



APPENDIX C: VISUAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT

Prepared for:



Prepared by:



TECHNICAL MEMORANDUM: VISUAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT

Prepared for:



Prepared by:



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1.0 INTRODUCTION

The South Carolina Department of Transportation (SCDOT) and Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) are proposing improvements to the Interstate 526 (I-526)/Long Point Road interchange in the town of Mount Pleasant, South Carolina. The proposed project extends along I-526 from Wando River to Hobcaw Creek and along Long Point Road from the Wando Welch [port] Terminal to Egypt Road.

This visual impact assessment (VIA) evaluates the effects of the proposed project on visual resources and has been prepared in accordance with the *Federal Highway Administration's (FHWA) Guidelines for the Visual Impact Assessment of Highway Projects* published in January 2015. The FHWA VIA guidelines begin with a scoping process to highlight visual resource issues and determine the appropriate level of study for compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). Based on FHWA's VIA scoping process for the proposed project, an abbreviated VIA was deemed the appropriate level of study for NEPA compliance. The findings of the scoping process are provided in Appendix A.

1.1 PROJECT OVERVIEW AND DESCRIPTION

The purpose of the proposed project is to improve operations of the interchange and interstate and to reduce operational conflicts between port-related traffic and local traffic. The need for the project is demonstrated by the growing automobile and truck traffic on I-526 and Long Point Road, the existing interchange deficiencies, and the operational conflicts between cars and trucks on Long Point Road and I-526.

The proposed project would provide a new access to Long Point Road for port-related traffic along with improvements to the existing partial cloverleaf interchange with I-526, see Figure 1.1. The improved partial cloverleaf interchange is a larger version of the existing interchange design that would be built within existing right-of-way and be similar in color and texture to the existing interchange.

Two new ramps along I-526 would be constructed approximately one mile west of the existing Long Point Road interchange and would extend to the western end of Long Point Road near the main gate of the Wando Welch Terminal. The eastbound ramp would be constructed at grade, the westbound ramp would be constructed as an overpass and would curve westward to align with I-526.

Collector-distributor (CD) roads would be constructed at grade west of the interchange near the existing port area and would improve merge and diverge movements of port-related and local traffic. In the westbound direction, the new ramp would tie into the existing Wando River bridge truck-climbing lane and in the eastbound direction, the Wando River truck lane would be extended to tie into the eastbound CD road.



Figure 1.1. Project Footprint

2.0 AREA OF VISUAL EFFECT AND LANDSCAPE UNITS

The area of visual effect (AVE) is the area in which views of the proposed project would be visible as influenced by the presence or absence of intervening topography, vegetation, and structures. A landscape unit is a spatially defined area with a unique visual identify (e.g., commercial areas, industrial areas, residential areas). A landscape unit is visually homogenous with only one viewshed. Landscape units can be differentiated from each other based on present visual resources including natural character, cultural character, and developed character.

Area of Visual Effect

This VIA considers the AVE to be within approximately 500 feet of the project's proposed right-of-way. The AVE is a developed area with large industrial (e.g., Waldo Welch Terminal) and commercial buildings, interspersed with residential areas enclosed by existing tree cover. Adjacent to the Wando River and Hobcaw Creek, estuarine and marine wetland areas are present.

The western extent of the proposed project traverses along I-526 with a residential area to the north, buffered by existing tree cover, and commercial area with pockets of residences to the south. In this area, the proposed project would include at-grade improvements to I-526 and two new truck ramps connecting to Shipping Lane and the Wando Welch Terminal. The eastbound ramp would be

constructed at grade, the westbound ramp would traverse above I-526. Noise walls are proposed adjacent to residential areas.

Continuing east, the proposed project encompasses the intersection with Long Point Road. Residential areas are present to the southeast and northwest, commercial areas are present to the northeast and industrial areas are present to the southwest. Existing trees visually buffer residences, commercial buildings, and industrial facilities from views of I-526 and Long Point Road. In this area, the proposed project would include at-grade improvements to the existing partial cloverleaf interchange, improvements to I-526 extending east up to Hobcaw Creek, and at grade improvements to Long Point Road extending from the partial cloverleaf interchange north to Bell Point Drive.

Noise barriers are currently being evaluated for noise-sensitive areas impacted by traffic noise. Barriers are required to meet both reasonableness and feasibility requirements as outlined in the SCDOT's noise policy. Barriers that pass those requirements, and the majority of property owners favor the construction of the barrier, will be built. The number of noise barriers, design, size, and location are still to be determined.

