SURROUNDINGS. [THRESHOLDS AE-1 AND AE-3]**

**Impact Analysis:** Implementation of the proposed General Plan is not expected to degrade views of scenic resources in the City. At full General Plan buildout, development in many parts of the City would intensify urban development in currently undeveloped areas. Portions of the City that are currently vacant land or farmland would be developed with a mix of residential, commercial, industrial, and institutional uses. The total residential intensity would more than double, from 30,269 units in 2010 to 63,754 units at buildout, and nonresidential land use intensity would increase more than fourfold, from 12.0 million square feet to 52.3 million square feet at buildout. Some of the greatest changes in land use, and thus in visual appearance, would be along the I-215 in the southern part of the City. Much of that corridor is currently vacant land and farmland; the area would be developed under the Economic Development Corridor (EDC) designation with a mix of residential, commercial, industrial, and institutional uses.

With or without adoption of the proposed General Plan, much of the northern and central parts of the City would be developed pursuant to 13 already approved specific plans with a mix of residential, commercial, institutional, and open-space uses. Pursuant to the proposed General Plan, four corridors would be developed as economic development corridors with mixed residential, commercial, industrial, and institutional uses. Those corridors are the I-215; Scott Road; McCall Boulevard in the Menifee Lakes area; and Ethanac Road along the northwest City boundary. More than 40 percent of the City would be designated for residential development at densities of eight units per acre or less—densities typical of detached single-family homes. Additional acreage in specific plans would be used for residences. Residences would also be developed in the Economic Development Corridor designation, but would be vertically integrated with other land uses.

Portions of the southern part of the City would be developed with rural residential use. Following is a brief description of impacts of proposed General Plan buildout on development patterns in several areas of the City.

#### Menifee Lakes

Broad development patterns in Menifee Lakes would remain as they currently exist.

#### Quail Valley

The overall development pattern in the existing community of Quail Valley would remain as it is. Vacant land surrounding the existing community of Quail Valley would be developed with low-density residential uses. Hills between the communities of Quail Valley and Sun City would be conserved as open space.

### Romoland

The west end of Romoland would be developed under the Economic Development Corridor designation with a mix of commercial, industrial, and residential uses; current uses are a mix of light industrial and vacant land. Part of Romoland northeast of the railroad tracks would be developed with residential uses up to 20 to 24 units per acre, far more dense than the existing single-family residential use.

The eastern part of Romoland, now largely farmland, would be built out pursuant to the Menifee Valley Ranch and Menifee North specific plans.

### Sun City

Broad development patterns in Sun City would remain as they currently exist.

### Paloma Valley

Paloma Valley would be built out with a mix of residential and rural residential uses and with mixed uses in the EDC designation near the I-215. Existing land uses are a mixture of single-family residential and vacant land.

Development in all areas of the City would be required to comply with regulations in the City's Municipal Code, policies in the proposed General Plan, and other existing City policies that protect scenic vistas, scenic resources, and the intended character of the City. The Municipal Code contains regulations that require retention of important natural features, preservation of views, and new development and landscaping that is sensitive to visual resources: In particular, the code's Siting of Wireless Communication Facilities (Chapter 9.08) and Administrative Nuisance Abatement (Chapter 11.20).



Policies of the proposed General Plan give substantial consideration to the preservation of scenic vistas, including those that protect undisturbed slopes, hillsides, and other natural landforms that enhance the City's environmental setting, found in the Open Space and Conservation Element. A list of proposed General Plan policies relating to aesthetic resources is included in Appendix C. Upon implementation of these policies and adherence to the Municipal Code, implementation of the proposed General Plan would not substantially degrade scenic vistas in Menifee. Scenic vista and community character impacts would be less than significant.

The environmental impacts would be the same under the Expanded EDC Scenario.

**IMPACT 5.1-2: IMPLEMENTATION OF THE GENERAL PLAN WOULD NOT DAMAGE SCENIC RESOURCES WITHIN A STATE SCENIC HIGHWAY. [THRESHOLD AE-2]**

**Impact Analysis:** The City of Menifee contains a multitude of natural visual resources, including low-lying valleys, mountains, and rock formations. These features are often enjoyed via the City's roadways. Scenic highways provide the motorist with views of distinctive natural characteristics that are not typical of other areas in the region. There are no officially designated scenic highways in or near the City of Menifee. State Route 74 (SR-74) passes through the northern part of the City and is considered an "Eligible State Scenic Highway – Not Officially Designated" by the California Department of Transportation. The nearest designated state scenic highway to the City is a portion of SR-74 in the San Jacinto Mountains about 17 miles east of the city (Caltrans 2010).

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Due to the visual significance of some areas, several roadways in Menifee have been officially recognized as Eligible County Scenic Highways. Eligible County Scenic Highways are county highways that have outstanding scenic qualities; although there is no official list of county highways eligible for scenic designation (as there is with state highways), they are considered eligible and do not require legislative action like state highways. The status of a proposed County Scenic Highway changes from eligible to officially designated when the local governing body applies to Caltrans for scenic highway approval, adopts a Corridor Protection Program, and receives notification that the highway has been officially designated a Scenic Highway.

Designating these roadways as “scenic highways” establishes the City’s intent to conserve its significant scenic resources for future generations and to manage development adjacent to these roadways so that it will not detract from the area’s natural characteristics. There are three County Eligible Scenic Highways in the City of Menifee: I-215 from McCall Boulevard south to the City boundary; McCall Boulevard from I-215 on the west to Menifee Road on the east; and Menifee Road from McCall Boulevard north to the City boundary.

