

**VISUAL ASSESSMENT  
BASELINE EXISTING  
CONDITIONS MEMORANDUM**

**Oregon Department of Transportation  
Highway 62 Corridor Solutions DEIS Project**

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# **HIGHWAY 62 VISUAL ASSESSMENT – BASELINE CONDITIONS REPORT**

This Visual Resources Baseline Report is part of the Visual and Aesthetic Impacts Analysis for the Highway 62 Solutions DEIS Project. The purpose of a Visual Quality and Aesthetic Impacts analysis is to describe the visual and aesthetic environment within the Highway 62 study area and to identify and evaluate potential adverse and beneficial impacts of the study alternatives. The resulting Visual and Aesthetic Resources Technical Report will follow the FHWA procedures as described in the publication FHWA-HI-88-054, *Visual Impact Assessment for Highway Projects*.

## **1.0 Methodology**

### **1.1 Data Collection**

By working with study staff and conducting field research, the author compiled the following information:

1. Plan drawings of the study alternatives.
2. Visual representations of proposed improvements.
3. Land use policies, regulations, maps and reports related to the City of Medford, Jackson County, and the Highway 62 corridor.

The author used this information to develop the Area of Potential Effect (APE), the area in which there is potential for the Alternatives to have visual or aesthetic impacts. The author then conducted a systematic field survey of the study area and the APE, documenting observations on inventory forms.

Observations about the visual landscape and neighborhood features were recorded on a field form using visual and aesthetic terminology to describe their type, condition, patterns, and characteristics. Other information that was recorded include:

- existing development and open space;
- areas of special visual or design character within the neighborhoods because of a distinction in form, scale or condition;
- individual buildings, landmarks or development of an aesthetic or historic nature;
- community-identified features, key views or sites, especially those identified in neighborhood plans, formal inventories or other studies, such as the viewpoints,
- panoramas, gateways and views of special features
- important views.

### **1.2 Identification and Description of Landscape Units**

A review of proposed alternatives and preliminary mapping and fieldwork was used to divide the study area into Landscape Units. The Units are determined by changes in topography and visual character, so that each may be described and evaluated clearly. Such segmentation will facilitate description and evaluation of the visual landscape. Based on the information collected, the author evaluated the visual quality of the project Units.

The author also developed a description of viewers within each neighborhood unit, including the type of viewers that see and respond to the affected environment, and the

degree to which viewers experience a view from a physical location and the duration of their view.

### 1.3 Visual Quality Evaluation

Using gathered as described above, the author performed an evaluative appraisal of the visual environment in the APE. Visual conditions are qualitatively measured as being of high, medium, or low quality.

- **High** = Highly memorable visual impression received from contrasting landscape elements as they combine to form visual patterns (vividness). High visual integrity of both built and natural landscape elements (intactness). Coherent, harmonious visual pattern created by built and natural landscape elements (unity).
- **Medium** = Moderately memorable visual impression, with some distinctive patterns and landscape definition (vividness). Average visual integrity between the natural and built landscape features, but there is some disruption of natural and built patterns (intactness). The visual elements of the landscape form a moderately coherent, harmonious visual pattern, but with some disruption (unity).
- **Low** = Visual impression is not memorable. Little visual pattern is formed because landscape patterns do not form a distinctive pattern (vividness). Low visual integrity between the natural and built landscape features (intactness). The pattern of elements is disrupted (unity).

## 2.0 Visual Environment of the Highway 62 Study Area

### 2.1 Regional Landscape

The Highway 62 study area extends between Medford, Oregon, and White City and is visually bound by the surrounding hills on all sides. Overall, the surrounding area can be characterized as a predominantly flat grassland plain with interspersed tree clumps. The surrounding hills border the central plain and create a continuous 360° silhouette line that can be seen from most places within the study area. While the central plain is relatively flat, the topography gently slopes and transitions into the surrounding hills along its perimeter edge. From a visual perspective, the surrounding hills tend to represent the background for most view sheds within or adjacent to the study area.

