

N. VISUAL RESOURCES

This section describes the existing visual resources within the City of Albany and evaluates potential impacts of the Draft General Plan on these resources. Included in this section is a description of existing visual conditions within Albany as well as an evaluation of the potential effects on visual resources that would result from implementation of the Draft General Plan. The visual analysis is based on field observations within the City of Albany, background reports prepared for the General Plan Update, and publically-available planning documents.

Visual resources include the elements that provide a “sense of place” within Albany and contribute to its unique identity. These elements encompass both natural and human-made features of the local environment, as well as cultural characteristics that contribute to how Albany is perceived, or “read” as a place. The setting section describes the primary features contributing to Albany’s natural setting, such as gateways, scenic views, scenic highways, and creek corridors, in addition to the issue of night lighting and glare.

1. Setting

The following section describes Albany’s regional and local visual setting.

a. Regional Setting. Albany is the northernmost city in Alameda County and is located on the east shore of the San Francisco Bay. Albany is located close to two prominent natural features San Francisco Bay which acts as the western border of the City and Albany Hill, which rises to approximately 330 feet in the western part of the City. Albany is located in an urbanized area and borders the Contra Costa County cities of Richmond on the northwest and El Cerrito on the north, and the Alameda County city of Berkeley on the east and south. Land uses, building types, and densities are similar in the adjacent cities and consist of primarily low rise development.

b. Local Setting. For the purpose of describing the urban setting, Albany has been divided into seven contiguous geographic areas, as shown in Figure IV.N-1. The neighborhood areas are listed below.

- Waterfront
- Freeway
- Albany Hill
- University Village
- Central and Eastern Albany
- San Pablo Avenue
- Solano Avenue

Each of Albany’s primary geographic areas is defined by a commercial, industrial, or residential district. Albany has an urban visual character, characterized by lower-rise buildings (mostly one to two stories in height), extensive landscaping, and a moderate intensity of uses. More dense and urban areas with taller buildings and more concentrated commercial activity are located along San Pablo Avenue and Solano Avenue.

c. Neighborhood Area Characteristics. The visual characteristics of each neighborhood are described below.

(1) Waterfront. The Albany waterfront is characterized by expansive open spaces and has visual qualities associated with unimproved parkland, such as open fields, trails, a beach, and dense ground cover. The area has been modified by a century of landfill, including the creation of the Albany Neck and Bulb which extend from the natural shoreline west one-half mile into San Francisco Bay. The artificial nature of the landscape is apparent, as scattered construction debris and exposed metal are visible, and construction rubble exists along the shoreline. A small eucalyptus grove is present near the Albany Beach, and other non-native trees such as canary palms, Australian tea trees, and acacia are present. The freeway creates a strong eastern edge to the area and separates the waterfront from the rest of the City.

Golden Gate Fields is a dominant visual feature of the shoreline environment. It includes a multi-story grandstand seating 8,000 people and a large club and concessions building. The grandstand and track are visible from much of the Central East Bay, including from Interstate 80 (I-80), the south side of Albany Hill, and the Berkeley Hills. Much of the racetrack property is open space, including parking lots, the interior turf area, and the track itself. A variety of fencing, lighting, and storage facilities are also present. The horse stables at the south end of the track are located in Berkeley.

San Francisco Bay adds to the expansive visual quality of this area and creates an outward focus toward the water. Visual character is defined primarily by long-range views to the horizon. There are also views northward toward Point Isabel and southward toward Cesar Chavez Park along the Berkeley waterfront. Short- and mid-range views take in shoreline features (such as concrete debris and rip rap), abundant scrub and low trees, trails, and tall grasslands. The Albany Bulb has an eclectic collection of outdoor folk art, much of it fashioned from refuse, that contributes to the wild and remote character of the area and provides a visual cue to the history of the Bulb and its origin as a landfill. The art includes a mix of elements that are transient and elements that are durable and familiar to visitors, including human figures crafted from driftwood.

(2) Freeway. The I-80 and Interstate 580 (I-580) freeways are among the dominant visual features of the city and create a strong edge between the waterfront and Albany's neighborhoods. I-80 is 10 lanes wide as it passes through Albany, with auxiliary and merge lanes making it appear even wider. South of Buchanan, frontage roads, ramps, and grade separations give the freeway an expansive presence. North of Buchanan, the I-80 and I-580 freeways run parallel to one another, with a narrow wedge of light industrial uses and a railroad in between. Elevated ramps at the interchange, and the slight curve of I-80 as it approaches Albany Hill create a change in aspect for drivers and form a memorable transition between the upper Eastshore area (from Richmond northward) and the shoreline area. The I-80/I-580 interchange itself includes an elevated segment of I-80, as well as flyovers and ramps which visually dominate the southern slope of Albany Hill and the approach to the freeways from Buchanan Street.



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LEGEND

- Albany City Limit
- Freeway
- BART Tracks
- Railroad Tracks

- Building
- Waterfront
- Eastshore Area
- University Village
- Central/Eastern Albany

- Albany Hill
- Solano Avenue
- San Pablo Avenue
- Gateways

FIGURE IV.N-1

City of Albany Draft General Plan Update EIR
Albany Visual Analysis Subareas

SOURCE: CITY OF ALBANY, 2/13/15.