New and/or intensified uses along these roadways would not fully obstruct visual resources such as the hillsides or distant mountains and would not require substantial changes in topography. Allowed uses in these areas would be regulated by City Design Guidelines, Municipal Code development standards, and proposed General Plan policies that limit the height and bulk of buildings.

Implementation of the proposed General Plan would not result in damage to any historic buildings or significant rock outcroppings within a state Scenic highway. However, implementation of the proposed General Plan would make improvements to McCall Boulevard and Menifee Road including widening to six lanes, curb, gutter, NEV/bike lanes, sidewalks, landscaped parkways. Also, Ethanac Road/SR-74 would be widened to six to eight lanes. Development of these improvements would involve the removal of ornamental and natural landscapes. As part of the roadway cross-section, landscaping would be installed along roads. The City is committed to preserving the environment and its natural resources, which are important to the heritage, character, economy, and overall quality of life of the community. The City’s goal is that scenic highway corridors are preserved and protected from change which would diminish the aesthetic value of lands adjacent to the designated routes. Policies and actions in the proposed General Plan express the City’s vision for balanced growth and ensure that new development is integrated into the natural topography. Adherence to the design standards of the City’s ordinances and commercial design guidelines and implementation of the policies of the General Plan would ensure that future development that would be accommodated by the General Plan would be developed in a manner that would not cause significant impacts on scenic resources. New projects would be required to preserve viewsheds and view corridors.

Views from eligible scenic highways within the city would significantly change because vast open spaces would be developed and views of low-lying valleys, mountains, and rock formations would be obstructed. However, because these scenic highways are not officially designated, impacts are considered be less than significant.

The environmental impacts would be the same under the Expanded EDC Scenario.

**IMPACT 5.1-3: IMPLEMENTATION OF THE GENERAL PLAN WOULD GENERATE ADDITIONAL LIGHT AND GLARE. [THRESHOLD AE-4]**

**Impact Analysis:** Sources of light and glare exist within the confines of the City, including building lighting (interior and exterior), security-lighting, sign illumination, and parking-area lighting. These sources are mostly associated with the multifamily residential, commercial, and industrial uses. Single-family, rural, and semirural residential development spread across the valley are also sources of nighttime light. Other sources of

nighttime light and glare include street lights and vehicular traffic along roadways. Additionally, there is some ambient lighting from surrounding communities and roadways.

Lighting in a rural context, especially glaring light, has the potential to impact the visual quality of the dark nighttime sky and natural open space areas.

Future development in accordance with the proposed General Plan would allow for development of currently undeveloped parcels and alteration, intensification, and redistribution of some existing land uses. Because the City and surrounding area are largely undeveloped, the lighting associated with improvements and structures of future development projects could increase nighttime light and glare within the City. There are portions of the City that would be developed with more light-intensive land uses under the proposed General Plan (e.g., conversion of vacant land or underutilized areas into residential, commercial, or industrial uses). Sources of light and glare from new development or redevelopment would include lighting needed to provide nighttime street and building illumination, security lighting, nighttime traffic, sign illumination, and lighting associated with construction activities.

Undeveloped portions of the City; redevelopment of underutilized areas; and replacement, expansion, or refurbishment of existing development in other areas would introduce new sources of light and glare that may adversely affect day or nighttime views and impact sensitive biological resource areas such as wildlife corridors, open space, and conservation areas.

The County of Riverside General Plan Harvest Valley/Winchester and Sun City/Menifee Valley Area Plans recognize that the nighttime sky is an attraction for residents of the valley. The plan also recognizes that wildlife habitat areas can be adversely impacted by artificial lighting. Additionally, nighttime lighting from the Menifee area has an impact on views from the Mount Palomar Observatory in San Diego County, which requires darkness for clear nighttime viewing. Chapter 6.01 of the City's Municipal Code, *Dark Sky, Light Pollution* requires restrictions on outdoor lighting, including low-pressure sodium lighting as the preferred lamp type; shielding of fixtures; and limited hours of operation of most outdoor lighting.

Additionally, all future development projects that would be accommodated by the proposed General Plan would be required to comply with California's Building Energy Efficiency Standards for Residential and Nonresidential Buildings (Title 24, Part 6, of the California Code of Regulations), which outlines mandatory provisions for lighting control devices and luminaires.

Adherence to county and City regulations and implementation of the policies of the proposed General Plan would ensure that light and glare from new development and redevelopment projects accommodated by the General Plan would be minimized and that significant impacts would not occur.

The environmental impacts would be the same under the Expanded EDC Scenario.

### **5.1.4 Existing Regulations and Standard Conditions**

#### **State**

- California's Building Energy Efficiency Standards for Residential and Nonresidential Buildings, Title 24, Part 6, of the California Code of Regulations
- California State Scenic Highways Program (California Streets and Highways Code Sections 260 through 263)



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- Dark Sky, Light Pollution (Chapter 6.01)
- Siting of Wireless Communication Facilities (Chapter 9.08)
- Administrative Nuisance Abatement (Chapter 11.20)

#### Relevant General Plan Policies

Relevant Menifee General Plan policies are in the Open Space and Conservation Element and Community Design Element, and are listed in Appendix C of this EIR.

#### 5.1.5 Level of Significance Before Mitigation

Upon implementation of regulatory requirements and standard conditions of approval, the following impacts would be less than significant: 5.1-1, 5.1-2, 5.1-3, and 5.1-4. Impacts would be less than significant under the Expanded EDC Scenario.

#### 5.1.6 Mitigation Measures

No mitigation measures are required.

#### 5.1.7 Level of Significance After Mitigation

Impacts would be less than significant for the proposed General Plan and for the Expanded EDC scenario.