Landscape Units

There are three landscape units within the AVE: residential, commercial (includes industrial), and marsh/river, see Figure 2.1. The residential landscape unit is predominantly located northwest and southeast of the I-526/Long Point Road interchange. The commercial landscape unit encompasses the majority of the area along Long Point Road. It includes large industrial facilities and the Wando Welch Terminal located west of I-526 and the commercial shopping center located east of I-526. The marsh/river landscape unit is the smallest landscape unit within the AVE and is located adjacent to the Wando River on the west end and Hobcaw Creek to the east of the project area.

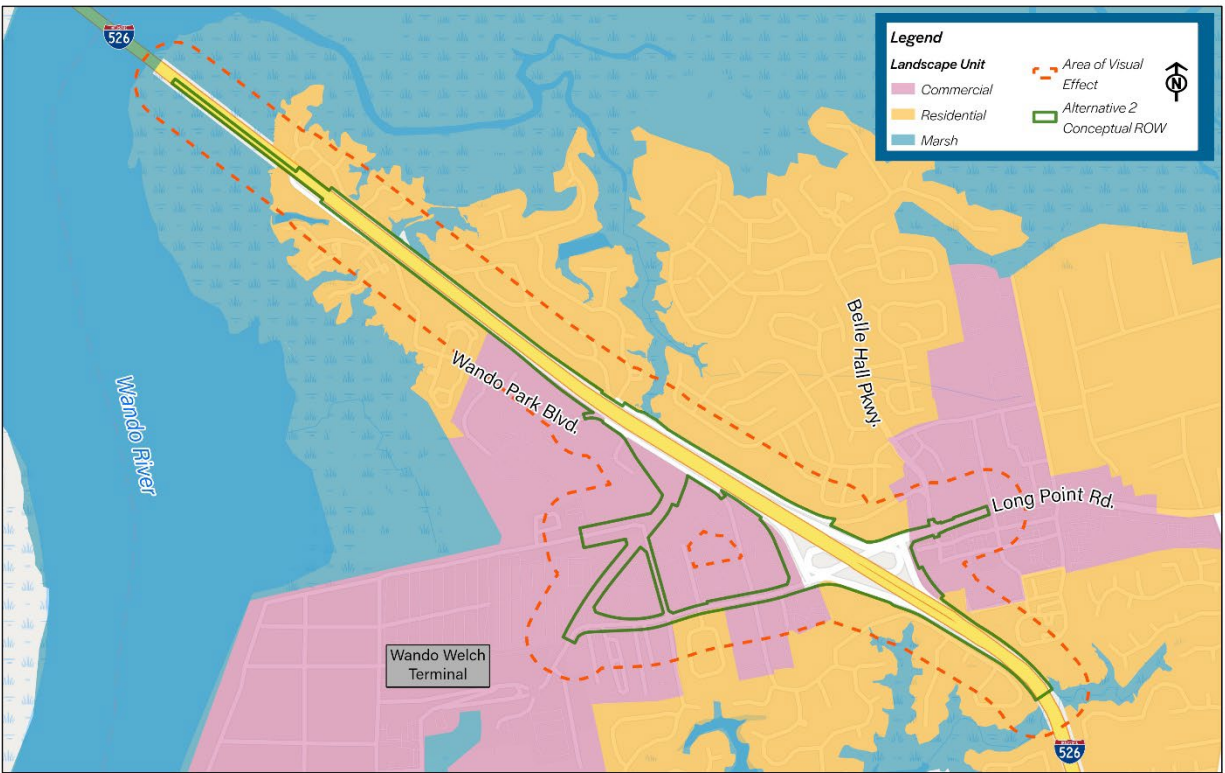


Figure 2.1. Area of Visual Effect and Landscape Units

3.0 VISUAL INVENTORY AND IMPACT EVALUATION

The visual inventory defines the existing character, viewers, and existing visual conditions to establish a baseline of the AVE. The impact evaluation analyzes impacts on visual quality anticipated from implementation of the proposed project and determines the extent of impacts based on compatibility of the project with the existing character of the area, viewer sensitivity to changes, and degree of impact (adverse, neutral, beneficial).