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Albany's small industrial district is confined to the linear strip immediately adjacent to the freeway area. Visually, the industrial district is linked to the freeway, with many of its businesses incorporating signage designed for visibility by passing traffic. The building scale is auto-oriented and the architecture is functional, consisting of a number of office-warehouse and industrial buildings. Newer buildings such as the Target store and a recently completed auto showroom incorporate a contemporary-industrial aesthetic that includes metal and glass. The railroad forms a strong boundary between this area and University Village to the west. North of Buchanan, the character is more eclectic, with vacant land, open storage, and older manufacturing buildings.

(3) Albany Hill. Albany Hill is visually important not only because it is a major topographic landmark but because the hill itself affords panoramic views across Albany, Berkeley, Richmond, El Cerrito and San Francisco Bay. Each side of Albany Hill has a different visual character, shaped by the street pattern, vegetation, scale of development, and adjacent uses. The north side of the hill is the least developed, with most of the land contained in a City park. The area is heavily wooded, steep, and somewhat difficult to access. The west side of the hill is dominated by the multi-colored high-rise towers at Gateview and the mid-rise condominiums to the north. The towers (roughly 15-18 stories tall, but still lower than the summit of Albany Hill) are a visual cue to I-80 motorists of the transition between the suburban communities north of Albany and the urban core of the East Bay. The freeway is a dominant presence here, creating a strong horizontal element along the western edge. Eucalyptus woodlands provide a green backdrop to the east and south, softening the presence of the high-rise buildings, and providing a buffer between this area and the rest of the City.

The south and east sides of Albany Hill are mostly urbanized. Views on the south slopes face the Bay, the freeway and racetrack, and points south. As the street grid becomes rectilinear, steep grades are common, creating dramatic panoramas. Tree cover is sparse, resulting in expansive views in almost all directions. The building stock consists of smaller cottages and bungalows generally dating from 1910-1940, and small apartment buildings from the 1950s and 60s. On the east side of Albany Hill, there is a large stock of multi-family housing and townhouse development from the 1960s and 70s, with many structures built into the hillside with stepped foundations, multi-level decks, and wood shingle finishes. These areas look eastward toward Berkeley and Kensington, with views taking in the UC Campus, the hill neighborhoods, and most of Albany. Features such as the BART tracks, San Pablo Avenue, and Solano Avenue provide visual orientation.

(4) University Village. University Village is somewhat self-contained within Albany. Its street network, "master planned" architectural style, building scale, open space pattern, defined edges, and function set it apart from the rest of Albany, although it is easily accessed from surrounding neighborhoods. With the completion of the redevelopment project in 2008, the area presents itself as an aesthetically pleasing, attractively landscaped complex of three-story apartments and townhomes. A consistent color palette, building type, signage program, and landscaping treatment unifies the development. Views from this area generally take in Albany Hill and the distant East Bay Hills, with filtered views west to the Bay.

Other features which define the aesthetic setting in University Village include the approximately 10-acre Gill Tract at the corner of Buchanan and San Pablo Avenue. The use of the tract for agricultural research in an otherwise urban context is noteworthy.

(5) Central and Eastern Albany. The remainder of Albany is characterized by mostly residential uses, fairly consistent in form and density, organized on a rectilinear street grid. Two commercial corridors—San Pablo and Solano Avenues—bisect the grid and provide community gathering places, business districts, and civic activities. The two corridors have been called out as separate neighborhoods and are described later in this chapter.

The character of the residential neighborhoods is eclectic. There is a predominance of one and two story stucco and wood single-family bungalows on lots that generally range from 2,500 to 5,000 square feet. Most of the housing stock dates from 1910-1945, although many homes have been expanded, remodeled, and updated. There is tremendous architectural diversity, including Tudor, Mission, Spanish Revival, Craftsman, and Contemporary styles. The color palette of the homes also is diverse, although pastel and earth-tones are predominant. The combination of small lots, consistent scale, eclectic architecture, front porches, narrow driveways, and mature trees gives the neighborhoods a comfortable and pleasant quality that is highly valued.

Most homes include small landscaped front yards, featuring a mix of ornamental plants, shrubs, and native species. Street trees are present on most blocks, but the overall tree canopy is somewhat sparse. Large specimen trees, including redwoods, Monterey pine, palms, and eucalyptus, occur in scattered locations, providing visual orientation. For the most part, utility lines are above ground and telephone poles and overhead wires are a recurring element of the streetscape.

Many homes were built as single story bungalows of less than 1,400 square feet. The desire to expand and update such homes has accelerated as their value has increased and as family size and income have increased. Given the narrow dimensions and small size of most lots, adding on often requires a second story. Albany has adopted design guidelines intended to reduce the perceived mass of two-story homes from the street, minimize the effect of such additions on adjacent properties, and promote architectural compatibility. On some homes with second story additions, the upper floor is recessed from the front facade, maintaining a lower profile at the street.

Some homes in Central and Eastern Albany have filtered or partial views of nearby landmarks, particularly San Francisco Bay and the hills of Marin County, the Golden Gate, San Francisco skyline, Berkeley Hills, El Cerrito Hills, and Albany Hill. Most views are short-range, taking in landscaped yards, nearby homes, street trees, and adjacent streets. In the eastern part of Albany, the terrain is gently sloped.

