

4.14 VISUAL QUALITY AND AESTHETICS

This section describes the existing aesthetic characteristics along the SVRTC including visual quality, prominent features, and scenic resources. This section also describes policies from the cities of Fremont, Milpitas, San Jose and Santa Clara applicable to visual resources.

4.14.1 METHODOLOGY FOR ASSESSING EXISTING CONDITIONS

The methodology used to conduct the visual analysis generally follows guidance published by the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), *Environmental Impact Statement Visual Impact Discussion*. Under FHWA's guidance, the limits of the visual environment are generally established by the highway's viewshed, i.e., the surface area visible from the highway and from which the highway can be seen. The SVRTC area is generally flat and is surrounded by urban and suburban development. The viewshed generally consists of a 600-foot-wide corridor, centered on the proposed rail line.

Where appropriate, the visual analysis includes more distant visual elements, but these are rare along the corridor and did not warrant expanding the study area. Areas outside the corridor, such as BEP Alternative park-and-ride lot locations, were not identified since construction of these lots is either part of a proposed or approved BART station, or is being analyzed in a separate environmental document.

The visual analysis considers the regional visual character of the region, which includes the County of Santa Clara and the cities of Fremont, Milpitas, San Jose and Santa Clara. It characterizes the SVRTC viewshed in terms of "visual analysis areas," which correspond to the cities through which the corridor travels. These visual analysis areas have a consistent or cohesive visual or physical character. Visual quality, prominent features, and scenic resources within these visual analysis areas are described.

The identification of existing visual resources and viewing conditions in the study area is comprised of three elements.

1. Objective identification of visual features and resources in the landscape.
2. Assessment of the character and quality of these resources relative to overall regional and local visual character.
3. Identification of the importance to people, sensitivity, or view of visual resources in the landscape.

4.14.2 CORRIDOR VISUAL CHARACTER

County of Santa Clara

Natural features form an essential part of the overall visual experience in the county. The Diablo Range to the east and the Santa Cruz Mountains to the west are prominent features that protect the valley from harsh coastal storms and are the source of numerous perennial and intermittent streams that run through the county to San Francisco Bay. Major waterways include Los Gatos Creek, Guadalupe River, Coyote Creek, and various tributaries including upper and lower Penitencia Creek and Silver Creek. Permanent bodies of water include the San Francisco Bay, Anderson Lake, and the Lexington, Guadalupe, Almaden, and Calero reservoirs. The valley floor itself is nearly flat.

Once a sleepy California agricultural county, Santa Clara is now a bustling metropolitan area with an expanding high-tech industry that attracts workers from around the world. The landscape fabric reveals the juxtaposition between old and new. Fruit orchards are located adjacent to modern office buildings or masonry sound walls that border residential subdivisions. Local convenience stores and restaurants still exist on street corners and in the older downtown areas, while big box stores and expansive malls have recently become a common sight.

City of Fremont

The City of Fremont's visual character is framed by "water and [San Francisco] Baylands on the west, coastal foothills and Mission Peak to the east, and Alameda Creek and associated open space areas on the north" (City of Fremont General Plan, p. 9-45). Major thoroughfares, such as Fremont Boulevard and Grimmer Boulevard, are wide and tree-lined with well-maintained landscaping. Residential neighborhoods primarily consist of one- to two-story single family housing units along quiet, narrow suburban roadways, with scattered public parks. The Fremont business community is comprised of eight major business districts, which primarily includes contemporary biotech and high tech office space, automotive dealerships, hotels, restaurants, and expansive retail centers and shopping districts. Views to the south of the proposed Warm Springs Station site include areas associated with the Irvington Business District, which is characterized by rail, commercial, and industrial uses.

City of Milpitas

Since the Ford Motor Company moved into the southern end of town in 1955, Milpitas has been transformed from an agricultural to an urban community. Busy restaurants and one- to two-story older commercial/retail buildings line Milpitas Boulevard through the older downtown area, which is near older single-family homes. Newer housing subdivisions have sprung up in the last few decades, while surrounding the downtown are modern office buildings with reflective glass windows and large single-level paved employee parking lots. The wide streets are lined with well-manicured grass and trees.

City of San Jose

San Jose is the urban hub of Silicon Valley, housing most of the county government buildings. San Jose initially developed around Mission San Jose, established in 1797. The city has undergone significant growth in the past century, becoming the largest city in the San Francisco Bay Area (with an estimated population of 917,971 in 2002). From Victorian and Art Deco style to high-tech and modern, each generation has left its own imprint in the downtown area and in the residential neighborhoods. The majority of the county's high-rise buildings are in the downtown area, along with SJSU and the San Jose Civic Center. Residential, commercial, and industrial development occupies most of the urban landscape in San Jose. The Guadalupe River and Coyote Creek are two important visual features.