The development within and adjacent to the study area includes one-story “strip” commercial (a linear, auto oriented configuration with parking between the road and the building), occasional low-rise hotels and offices, scattered single and multi-family housing, and industrial uses (such as the Medford Airport, material storage areas, trucking facilities, etc.). Most of the existing development is either completely oriented to Hwy. 62, or dependent on it for access. Except for some of the housing units, there is very little formal relationship between the man-made development and the natural landscape.

### 2.3 Area of Potential Effect

The Area of Potential Effect (APE) is the physical area that will potentially be affected by the changes imposed by future transportation alternatives; this is not necessarily the

same as the study area. In addition to the study area along Highway 62, and alternative adjacent study areas to the west of Hwy. 62, the APE extends to the edge of the view shed from points within the project area. This view shed primarily includes areas between the study area, and the peaks and ridges of the surrounding hills.

**2.4 Landscape Units**

As shown in *Figure 1*, the landscape units used to assess the visual environment of the project area define areas according to changes in topography, vegetation, and overall visual character. Such segmentation facilitates description and evaluation of the visual image, quality, and character of both the study area and the overall APE.

**2.5 Viewer Profile**

While stationary viewers are likely to view the project study area, it is anticipated that mobile viewers will comprise the predominant viewer profile. Stationary viewers such as employees of adjacent business, consumers, and adjacent residents will experience a specific view shed for the longest period of time. Mobile viewers are those experiencing various parts of the view shed while passing through the study area in motor vehicles. Currently, there are few bicyclists and pedestrians present within or adjacent to the study area due to development patterns that are predominantly auto oriented. Those areas that are the most pedestrian oriented (like the southern residential neighborhood), also tend to be the most visually isolated.

**3.0 Existing Visual Resources by Landscape Unit**

**3.1 Landscape Unit 1: Highway 62**

**Visual Environment**

Highway 62 is a four-lane local highway without bike or pedestrian accommodations. In general, it is lined with “strip” type commercial and industrial development flanking both sides. Access to these commercial properties is achieved through direct curb-cuts or frontage roads. The average speed is approximately 50 miles per hour. With little cohesiveness in the design and layout of the adjacent buildings, this corridor lacks a sense of unity amongst the manmade elements and between those elements and the natural environment. The minimalist adjacent buildings, the higher volumes of traffic, and the overall speed of movement creates a poor visual environment in which to appreciate the surrounding natural landscape. These conditions force the viewer to focus on the foreground elements along most of the corridor, while the middleground and background elements play a smaller role in the visual experience. Except for one slight hill, the Highway alignment is fairly flat and at-grade with many of the adjacent commercial uses. While the surrounding hills are always in view, this one slight elevation change in the road promotes a brief increase in viewer sensitivity to the surrounding environment.

Figure 1



Southbound view along Hwy. 62 at hill.

### **Viewer Profile**

The typical viewers along Hwy. 62 are mobile viewers in either cars or trucks. In general, viewer sensitivity is fairly low due to the traffic speed and volume, and the low level of unity and intactness of the man-made elements. The hill on this stretch of Hwy. 62 (near Coker Road) is a location where viewers can step away from the distractions and become more attune to the surrounding environment.

<b>TABLE 1 LANDSCAPE UNIT 1: HIGHWAY 62</b>		
<b>Resource or View</b>	<b>Resource Quality</b>	<b>Viewer Sensitivity</b>
View 1A: Overall View from Hwy. 62	Low	Low
View 1B: View from Hwy 62 hill	Medium	Medium

## **3.2 Landscape Unit 2: Highway Commercial and Industrial Uses**

### **Visual Environment**

Nearly all of the commercial uses within and adjacent to the study area can be classified as “strip commercial” and some “big box” commercial (development that is more monolithic and rectangular with large amounts of parking between the street and the building). The industrial uses can be characterized as warehouses set back off of the street – usually with some form of outdoor equipment or material storage. These uses are car and truck oriented in that they are generally spread out along Hwy. 62 in a way that is conducive to vehicle access, but have little to no accommodations for pedestrian access and use. There is one strip mall located at the southern end of the study area where Poplar Drive intersects with Hwy. 62. While some accommodations are made for on-site pedestrian circulation, connections to adjacent areas are very car oriented.