Concentrations of multi-family development exist on the blocks between Brighton Avenue and El Cerrito Plaza, and along Adams Street and Kains Avenue. Multi-family structures are generally two to four stories in height, with many incorporating modernist or mid-century modern designs typical of apartment construction in the 1950s and 60s. Some are “soft story” buildings with tuck-under carports at the street level and one or two stories of apartments above. The quality and condition of these buildings is variable, with some in excellent condition and others in need of maintenance and repair.

A number of distinct uses in Central and Eastern Albany’s neighborhoods stand out as visual landmarks. These include churches, such as Albany United Methodist on Marin Avenue and St. Albans on Washington at Curtis, and civic buildings such as the Community Center and Library on Marin Avenue and the Veterans Memorial Building in Memorial Park. Schools are also a prominent feature of the Albany landscape, particularly St. Mary’s College High School in the southeastern

corner of the City and Albany High School and Middle School in the north-central part of the City. City parks and open spaces complement the residential areas, particularly Jewel's Terrace Park in the Albany Terrace area and Memorial Park in northeast Albany. There are also a number of distinctive visual features, such as the elevated BART tracks along the Ohlone Greenway and the wide grassy median on Key Route Boulevard.

(6) San Pablo Avenue. San Pablo Avenue has historically been an auto-oriented thoroughfare. It was once part of the Lincoln Highway, the first transcontinental highway for automobiles, and it supported a streetcar during the early 20th Century. Although its function as an interstate highway ended more than 50 years ago, the legacy persists in the character and mix of uses along the Avenue. San Pablo Avenue is still a State Route (SR 123). Large signs and parking lots are prominent and many businesses are convenience-based or provide goods and services related to automobiles. Buildings range from one to four stories in height, and land uses include auto sales and parts, auto service and repair, shopping centers, freestanding retail uses, restaurants, offices, service businesses, and multi-family residential.

The corridor lacks a common design language or architectural aesthetic. Most blocks are characterized by a mix of building styles, signage types, setbacks, and off-street parking provisions. Sidewalk and median investments have improved the visual quality of the public space, and recent private development has created more cohesion.

During the last 20 years, the corridor has begun to transform into a more pedestrian-oriented district, with landscaping, streetscape amenities, and mixed-use development introduced. One of the distinguishing characteristics of the newer projects is that they contain retail storefronts opening to the sidewalk rather than parking lots along the street frontage. Parking on these properties is located beneath or behind the building, and residential uses are located on upper stories.

Since the late 1980s, Albany's policy has been to make the intersection of San Pablo and Solano Avenue a more visually distinctive node. Tightly clustered storefront buildings along this stretch of San Pablo help the area function as an extension of the Solano Avenue shopping district. One block south, the Buchanan/Marin/San Pablo intersection is another important node. City Hall and the Police and Fire stations create a focal point, but two service stations on the east side of the intersection suggest the node has not reached its full potential. The potential for a more positive visual impact also exists further south along the west side of San Pablo Avenue, where vacant parcels fronting the Avenue near University Village are planned for development with new housing and retail uses. The northern Albany gateway in the vicinity of Albany Bowl also has the potential to be more visually distinct.

Views from San Pablo Avenue are generally oriented to the Avenue itself, as the flat terrain tends to limit broad panoramas. Albany Hill is a dominant visual feature in the northern part of the corridor. The Berkeley and El Cerrito Hills are generally visible to the east, particularly at the intersecting streets and from parking lots. Utilities are underground, with cobra head light fixtures spaced at regular intervals along the Avenue. Mature street trees are regularly spaced on most blocks. A grove of mature evergreens and palms creates a visual landmark just south of City Hall.

(7) Solano Avenue. Solano Avenue is a pedestrian-oriented shopping district characterized by almost continuous ground floor commercial activity from Adams Street to the Berkeley border, 15 blocks to the east. The street is characterized by short blocks, a well-defined street wall, small storefronts with large transparent windows, eclectic architecture, active ground floor uses, and diagonal street parking. These factors combine to create a distinct “village” ambiance that invites strolling, browsing, and pedestrian interactions.

Pedestrian improvements such as curb bulb-outs, landscaping, benches, bus shelters, and small plazas, where implemented, have enhanced the character of this area, and provided gathering places and seating areas along the Avenue. Utilities are underground and antique lighting standards are in place. Many of the buildings feature awnings, creative signage, interesting window displays, and architectural elements that create visual interest.

Most blocks contain one- and two-story wood-frame commercial buildings built to the front setback, and articulated with small storefronts. Some are simple and lack architectural details, and some include embellishments such as turrets, tile mosaics, and parapet walls. The corner buildings often include special treatments which define the end of the block. Building styles include Mediterranean, Tudor, Mid-Century Modern, Art Deco, and California Contemporary, as well as numerous simple vernacular commercial structures from the 1920s and 30s. Exterior finishes include brick, ceramic tile, stucco, wood, and other surfaces, while rooflines and materials vary widely from red clay tiles to mansard-style. The overall effect is eclectic and memorable.