City of Santa Clara

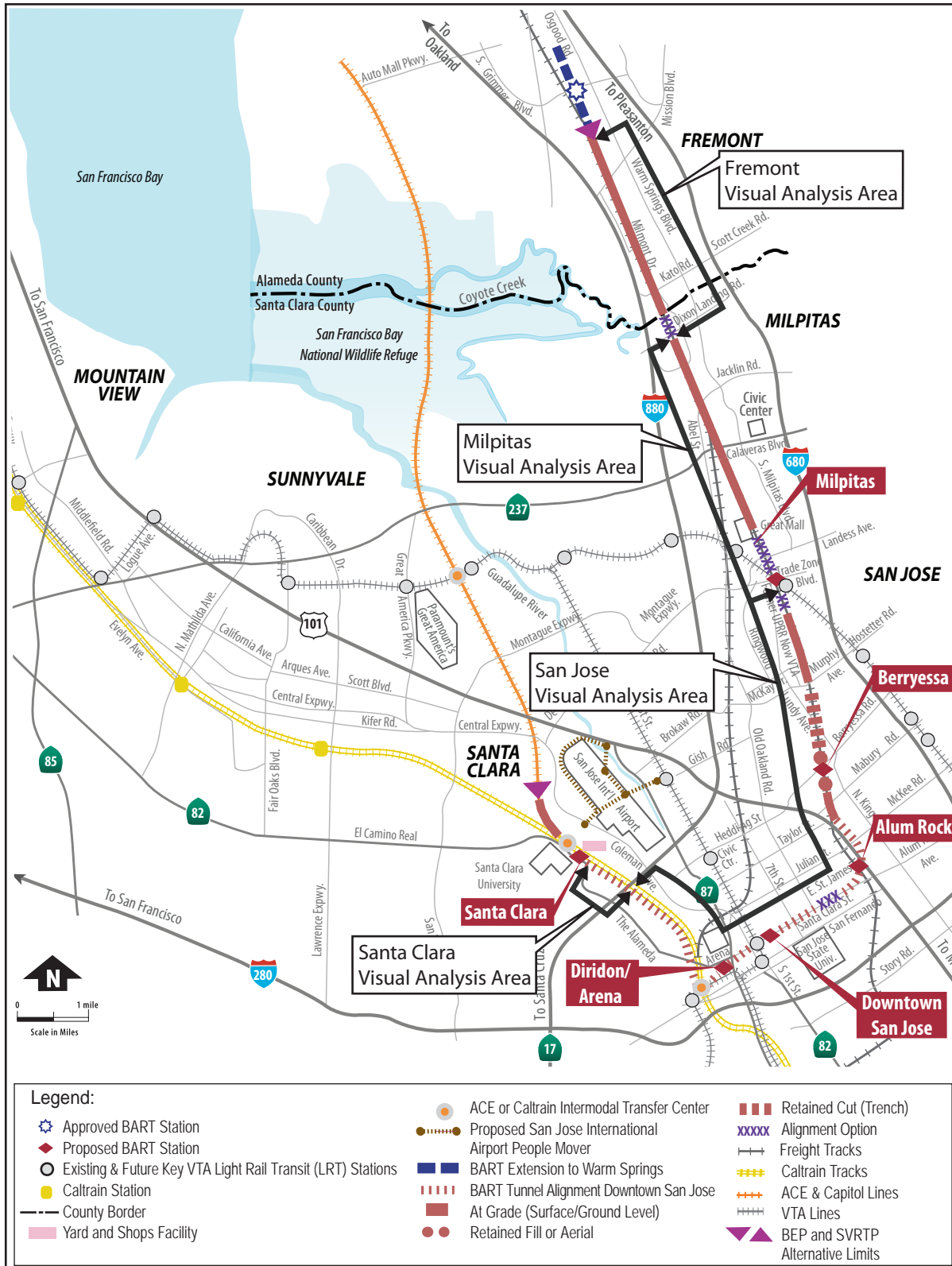
Santa Clara initially developed around Mission Santa Clara de Asis, established in 1777, and contains many historic buildings in the vicinity of Santa Clara University, such as the mission and the Santa Clara Station Depot and Santa Clara Tower. Additionally, different generations of development have grown up around the mission and university. The Silicon Valley high-tech industry is seen in the typical style, architecture, and structure of the buildings in the area, specifically office buildings throughout the City.

4.14.3 VISUAL ANALYSIS AREA VISUAL CHARACTER

Visual character and scenic resources within the viewshed of each visual analysis area are described below. For the BEP Alternative the visual analysis areas include the viewshed within the cities of Fremont, Milpitas, and San Jose (see Figure 4.14-1). For the SVRTP Alternative, the visual analysis areas include the viewshed within the cities of Fremont, Milpitas, San Jose and Santa Clara. Viewer groups in the study area consist of residents; workers at office or industrial sites; and pedestrians, bicyclists, and drivers using roadways in the vicinity of the proposed alignments.