3.1 VISUAL INVENTORY

Landscape Character

The AVE is developed and consists of commercial, residential and marsh/river landscape units. The AVE includes large scale transportation infrastructure including the existing I-526 and Long Point Road (roadways to be improved) and major industrial facilities such as the Wando Welch Terminal. The existing I-526 does not include roadway lighting that could impact nearby residences. Existing tree cover (foliage of trees are 50 feet wide or more) encloses most residences and buffers views of I-526 and Long Point Road.

Viewers

Viewers would predominantly consist of travelers using I-526, Long Point Road, Waldo Park Boulevard, Seacoast Parkway, and some residents not buffered from the proposed project by existing tree cover (e.g., Etiwan Pointe Townhomes, Atria Mount Pleasant assisted living facility, and portions of the Tidal Walk neighborhood).

Visual Condition

The visual condition of the AVE varies by landscape unit. The residential landscape unit is visually homogenous, consisting of single-family homes or apartment complexes. Most residences are enclosed by existing tree cover that serves as a visual buffer from views of major roadways including I-526 and Long Point Road. The commercial landscape unit is characterized by commercial buildings with surrounding parking and large-scale industrial facilities. The marsh/river landscape unit is visually diverse including views of natural features (e.g., marsh lands, rivers, trees), residences, and large-scale industrial facilities.

3.2 IMPACT EVALUATION

Compatibility

The proposed project would predominantly be compatible with the existing developed character of the AVE which consists of commercial buildings, industrial facilities, and large-scale transportation infrastructure. The proposed project would be similar in size, scale, color, and texture to existing roadways. Most improvements would be at-grade, avoiding impacts to views outside of actively using I-526 or Long Point Road. The proposed project would be built primarily within existing right-of-way (ROW). Vegetation within existing and proposed ROW would be removed during construction; however, there are still vegetative buffers outside of the ROW that would provide visual screening of the I-526 facility.

Most residential areas are buffered from the proposed project by existing tree cover. The proposed westbound entrance ramp to I-526 and proposed noise wall in this location would be incompatible with the residential character directly adjacent to the overpass (i.e., southeast portion of Tidal Walk and Grassy Creek neighborhoods, southwest portion of the Belle Hall Plantation).

Viewer Sensitivity

Viewer sensitivity is the ability of viewers to see and care about a project's impacts. The proposed project would be primarily at grade and similar in size, scale, texture, and color to existing transportation infrastructure within the AVE. No roadway lighting is expected as part of the proposed project, minimizing viewer sensitivity to the proposed project during non-daylight hours. Viewers within the AVE would predominantly be insensitive to changes.

Residences, commercial buildings, and industrial facilities still have the potential to be buffered from visual changes by existing tree cover outside of the proposed ROW. Travelers on I-526, Long Point Road, Waldo Park Boulevard, and Seacoast Parkway would be able to see changes (in particular, noise walls) as a result of the proposed project while using these roadways. However, views would be of short duration and travelers would likely be routinely using these roadways, minimizing the attention paid and focus on visual changes.

Residents directly adjacent to the proposed westbound entrance ramp overpass onto I-526 and proposed noise wall in this location (i.e., southeast portion of Tidal Walk and Grassy Creek neighborhoods, southwest portion of the Belle Hall Plantation) would be sensitive to visual changes, see Figure 3.1. The proposed project would not be buffered from view by tree cover and skyline views would be obstructed. The duration of views of the proposed project could be of long duration while residents use yards or porches. Headlights from traffic would be a new source of lighting; however, traffic volumes are not expected to increase and more direct routing for truck traffic as a result of the proposed project could reduce the overall number of viewers or duration of views impacted by headlights within the AVE. For additional renderings of view points in the AVE refer to Appendix B.



Figure 3.1. Existing View (top) and Proposed View (bottom) at Intersection of Seacoast Parkway and Shoals Drive (Entrance to Tidal Walk and Grassy Creek neighborhoods)

Degree of Impact

Visual impacts from the proposed project would predominantly be neutral. The proposed project is predominantly compatible with the existing character of the AVE and viewers would be insensitive to changes.

The exception is residents adjacent to the proposed westbound entrance ramp overpass onto I-526 (i.e., southeast portion of Tidal Walk and Grassy Creek neighborhoods, southwest portion of the Belle Hall Plantation) where localized adverse impact would occur. Impacts would be adverse because the overpass would obstruct views for adjacent residents.