A few larger auto-oriented uses exist along the Avenue. These include the Safeway store, a CVS pharmacy, and a 7-Eleven store. Some blocks include a single two- or three-story apartment building, generally dating from the 1940s to the 1960s, with carports or garages at the street level. While there are no designated historical landmarks on the Avenue, a few buildings are notable for their size, age, and function. These include the Albany Theater, the Church on the Corner, the Post Office, Cornell School, and an AT&T facility near the Berkeley border.

Views from the Solano corridor are primarily short-range and focus on buildings, landscapes, and street trees. On most blocks there are longer-distance views to the Berkeley Hills to the east, the El Cerrito Hills to the north, and Albany Hill to the west. Filtered views of the Bay and distant landmarks in San Francisco and Marin County exist in a few locations.

d. Visual Characteristics. The following section describes Albany’s visual characteristics.

(1) Gateways and Landmarks. Gateways are an important aspect of community design. They create a first impression and lasting image. A well-designed gateway can communicate an image of vitality and prosperity while a poorly managed or neglected gateway can communicate disinvestment and a lack of civic pride. The major gateways into Albany are generally considered to be Buchanan Street east of I-80: the locations where San Pablo Avenue enters the City on the north and south, and the locations where Marin and Solano Avenues enter the City on the east. Albany’s Public Art Master Plan places a special focus on beautifying these locations.

The Buchanan Gateway currently includes the “Rose Wave” sculpture and the new Buchanan bike path. It is further defined by the large USDA building, the open space at Ocean View Park, the Gill

Tract farm, and the residential area ascending up Albany Hill on the north. City Hall is effectively the terminus of this gateway.

The north and south San Pablo Avenue gateways are only eight blocks apart. At the northern boundary, there is little awareness of either the Albany line or Cerrito Creek below. At the southern boundary, the UC property provides an opportunity for a more distinctive southern gateway. A large piece of public art was recently approved in association with new mixed-use development proposed for this area.

The eastern gateway along Solano Avenue is vaguely defined, in part because of a peculiarity in the City boundary. Albany's easternmost point is between Ventura and Tulare Avenues, but for four blocks from this point west, Albany occupies the southern side of the street while the northern side is in Berkeley. The first point where Albany occupies both sides of the street is between Curtis and Neilson Streets. At this point, an older sign made from black steel I-beams reads "Welcome to Albany."

(2) Landscaping and Street Trees. Trees, shrubs, and flowers enhance Albany's appearance and provide a contrast to the built environment. Trees also offer shade for pedestrians, provide privacy and a buffer from noise, relieve some of the effects of air pollution, and introduce nature and habitat into an urban environment. Trees can have positive effects on stormwater runoff and water quality, and can result in increased property values. Trees can also sequester carbon, and contribute to efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Albany has developed an urban forestry program to promote street tree planting and tree maintenance best practices. Pruning of street trees is conducted on a three to four year cycle, with a priority on fast-growing trees or potential hazards. Albany also conducts tree planting and concrete removal for a fee when requested by homeowners. A landscape and lighting assessment district generates revenues for street tree planting, landscaping, public street lighting, sidewalks, and park and recreational improvements.

There are approximately 5,000 publicly-owned trees in Albany, located in City parks and along City streets. In 2010, an updated list of recommended street tree species was adopted based on the recommendations of a Tree Task Force that met for two years prior. Residents may pick a tree from the list and contact the City to arrange for planting. Trees are planted throughout the year, as demand and availability allow. Once planted, residents must agree to water trees according to the instructions provided by the City, and accept liability for tree-related hazards. The City conducts pruning and maintenance. For new construction projects, owners are generally required to purchase trees to be planted by the City in the street right-of-way adjacent to the project.

Over the years, a number of specific programs have been implemented to incentivize tree planting. These include the Block Urban Forest Focus (BUFF) process, in which neighbors mobilize their block to identify tree planting sites, remove concrete, plant trees and ground cover, and prune existing trees. In addition, a Tree Fund has been established to provide a repository for persons wishing to donate money to plant and sustain the City's urban forest. Such programs are intended to build a sense of community and stewardship, while also greening the City.

Homeowners are asked to support and complement City tree maintenance efforts by watering and mulching their street trees, and keeping weeds from interfering with tree development. The City occasionally re-stakes young trees. For mature trees, the City removes dead branches, addresses conflicts with overhead wires, and prunes branches that obscure signs or create sidewalk or road hazards. The City also assists with sidewalk damage that is caused by street trees, although the primary responsibility for sidewalk repair falls on the homeowner.

The City has adopted an official tree removal policy, which includes procedures for emergency and non-emergency removal of trees on public property. Causes for emergency removal include immediate, clear, and imminent danger to the public. The policy calls for a replacement tree to be planted in 60 days or less. For non-emergency removal, permission must be granted by the Director of Community Development, following a noticed public hearing before the Parks and Recreation Commission. Criteria have been established to justify removal, such as a finding that the tree is diseased, damaged, causing frequent sidewalk or utility damage, or poses a hazard. The City itself may apply for a tree removal permit, subject to these same criteria. The Parks and Recreation Commission may grant or deny a tree removal application permit. Their decision is appealable to the City Council.

(3) Public Art Program. Public art includes artwork in the public realm, such as sculptures, murals and mosaics. Public art creates a sense of space and improves the quality and design of buildings, streetscapes and public places, giving a stronger feeling of identity. Architecture and landscapes can be a form of public art, as they express a particular perspective and can provide a source of beauty and interest.