Figure 2



*View of strip mall with surrounding hills in the distance*

All of these commercial and industrial structures are modestly designed and constructed and lack general distinction. With the exception of a two-story office building off of Excel Drive, and a few hotels closer to the I-5/Hwy 62 interchange, all of the commercial and industrial structures are one-story structures that range anywhere from 12' to 30' in height and allow for relatively unobstructed views of the surrounding hills. However, because the area is fairly flat, even these low buildings obstruct views of the nearby grasslands and forested nodes. There is a distinct contrast between these buildings and the surrounding natural landscape due to the types of building materials used, and the regular rectilinear lines that they create. While these buildings establish a dominant foreground, undeveloped gaps between the uses do allow occasional focused views of middleground and background landscape elements.

Figure 3



*View of industrial use with typical building construction and form*

**Viewer Profile**

Viewers include employees of the various businesses, and their patrons.

TABLE 2 LANDSCAPE UNIT 2: COMMERCIAL AND INDUSTRIAL USES		
Resource or View	Resource Quality	Viewer Sensitivity
Views from Parking Lots/Industrial Yards	Low	Low

### 3.3 Landscape Unit 3: Residential Uses

#### Visual Environment

Residential uses are a minor component of the overall visual resources. However, there are points where they do share the visual environment with the project area. There are essentially three (3) conditions in which housing exists relative to the project area.

- A. Southern Neighborhood Subdivision. This area exists on the southern end of the project area and extends from the vicinity of the G.I. Joe parking lot (mentioned in the Landscape Unit 2 description), north to Delta Waters Road. The neighborhood is fairly intact, well maintained, and has delineated sidewalks for pedestrian movement. Due to the relatively flat topography in this area, and the commercial properties that screen most of the housing from views to the north and west, there are few points where this neighborhood engages the visual environment of the project area. The primary exception to this visual condition exists along Skypark Drive – off of Lake Avenue. Due to some undeveloped land that creates a gap between the neighborhood and Hwy. 62, and the fact that these are two-story multifamily homes, there is a visual exchange between these housing units, Hwy. 62 in the foreground, and some of the background landscape beyond.

Figure 4



View looking northeast from Skypark Drive multi-family project

Figure 5



View of Skypark Drive multi-family project

- B. Coker Butte Houses and the Lower Butte Neighborhood. – There are only a few houses in the Coker Butte area, and they have a very prominent view of the central plain. The houses themselves tend to be fairly well integrated into the tree and grassland landscape of the butte. Most development that would happen within the study area would be visible from these dwellings.

The neighborhood that sits to the south of the Butte is located on a smaller hill, and shares similar but more limited views than the Coker Butte houses. This is a newer higher density neighborhood that is fairly pedestrian oriented. Views from these residents include foreground views of the backsides of commercial and industrial projects along Hwy. 62, a middle ground of tree clumps and grasslands in the valley, and appealing views of the surrounding hills in the background.

Figure 6



*Western view from a lower portion of Coker Butte*

*Figure 7*



*Western view from the lower butte neighborhood*

- C. Dispersed Central Plain Houses. – The houses that are individually dispersed throughout the central plain fall within this category. Generally, they tend to be pre-manufactured or simple ranch-style houses. Because of their location in the more natural grassland setting, their views have a higher visual quality, and their view shed is fairly broad.

*Figure 8*



*Typical southern view from central plain housing unit*

**Viewer Profile**

Viewers include residents of the different unit types and visitors to the neighborhood. The primary viewer group, residents, will tend to be more stationary and therefore more sensitive, while infrequent visitors arriving by car will tend to be less sensitive.