4.0 MITIGATION

Mitigation includes measures taken to avoid, minimize, and offset visual impacts associated with the proposed project. Public comment received by nearby residences indicated concern about impacts to views from the proposed project. To mitigate these potential impacts the design was modified to shift the proposed overpass ramps approximately 1,000 feet to the east. This realignment provides the greatest distance between residences and the overpass and avoids and minimizes visual impacts between residences and the proposed project. Noise walls are proposed adjacent to residential areas and would serve as an additional buffer. Although the design, size, and location of noise walls is still to be determined, it is feasible to enhance the aesthetics of the walls to minimize impacts. No policies have been put in place requiring roadway lighting, and the current facility is not illuminated. If lighting is incorporated into the project, the lighting design would require considering impacts on the surrounding land uses and minimizing impacts if possible. No additional mitigation is proposed at this time.

APPENDIX A: VISUAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT CHECKLIST

1.0 INTRODUCTION

This document provides a high-level visual impact assessment (VIA) using a questionnaire checklist and providing a brief rationale for answers. The basis of the assessment is the Federal Highway Administration's (FHWA) Guidelines for the Visual Impact Assessment of Highway Projects published in January 2015.

The South Carolina Department of Transportation (SCDOT) and Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) are proposing improvements to the I-526/Long Point Road interchange in the town of Mount Pleasant, South Carolina. The study area extends along I-526 from Wando River to Hobcaw Creek and along Long Point Road from the Wando Welch Terminal to Egypt Road.

The area of visual effect (AVE) is the area in which views of the project would be visible as influenced by the presence or absence of intervening topography, vegetation, and structures. This VIA considers the AVE to be within 500 feet of the proposed project. The AVE is developed and adjacent to commercial and residential landscape units.

The western extent of the proposed project traverses along I-526 with a residential landscape unit to the north, buffered by existing tree cover, and commercial landscape unit with pockets of residences to the south. In this area, the proposed project would include at grade improvements to I-526 as well as an eastbound exit ramp and westbound entrance ramp connecting to Shipping Lane and the Wando Welch Terminal. The eastbound exit ramp would be constructed at grade, the westbound entrance ramp to would traverse above I-526.

Noise walls are proposed adjacent to residential landscape units. The design, size, and location of noise walls is still to be determined.

Continuing east, the proposed project encompasses the intersection with Long Point Road. Residential landscape units are present to the southeast and northwest, commercial landscape units are present to the northeast and southwest. In this area, the proposed project would include at grade improvements to I-526, extending east across Hobcaw Creek, and at grade improvements to Long Point Road, extending from Bell Point Drive to Wando Park Boulevard. Noise walls are proposed adjacent to residential landscape units.

2.0 VISUAL IMPACT QUESTIONNAIRE

The following ten questions were used to determine the appropriate level of effort for assessing the impacts on visual quality from the proposed project. The first set of five questions is concerned with environmental compatibility impacts on the visual resources of the affected environment. The second set of five questions deals with the sensitivity of the affected population of viewers to those impacts.

Each of the ten questions on the questionnaire was considered and the response that most closely applies to the proposed project was selected. Each response has a corresponding point value. After the questionnaire was completed, the total score indicated the type of VIA document suitable for the proposed project.

This scoring system was used as a preliminary guide only. Although these questions provide some guidelines for determining if a VIA is necessary, it was not, by itself, considered definitive. If there is any hint that visual issues may be a factor in assessing impacts, a VIA will be conducted. Although the total score directed the toward an abbreviated VIA , circumstances may necessitate selecting a different level of analysis and documentation based on previous experience, local concerns, or professional judgment.

Visual Impact Assessment Scoping Questionnaire

Project Name: Long Point Road

Site Visit Date: October 2022

Location: South Carolina

Time: NA

Special Conditions/Notes:

Conducted By: Annamarie Weddle

Environmental Compatibility

1. *Will the project result in a noticeable change in the physical characteristics of the existing environment?*

(Consider all project components and construction impacts - both permanent and temporary, including landform changes, structures, noise barriers, vegetation removal, railing, signage, and contractor activities.)

- High level of permanent change (3)
- Moderate level of permanent change (2)
- Low level of permanent or temporary change (1)
- No noticeable change (0)

2. *Will the project complement or contrast with the visual character desired by the community?*

(Evaluate the scale and extent of the project features compared to the surrounding scale of the community. Is the project likely to give an urban appearance to an existing rural or suburban community? Do you anticipate that the change will be viewed by the public as positive or negative? Research planning documents or talk with local planners and community representatives to understand the type of visual environment local residents envision for their community.)