The City has adopted an Art in Public Places Ordinance as a way to fund public art in Albany. Certain types of public and private construction projects must either include a public art component, or pay an in-lieu fee which contributes to the development of public art elsewhere in the City. Any project with a construction cost greater than \$300,000 must include a public art component equal to 1.75 percent of the total construction cost, or contribute 1.75 percent of the project cost to the Public Art Fund.

The City has adopted a Public Arts Master Plan to guide the siting of public art. Locations throughout the City have been evaluated for future art pieces, and several prominent and high visibility sites have been identified as candidates. Notable existing art installations include “Heron” at the Albany waterfront, the “Rose Wave” on Buchanan Street, “Long Song” in Memorial Park, and a tile mural in Terrace Park.

(4) Scenic Views and Scenic Highways. California's Scenic Highway Program was created by the State legislature in 1963. Its purpose is to protect and enhance the natural scenic beauty of California highways and adjacent corridors through special conservation treatment. Designated scenic highways are subject to various regulations and guidelines to avoid diminishing their aesthetic values. There are no officially designated State scenic highways in Albany.

e. Light and Glare. This section describes the existing conditions of light and glare in Albany. Light pollution refers to forms of unwanted light in the night sky, including glare, sky glow, excessive night lighting, and diminished night sky visibility. Existing sources of nighttime light in and around Albany include street lights, parking lot lighting, building lighting, illuminated signs, vehicle headlamps, and interior lighting visible through windows. Billboard illumination has been an issue in the City in the recent past, with concern about the potential effects on residences near I-80.

Existing sources of glare also include those common to urban areas, such as reflection of sunlight and artificial light off of windows, buildings and other surfaces in the day, and glare from inadequately shielded and improperly directed light sources at night. Light and glare levels in the City are fairly typical of an urban environment. Performance standards addressing light and glare, including the design of exterior lighting fixtures, have been incorporated into the Albany Municipal Code.

f. Regulatory Setting. This section describes applicable State and local regulations that pertain to visual resources.

(1) California Scenic Highway Program. The intent of the California Scenic Highway Program (Streets and Highway Code Section 260) is to protect and enhance California's natural beauty and to protect the social and economic values provided by the State's scenic resources. The California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) defines a scenic highway as any freeway, highway, road, or other public right-of-way that traverses an area of exceptional scenic quality. Suitability for designation as a State Scenic Highway is based on vividness, intactness, and unity. There are no officially designated highways within the City of Albany.

(2) City of Albany Municipal Code. Visual and aesthetic conditions are regulated in various sections of the Municipal Code. Specifically, the zoning regulations include standards for building height and placement which are intended to preserve views, maintain light and air, and protect the aesthetic quality of the City and its neighborhoods. Daylight plane regulations have been adopted which require taller buildings to decrease in height as they approach property lines in order to preserve privacy and sunlight in adjacent yards.

Various provisions of the Code address the screening of building components such as mechanical equipment, open storage, surface parking, and trash collection areas. For example, the PRC zoning overlay district includes specific provisions to shield residences on Adams Street from the potential aesthetic effects of commercial uses nearby. Similarly, Section 20.24.110 of the code includes requirements for screening of storage areas, outdoor merchandise displays, manufacturing, and rooftop appurtenances. Municipal Code standards also address lighting, parking lots, outdoor seating areas, the design of secondary units, and other property attributes where visual character might be affected. The Code also includes regulations for signs, which are primarily driven by aesthetic and safety considerations.

The Zoning Code includes special provisions for the RHD (Residential Hillside) zoning district, which was established to protect scenic beauty and preserve significant ridgeline or bay views from Albany Hill. RHD Development standards were drafted to minimize the potential visual impacts of development on surrounding properties, to preserve views, and to protect the visual integrity of the hill itself.

Special design provisions have also been adopted for the commercial “node” area around Solano and San Pablo Avenues. These call for tower elements to distinguish this area from the rest of the street. The Code also addresses the articulation and rhythm of storefronts and facades in this area.

The Municipal Code also regulates the siting of wireless communication facilities, noting that such facilities must be sited to avoid unreasonable interference with neighboring properties, and in locations where their visual impact is least detrimental to scenic vistas (20.20.100.E.2.c). The Code further stipulates that such facilities must be screened from view of surrounding properties and the public. A visual analysis is required when a facility is proposed, and findings relating to view impacts are required when projects are approved.

(3) Design Review. Albany has adopted a design review program to ensure that improvements to property are visually and functionally appropriate to their site conditions and harmonious with their surroundings, including natural landforms and vegetation. Design review is also intended to ensure the compatibility of signs, and to achieve complementary policy goals relating to parking, water conservation, and waste management. Design review is required for new construction and most residential alterations, with exceptions for small accessory structures, changes which do not affect the exterior of structures or which involve normal repair and replacement, re-roofing, skylights, and other minor changes. For additions over 400 square feet and any second story addition, a public hearing before the Planning and Zoning Commission is held as part of the review process.