<b>TABLE 3 LANDSCAPE UNIT 3: Residential Uses</b>		
<b>Resource or View</b>	<b>Resource Quality</b>	<b>Viewer Sensitivity</b>
Views 3A: Views of study area from Southern Neighborhood	Low	Low
Views 3B: Views from Coker Butte and Lower Butte Neighborhood	High/Medium	High/Medium
Views 3C: Views from Central Valley Houses	High	High

**3.4 Landscape Unit 4: Grassland Plain & Forested Nodes**

**Visual Environment**

The grasslands and forested nodes make up the majority of the landscape for those parts of the study area outside of the Hwy. 62 corridor. It can be characterized by natural grasses, agricultural crop production, and intermittent forested clumps. In many cases, depending on the background elements, this landscape unit has a high level of unity and intactness. Several views include wooden barns and agricultural structures that are complemented by the variety of textures in the landscape. Looking east, the view is disrupted by the erratic and cluttered backsides of highway commercial buildings. However, the view to the west reveals a natural texturally balanced landscape in the fore and middleground, with surrounding hills in the background.

*Figure 9*



*View looking south from Justice Road*

Figure 10



View looking west from Agate Road

### **Viewer Profile**

With much of this area being under private ownership, and without many accommodations for pedestrians or bicycles, the majority of the viewers are in automobiles passing through the area. However, even with this level of movement, the viewers are more likely to experience a higher level of sensitivity to the visual environment because there are fewer distractions (due to lower speeds, fewer vehicles on the road, and less distracting foreground elements).

<b>TABLE 4 LANDSCAPE UNIT 4: Grass Lands Forested Nodes</b>		
<b>Resource or View</b>	<b>Resource Quality</b>	<b>Viewer Sensitivity</b>
Views 4A: Views of the landscape unit from the surrounding area	High	Medium
Views 4B: Views from within the landscape unit	High	High

## **3.5 Landscape Unit 5: Surrounding Hills**

### **Visual Environment**

The surrounding hills are the most prominent and vivid visual element accessible from within the study area and the adjacent environment. The hills are visible from all of the landscape units, but the visual environment that they contribute to is dependent on the foreground and middle ground elements within each unit. While few views are actually gained from the hills themselves (due to access restrictions and limited development), they are clearly a strong resource for the area.

Figure 11



View looking west towards the surrounding hills

**Viewer Profile**

As mentioned above, views from the hills are infrequent due to limited access and low population densities. However, those viewing the surrounding hills from the lower grassland areas are both stationary and mobile. Because the hills are a background visual element, the viewer sensitivity to them is dependent on what visual distractions exist in the landscape unit they are being viewed from. Since they are a prominent element in every direction, they do have the potential to create high viewer sensitivity regardless of whether the viewer is mobile or stationary.

TABLE 5 LANDSCAPE UNIT 5: SURROUNDING HILLS		
Resource or View	Resource Quality	Viewer Sensitivity
Surrounding Hills	High	Med/High
Views 5A: Views of hills from grasslands & central plains houses	High	High
Views 5B: Views from the Coker Butte area	High/Medium	High/Medium
Views 5C: Views from Hwy. 62	Medium	Low
Views 5D: Views from southern neighborhood	Low	Low
Views 5E: Views from Hwy. Commercial/ Industrial	Medium	Low

**Highway 62  
Crater Lake Highway  
Corridor Solutions Project  
Medford, Oregon**



**Map Features**

- Urban Growth Boundary
- Highways
- Roads
- Landscapes Units:**
- 1 Highway 62
- 2 Highway Commercial and Industrial Uses
- 3-A Residential Uses A: South Neighborhood
- 3-B Residential Uses B: Coker Butte Houses
- 3-C Residential Uses C: Dispersed Houses
- 4 Grass Lands and Forested Nodes
- 5 Surrounding Hills

Feet  
0 1,000 2,000 3,000 4,000

Meters  
0 250 500 750 1,000

**Figure 12  
Visual Resources**

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