- Low compatibility (3)
- Moderate Compatibility (2)
- High compatibility (1)

3. *What level of local concern is there for the types of project features (e.g., bridge structures, large excavations, sound barriers, or median planting removal) and construction impacts that are proposed?*

(Certain project improvements can be of special interest to local citizens, causing a heightened level of public concern, and requiring a more focused visual analysis.)

- High concern (3)
- Moderate concern (2)
- Low concern (1)
- Negligible Project Features (0)

4. *Is it anticipated that to mitigate visual impacts, it may be necessary to develop extensive or novel mitigation strategies to avoid, minimize, or compensate for adverse impacts or will using conventional mitigation strategies, such as landscape or architectural treatment adequately mitigate adverse visual impacts?*

- Extensive non-conventional mitigation likely (3)
- Some non-conventional mitigation likely (2)
- Only conventional mitigation likely (1)
- No mitigation likely

5. *Will this project, when seen collectively with other projects, result in an aggregate adverse change (cumulative impacts) in overall visual quality or character?*

(Identify any projects [both state and local] in the area that have been constructed in recent years and those currently planned for future construction. The window of time and the extent of area applicable to possible cumulative impacts should be based on a reasonable anticipation of the viewing public's perception.)

- Cumulative impacts likely: 0-5 years (3)
- Cumulative impacts likely: 6-10 years (2)
- Cumulative impacts unlikely (1)

Viewer Sensitivity

1. *What is the potential that the project proposal may be controversial within the community, or opposed by any organized group?*

(This can be researched initially by talking with the state DOT and local agency management and staff familiar with the affected community's sentiments as evidenced by past projects and/or current information.)

- High potential (3)
- Moderate potential (2)
- Low potential (1)
- No potential (0)

2. *How sensitive are potential viewer-groups likely to be regarding visible changes proposed by the project?*

(Consider among other factors the number of viewers within the group, probable viewer expectations, activities, viewing duration, and orientation. The expected viewer sensitivity level may be scoped by applying professional judgment, and by soliciting information from other DOT staff, local agencies and community representatives familiar with the affected community's sentiments and demonstrated concerns.)

High sensitivity (3)

Moderate sensitivity (2)

Low sensitivity (1)

3. *To what degree does the project's aesthetic approach appear to be consistent with applicable laws, ordinances, regulations, policies or standards?*

Low compatibility (3)

Moderate compatibility (2)

High compatibility (1)

4. *Are permits going to be required by outside regulatory agencies (i.e., Federal, State, or local)?*

(Permit requirements can have an unintended consequence on the visual environment. Anticipated permits, as well as specific permit requirements - which are defined by the permitter, may be determined by talking with the project environmental planner and project engineer. Note: coordinate with the state DOT representative responsible for obtaining the permit prior to communicating directly with any permitting agency. Permits that may benefit from additional analysis include permits that may result in visible built features, such as infiltration basins or devices under a storm water permit or a retaining wall for wetland avoidance or permits for work in sensitive areas such as coastal development permits or on Federal lands, such as impacts to Wild and Scenic Rivers.)

Yes (3)

Maybe (2)

No (1)

5. *Will the project sponsor or public benefit from a more detailed visual analysis in order to help reach consensus on a course of action to address potential visual impacts?*

(Consider the proposed project features, possible visual impacts, and probable mitigation recommendations.)

- Yes (3)
- Maybe (2)
- No (1)

Determining the Level of Visual Impact Assessment

Total the scores of the answers to all ten questions on the Visual Impact Assessment Scoping Questionnaire. Use the total score from the questionnaire as an indicator of the appropriate level of VIA to perform for the project. Confirm that the level suggested by the checklist is consistent with the project teams' professional judgments. If there remains doubt about whether a VIA needs to be completed, it may be prudent to conduct an Abbreviated VIA. If there remains doubt about the level of the VIA, begin with the simpler VIA process. If visual impacts emerge as a more substantial concern than anticipated, the level of VIA documentation can always be increased.

The level of the VIA can initially be based on the following ranges of total scores:

Score 25-30

An *Expanded VIA* is probably necessary. It is recommended that it should be preceded by a formal visual scoping study prior to beginning the VIA to alert the project team to potential highly adverse impacts and to develop new project alternatives to avoid those impacts. These technical studies will likely receive state-wide, even national, public review. Extensive use of visual simulations and a comprehensive public involvement program would be typical.