Approval of design review applications takes into consideration general standards regarding architecture, landscape design, site planning, appropriate treatment of any constraints and natural features on the property, access, privacy, coordination of design details, conformance to applicable design guidelines, and similar criteria. Additional standards related to scale, massing, and architectural compatibility apply to single-family residential additions. Story poles may be required to visually display the outer limits of proposed additions. Special provisions have also been adopted for additions which exceed 28 feet in height in the single-family zoning district.

(4) San Pablo Avenue Design Guidelines. Design guidelines were adopted for parcels abutting San Pablo Avenue in 1993. The guidelines implement the recommendations of a 1989 Concept Plan intended to improve the overall appearance and commercial vitality of the street. The vision for the street is to create an attractive “retail boulevard” with a consistent commercial frontage, greater pedestrian activity, and special locations that create a stronger sense of place. The guidelines do not call for a particular architectural style and apply only to new development and renovations.

The guidelines call for distinctive building silhouettes, and greater attention to building massing to create a stronger street presence. A preference is given for buildings that are articulated into discrete building bays which correspond to smaller storefronts. The guidelines also recommend stronger vertical elements, more interesting facades, special treatments at corners, and the incorporation of lighting as an architectural feature. Buildings are addressed based on their various components—a base, a cap (roofs, cornice lines, parapets), windows and doors, and awnings. Provisions for signage are also included, focusing on the relationship of the sign to the architecture and proportion of the building. The guidelines also cover ground floor details, such as exterior surface materials and lighting. Exterior color is also addressed. Also covered is the location of parking, loading, and service areas. Special provisions in the guidelines were drafted for two key sites: the University Village/Gill Tract property and the Albany Bowl.

2. Impacts and Mitigation Measures

This section discusses potential impacts to visual resources that could result from implementation of the Draft General Plan. The section begins with the significance criteria, which establish the thresholds used to determine whether an impact is significant. The latter part of this section evaluates the Draft General Plan for visual resource impacts, and identifies mitigation measures, as necessary.

a. **Criteria of Significance.** The Draft General Plan would have a significant impact related to visual resources if it would:

- Have a substantial adverse effect on a scenic vista, which could be caused by blocking panoramic views or views of significant landscape features or landforms as seen from public viewing areas;
- Substantially damage to 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 study area and its surroundings; or
- Create of a new source of substantial light or glare which would adversely affect day or nighttime views in the area.

b. **Impacts Analysis.** The following discussion describes impacts on visual resources associated with implementation of the Draft General Plan.

(1) **Substantial Adverse Effect on Scenic Vistas.** The scenic quality of Albany is characterized by views of the San Francisco Bay and Marin Hills (including Mount Tamalpais) to the west, Berkeley Hills to the east, and Albany Hill throughout the City. Views of the San Francisco Bay and Marin Hills are generally available from the waterfront including the Albany Bulb and Neck, and Albany Hill. Filtered views of the Bay and Marin hills are available throughout residential neighborhoods and in a few locations along Solano. Views to the east of the Berkeley Hills are available throughout Albany on residential streets as well as Solano Avenue.

Development associated with implementation of the Draft General Plan would be concentrated along San Pablo Avenue and Solano Avenue. As a result of increased development, building heights may increase along commercial corridors. New development would not substantially block existing views as the following Draft General Plan policies protect these important view sheds. Development would not occur in protected undeveloped areas, including the Bay Trail and Albany waterfront, that provide significant scenic views of the Bay in the City. Additionally, streets and existing open spaces would remain the same under the Draft General Plan and views from these publically-accessible viewpoints would remain unobstructed.

- **Policy LU-2.1: Context-Sensitive Design.** Ensure that infill development in residential areas is compatible in density, scale and character with the established neighborhood context.
- **Policy LU-2.2: Mixed Density Areas.** In areas designated for high and medium density residential uses, ensure that new development is designed to minimize sharp contrasts in height, prevent the loss of sunlight and privacy for adjacent homes, and provide buffering and screening from nearby lower density uses.

- **Policy LU-2.3: Design Guidelines.** Maintain residential design guidelines and design review procedures that promote the compatibility of residential alterations and additions with existing homes and that strive to reduce impacts on neighboring properties. The guidelines should be used to encourage high-quality, visually distinctive architecture, and the use of durable, attractive construction materials.
- **Policy LU-2.6: Second-Story Additions.** Ensure that second story additions to single story homes are designed to minimize increases in height and bulk, and to reduce their perceived mass from the street and surrounding yards.
- **Policy LU-2.8: Kains Avenue and Adams Street.** Maintain Kains Avenue and Adams Street as predominantly residential streets. Land use regulations should limit the encroachment of commercial uses onto parcels that are currently developed with housing. Residential uses along these streets and in adjacent areas should be protected from the potential adverse impacts of commercial uses through special setback requirements. The use of these two streets for primary access to non-residential uses shall be discouraged or prohibited as appropriate.
- **Policy LU-2.9: Non-Residential Uses.** Ensure that non-residential uses in residential areas, such as child care centers, houses of worship, and group homes, are designed and operated to minimize adverse effects on nearby homes and neighborhoods.
- **Policy LU-2.11: Front Yards.** Encourage the management and design of front yard space, including landscaping and fences, to complement residential architecture and enhance neighborhood aesthetics. **Action LU-2.B: Multi-Family Design Guidelines.** Expand the City's design guidelines for multi-family housing to more comprehensively address residential design issues in the City's medium and high density zoning districts.
- **Action LU-2.B: Multi-Family Design Guidelines.** Expand the City's design guidelines for multi-family housing to more comprehensively address residential design issues in the City's medium and high density zoning districts.
- **Policy LU-3.7: Commercial Design.** Encourage distinctive architecture in Albany's commercial districts, with massing, height, façade design, signage, exterior materials, and lighting used to establish a strong sense of place and orientation. New buildings should be sited to enhance the sidewalk space, with any on-site parking located to the side or rear of a structure rather than between the structure and the street.
- **Policy LU-3.8: Buffering.** Require buffering of residential uses, particularly along Kains Avenue, Adams Street, and the perpendicular side streets that intersect Solano Avenue, from the potentially adverse impacts created by nearby commercial activities. This should include special setback and daylight plane regulations to be applied where commercial zones abut lower density zones. It may also include special use, design, and noise standards.
- **Action LU-3.D: San Pablo Avenue Design Guidelines.** Update the San Pablo Avenue Design Guidelines. In addition to providing direction on building scale, commercial facades, landscaping, and public improvements, the guidelines should consider the segmentation of the corridor into "districts" which are different in their function and character. If such districts are identified, zoning code amendments should be considered to reinforce the desired character.
- **Policy LU-6.3: Views and Vistas.** Consider protection of vistas from public viewpoints when reviewing new development applications.

The Draft General Plan would promote open space in Albany, which would provide new public viewpoints. Therefore, development associated with implementation of the Draft General Plan would have a less-than-significant impact on scenic vistas.

(2) **Substantial Damage to Scenic Resources.** As previously described, there are no officially designated State Scenic Highways in Albany, and no portions of Albany encompass the viewshed of a State Scenic Highway. Therefore, the Draft General Plan would not damage scenic resources within a State Scenic Highway. Key scenic resources within Albany include views of the San Francisco Bay, Albany Hill, and Berkeley Hills. The policies in the Draft General Plan would ensure that future development would not affect scenic resources, including the waterfront.

- **Policy LU-2.1: Context-Sensitive Design.** Ensure that infill development in residential areas is compatible in density, scale and character with the established neighborhood context.
- **Policy LU-2.3: Design Guidelines.** Maintain residential design guidelines and design review procedures that promote the compatibility of residential alterations and additions with existing homes and that strive to reduce impacts on neighboring properties. The guidelines should be used to encourage high quality, visually distinctive architecture, and the use of durable, attractive construction materials.
- **Policy LU-5.1: Albany Hill.** Ensure that any future development on Albany Hill is designed and planned to respect natural topography, minimize grading, respond to soil and drainage conditions, minimize impacts on parking and narrow streets, and protect view corridors. The entire crest of Albany Hill shall remain a non-urbanized open space area.
- **Policy LU-5.2: Albany Shoreline.** Work collaboratively with federal, State and regional agencies, key interest groups and shoreline open space advocates, and Albany residents to enhance the recreational, ecological, and open space value of the Albany waterfront.
- **Action LU-5.A: Albany Hill Vacant Parcel.** Work with the owners of the vacant 11-acre parcel on the west side of Albany Hill to cluster the site's allowable development in a way that enables a majority of the property to be conserved as open space.
- **Policy LU-6.1: Historic Preservation.** Encourage expanded recognition, public education, and appreciation of Albany's large inventory of early 20th Century homes and commercial buildings. Such buildings help define Albany's sense of place and identity.
- **Policy CON-1.3: Conservation of Albany Hill.** Protect and restore natural features, native vegetation, and wildlife on Albany Hill.

Draft General Plan Policy LU-6.3 would ensure the protection and enhancement of views that define Albany's character. Additionally, Policies LU-5.1, LU-5.2, CON-1.3, CON-1.4 and Action LU-5.A would assist in protecting the views of open space and scenic resources of Albany Hill and Albany's waterfront. Historic Preservation policies under the Land Use Element of the Draft General Plan would encourage expanded recognition of Albany's inventory of early 20th Century buildings. New projects that could affect historic structures would be required to undergo environmental review, pursuant to CEQA. At the time of such environmental review, potential project-specific adverse impacts on historic structures would be identified and mitigation measures would be recommended. In addition, development that would occur as part of the Draft General Plan implementation would not substantially change the layouts of existing residential neighborhoods that contribute to the visual quality of developed portions of Albany. As previously described, Draft General Plan Policy LU-2.1 would ensure context-sensitive design within residential neighborhoods. Draft General Plan Policy LU-2.3 would maintain residential design guidelines and design review procedures to promote compatibility within residential neighborhoods. Therefore, implementation of the Draft General Plan would result in a less-than-significant impact on scenic resources within Albany.

(3) Substantial Degradation to the Existing Visual Character. The City encompasses a diversity of visual environments ranging from the waterfront, single-family residential neighborhoods, to the Solano Avenue commercial district. In general, most growth in Albany's would occur along Solano Avenue and San Pablo Avenue. Mixed-use projects are anticipated to occur along these commercial corridors, which could alter the existing visual character. Underutilized areas and property, as defined in the Housing Element of the Draft General Plan, have been identified as places that could benefit from improvements to the built environment and additional visual cohesion. New transit-oriented development would be concentrated along commercial corridors which are visually appropriate for increased development intensities. The Draft General Plan would generally not affect areas with a high degree of scenic value including the waterfront and single-family residential neighborhoods.