Score 20-24

A *Standard VIA* is recommended. This technical study will likely receive extensive local, perhaps state-wide, public review. It would typically include several visual simulations. It would also include a thorough examination of public planning and policy documents supplemented with a direct public engagement processes to determine visual preferences.

Score 15-19

An *Abbreviated VIA* would briefly describe project features, impacts and mitigation requirements. Visual simulations would be optional. An Abbreviated VIA would receive little direct public interest beyond a summary of its findings in the project's environmental documents. Visual preferences would be based on observation and review of planning and policy documents by local jurisdictions.

Score 10-14

A *VIA Memorandum* addressing minor visual issues that indicates the nature of the limited impacts and any necessary mitigation strategies that should be implemented would likely be sufficient along with an explanation of why no formal analysis is required.

Score 6-9

No noticeable physical changes to the environment are proposed and no further analysis is required. Print out a copy of this completed questionnaire for your project file to document that there is no effect. A *VIA Memorandum* may be used to document that there is no effect and to explain the approach used for the determination.

3.0 QUESTIONNAIRE RATIONALE

Environmental Compatibility

1. Will the project result in a noticeable change in the physical characteristics of the existing environment? (Consider all project components and construction impacts - both permanent and temporary, including landform changes, structures, noise barriers, vegetation removal, railing, signage, and contractor activities.)

Rationale: Low level of permanent change was selected as a response to this question because the proposed project is a modification to an existing roadway. The proposed project would require a new overpass which would be visible to a select number of houses in proximity to the overpass. Minimal relocations are required for the facility. The proposed project would be unlikely to introduce impacts to the surrounding area.

2. Will the project complement or contrast with the visual character desired by the community? (Evaluate the scale and extent of the project features compared to the surrounding scale of the community. Is the project likely to give an urban appearance to an existing rural or suburban community? Do you anticipate that the change will be viewed by the public as positive or negative? Research planning documents or talk with local planners and community representatives to understand the type of visual environment local residents envision for their community.)

Rationale: High compatibility was selected as a response to this question because the project area is predominantly characterized by transportation infrastructure and industrial land uses. The proposed project would be similar in size, scale, color, and texture of existing transportation infrastructure in the project area and be shielded from view of the majority of residents by existing vegetation.

3. What level of local concern is there for the types of project features (e.g., bridge structures, large excavations, sound barriers, or median planting removal) and construction impacts that are proposed? (Certain project improvements can be of special interest to local citizens, causing a heightened level of public concern, and requiring a more focused visual analysis.)

Rationale: Moderate concern was selected as a response to this question because some concern

was expressed by local residents; however, the project alignment was adjusted in response to their concerns.

4. Is it anticipated that to mitigate visual impacts, it may be necessary to develop extensive or novel mitigation strategies to avoid, minimize, or compensate for adverse impacts or will using conventional mitigation strategies, such as landscape or architectural treatment adequately mitigate adverse visual impacts?

Rationale: Only conventional mitigation is anticipated for visual impacts of the proposed project.

5. Will this project, when seen collectively with other projects, result in an aggregate adverse change (cumulative impacts) in overall visual quality or character? (Identify any projects [both state and local] in the area that have been constructed in recent years and those currently planned for future construction. The window of time and the extent of area applicable to possible cumulative impacts should be based on a reasonable anticipation of the viewing public's perception.)

Rationale: Cumulative impacts unlikely was selected as response to this question because the overall visual character of the area is not changing.

Viewer Sensitivity

1. What is the potential that the project proposal may be controversial within the community, or opposed by any organized group? (This can be researched initially by talking with the state DOT and local agency management and staff familiar with the affected community's sentiments as evidenced by past projects and/or current information.)

Rationale: Moderate potential has been selected as a response to this question because there have been comments received by local residents about the potential impacts of the proposed project; however, the alignment of the proposed project was adjusted in response to comments received.

2. How sensitive are potential viewer-groups likely to be regarding visible changes proposed by the project? (Consider among other factors the number of viewers within the group, probable viewer expectations, activities, viewing duration, and orientation. The expected viewer sensitivity level may be scoped by applying professional judgment, and by soliciting information from other DOT staff, local agencies and community representatives familiar with the affected community's sentiments and demonstrated concerns.)