The visual character of commercial corridors could be altered with implementation of the Draft General Plan primarily through the intensifications of uses, including mixed-use development along transit corridors and infill development, where such development is visually compatible with the existing urban fabric. Intensification of uses in commercial corridors would not have an adverse effect on visual character. Development would occur primarily in already-developed areas and would not displace natural environments with a high level of visual quality. Infill development anticipated by the Draft General Plan would result in the redevelopment of underutilized areas and would add cohesion to the existing character of Albany.

The policies in the Draft General Plan previously listed under Section 2.b(1) Substantial Adverse Effect on Scenic Vistas and 2.b(2) Substantial Damage to Scenic Resources would ensure that the scale and design of new development is of high quality that would be site-sensitive and would not adversely affect the visual character of adjacent areas. In addition, the Draft General Plan would work in conjunction with a variety of other design plans and guidelines that have adopted to encourage appropriate designs for San Pablo Avenue and other neighborhood areas within Albany. These plans include: Complete Streets Conceptual Design for San Pablo Avenue and Buchanan Street; Residential Design Guidelines; San Pablo Avenue Urban Design Concept Plan; San Pablo Avenue Streetscape Master Plan; and San Pablo Avenue Design Guidelines. As a result, implementation of the Draft General Plan would result in less-than-significant impacts to the City's visual character.

(4) Substantial Light or Glare. The Draft General Plan does not include any individual projects that would create substantial amounts of glare. However, development anticipated under the Draft General Plan would result in increased amounts of lighting associated with new development (generally installed for security and safety reasons) and reflective building surfaces. New lighting and reflective building surfaces (including windows) would be similar to those that characterize existing urban development in Albany.

The Draft General Plan includes policies, listed below, to ensure that new buildings and associated lighting would not substantially adversely affect daytime or nighttime views. Draft General Plan Policy LU-6.6 would ensure exterior lighting would be reduced to prevent potential light and glare impacts. This policy would assist in reducing light and glare spillover into areas adjacent to new development. Additionally, Draft General Plan Policy LU-6.4 would encourage streetscape improvements including lighting and sidewalk extensions.

- **Policy LU-2.12: Residential Beautification.** Enhance the appearance of residential areas through street tree planting, street lighting and sidewalk improvements, landscaping, and other investments that beautify local streets.
- **Policy LU-6.4: Streetscape Improvements.** Improve the visual character and safety of heavily traveled Albany streets through streetscape improvements such as lighting, signage landscaping, sidewalk extensions, public art, and tree planting.
- **Policy LU-6.6: Lighting.** Manage exterior lighting to reduce potential light and glare impacts, improve public safety, enhance night time visibility, complement local architecture, and enhance the character of the City.
- **Policy CON-5.6: Light Pollution.** Reduce the intrusion of unwanted light and glare, particularly in settings where it may interfere with natural habitat.

The policies listed above and especially Policy CON-5.6 would assist in reducing light and glare spillover into areas adjacent to new development.

The majority of additional development associated with implementation of the Draft General Plan would occur as mixed-use infill projects along San Pablo Avenue and secondarily along Solano Avenue. Any development of vacant parcels adjacent to open space that could occur would be subject to these policies that would reduce potential light and glare impacts to a less-than-significant level. With the implementation of the Draft General Plan policies and enforcement of lighting regulations in the Albany Municipal Code, described above, the Draft General Plan would not create a new source of substantial light or glare which would adversely affect day or nighttime views within the area. As such, this impact would be less than significant.

c. Cumulative Impacts. Development associated with implementation of the Draft General Plan could result in changes to the visual environment that could combine with similar effects in nearby communities. However, changes to the visual environment associated with growth in Albany and adjacent surrounding areas including the City of Berkeley and the City of El Cerrito would generally be less than significant because they would occur in already urbanized areas. Development associated with these surrounding areas, in conjunction with development associated with implementation of the Draft General Plan would not significantly impact views of the waterfront, Albany Hill, or the Berkeley Hills. These urbanized areas are characterized by change over time, associated with new roadways, maturing vegetation, and infill development. Due to expected growth patterns in Albany and surrounding communities, changes to the visual environment would generally include mixed-use development along commercial corridors; streetscape improvements; and taller buildings along major transportation corridors (e.g., San Pablo Avenue). Views of the hills and Bay within Alameda and Contra Costa Counties would generally remain the same.

Development associated with past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future projects in communities outside Albany could increase light and glare. New development within Albany would not cumulatively contribute to locally increased levels of light and glare because development would occur in already-developed areas within the City.

In addition, Draft General Plan Policies listed above would protect visual resources within Albany. These policies are intended to enhance the overall appearance of Albany; encourage the implementation of sound principles of urban design; and promote infill development that is compatible with the existing neighborhood. In addition, the visual character of established residential neighborhoods would be protected. These policies are expected to enhance the quality of the visual environment in Albany over time; similar policies and design review procedures would be implemented in surrounding cities, with similar expected effects. Therefore, the cumulative impact on visual resources associated with the Draft General Plan and cumulative growth would be less than significant.