Rationale: Low sensitivity was selected as a response for this question because minimal visual changes would occur from the proposed project because it is a modification to an existing roadway. Existing tree cover would shield the majority of residents from view of the proposed project; however, a few residences would be able to see the proposed overpass.

3. To what degree does the project's aesthetic approach appear to be consistent with applicable laws, ordinances, regulations, policies or standards?

Rationale: High compatibility was selected as a response to this question because the project will be designed in accordance to all applicable policies and standards within the corridor.

4. Are permits going to be required by outside regulatory agencies (i.e., Federal, State, or local)? (Permit requirements can have an unintended consequence on the visual environment. Anticipated permits, as well as specific permit requirements - which are defined by the permitter, may be determined by talking with the project environmental planner and project engineer. Note: coordinate with the state DOT representative responsible for obtaining the permit prior to communicating directly with any permitting agency. Permits that may benefit from additional analysis include permits that may result in visible built features, such as infiltration basins or devices under a storm water permit or a retaining wall for wetland avoidance or permits for work in sensitive areas such as coastal development permits or on Federal lands, such as impacts to Wild and Scenic Rivers.)

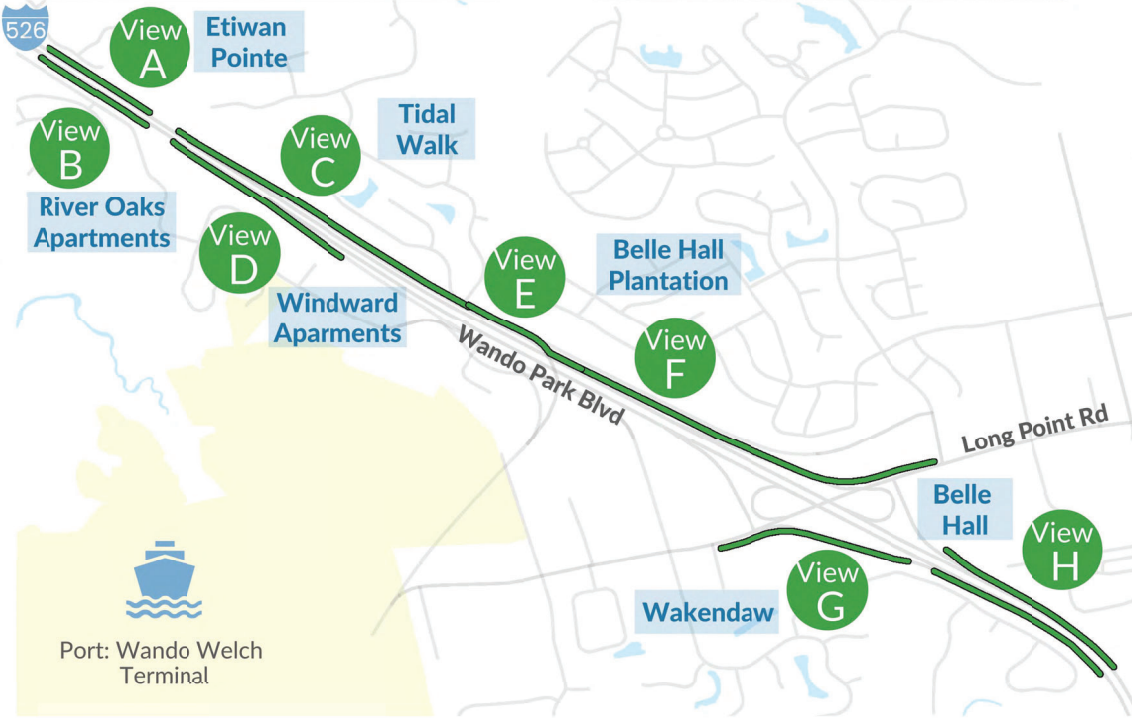
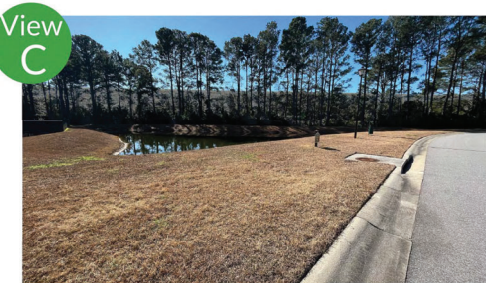
Rationale: Yes, permits from outside regulatory agencies are required and will be obtained for various elements of the project.

5. Will the project sponsor or public benefit from a more detailed visual analysis in order to help reach consensus on a course of action to address potential visual impacts? (Consider the proposed project features, possible visual impacts, and probable mitigation recommendations.)

Rationale: No, because of proposed project would result in minimal visual impacts as it is compatible with the existing character of the project area. Impacts would occur to a localized residential area where existing trees would not shield views of the proposed project. The alignment of the proposed project was adjusted in response to public comments and minimizes visual impacts.

APPENDIX B: RENDERED VIEWS WITHIN AVE

Recommended Noise Walls



View
A

Slipper Shell Dr
Etiwan Point Dr

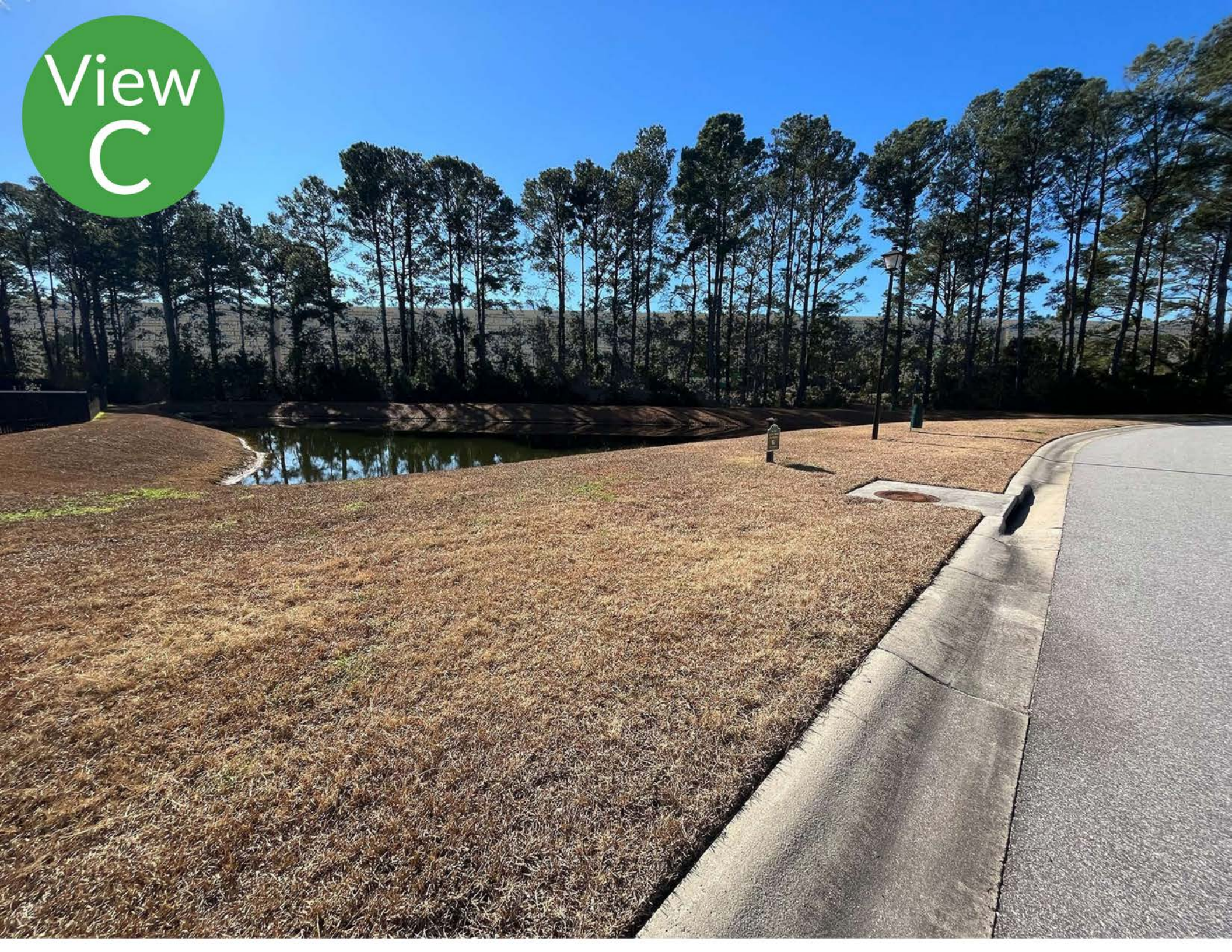
STOP



View
B



View
C



View
D



View
E



View
F



View
G



View
H