City of Fremont Visual Analysis Area

The City of Fremont visual analysis area extends from Warm Springs Road to Dixon Landing Road. This area is characterized by a gradual transition from agriculture to modern office developments with interspersed heavy-industrial uses. The built environment consists of low- to mid-rise commercial and industrial office buildings (six stories or less) painted in neutral colors. In general, these areas are surrounded by perimeter landscaping (trees, bushes, and groundcover) and parking areas. Exceptions to this type of development include the New United Motor Manufacturing Incorporated Plant which is a large industrial complex including several office buildings, parking lots, truck containers, and large parcels of undeveloped land adjacent to Kato Road (north and south of Mission Boulevard). No identified scenic resources are located in this area. Mission Hills and Mission Peaks, which are unique visual resources, are located to the east of the alignment. Viewers in this area who may be affected by the alternatives include office and industrial workers, motorists, and pedestrians/bicyclists.



Source: VTA, 2008.

Figure 4.14-1: Visual Analysis Areas

City of Milpitas Visual Analysis Area

The City of Milpitas visual analysis area extends from Dixon Landing Road to Montague Expressway. The northern portion of this area is characterized by single-family residential building development and recreational (parks and open space) land uses. Development in this area is on a much smaller-scale, consistent with single-family residential land uses. Building shapes, sizes, and color vary in this area. The distinctive rolling hills of the Diablo Range to the east of this area form a scenic resource. Viewers in this area who may be affected by the alternatives include residents, motorists, and pedestrians/bicyclists.

The southern portion of this area is characterized by low- to mid-rise industrial and commercial office building development. In general, industrial and commercial office buildings are large and boxy in construction, and are painted in neutral colors. The buildings are typically surrounded by landscaping (trees, bushes, and groundcover) and parking areas. The area immediately south of Calaveras Boulevard is dominated by surface parking lots associated with the Great Mall Parkway. No identified scenic resources are located in this area. Viewers in this area who may be affected by the alternatives include office and industrial workers, motorists, and pedestrians/bicyclists.

City of San Jose Visual Analysis Area

For the BEP Alternative, the City of San Jose visual analysis area extends from Montague Expressway to just south of Mabury Road. South of Trade Zone Boulevard, development to the west of the alignment consists of low- and mid-rise commercial office buildings, and east of the alignment is residential development. The residential areas consist of one- and two-story single-family homes, and in a variety of shapes, sizes, and colors. These residences are surrounded by landscaping (lawns, bushes, groundcover, and backyards), fences, and neighborhood streets. No identified scenic resources are located in this area. Near the San Jose Flea Market and north of US 101, the visual character on the west transitions to commercial land uses, including parking lots and vendor stalls, and on the east to large low-rise warehouses surrounded by parking lots and landscaping. Viewers in this area who may be affected by the BEP Alternative include residents living in nearby communities, motorists and pedestrians/bicyclists traveling on Berryessa Road, and shoppers and merchants at the San Jose Flea Market.

For the SVRTP Alternative, the visual analysis area for the City of San Jose extends from Montague Expressway to Interstate 880 (I-880). The land uses between Montague Expressway and Mabury Road are discussed under the BEP Alternative above. The surrounding land uses around the alignment from approximately Mabury Road to East Santa Clara Street is characterized primarily by industrial uses, which is comprised of large and boxed-shaped industrial buildings painted in neutral colors and associated surface parking lots. The alignment area along East Santa Clara Street from US 101 to South 7th Street transitions to a mixture of commercial and industrial uses, in which there are low-rise industrial and commercial buildings surrounded by surface parking lots, with intermittent single-family and multiple-unit housing painted in various

colors on small lots. The street is landscaped with various types of relatively mature trees and also lined with intermittent large, commercial billboards. West of South 7th Street, land use transitions to mid-rise commercial buildings and high-rise contemporary-style office buildings and associated parking structures and lots in the downtown San Jose area. The roadways are predominantly lined with relatively mature trees and shrubs and there are also green, open-space areas along the alignment, including an area adjacent to Coyote Creek and a recreational area near the proposed Diridon/Arena Station. Viewers in this visual analysis area include industrial workers and merchants, business people employed in downtown San Jose, pedestrians/bicyclists, and motorists.

The Five Wounds National Portuguese Church and School, which is an ornate, 16th-century style church built in 1919, is located on East Santa Clara Street west of US 101 and is a scenic resource within this visual analysis area.

City of Santa Clara Visual Analysis Area (SVRTP Alternative)

The City of Santa Clara visual analysis area, extending from I-880 to the proposed Santa Clara Station, is characterized primarily by industrial and commercial uses along the railroad corridor. Single-family residences are located on the west side of the alignment north of I-880. These newly developed residences are multi-story homes with neutral coloring and 10 to 14 foot high walls separating the residences from the existing railroad activities. The industrial areas are dominated by large, industrial buildings painted in neutral tones and associated parking lots surrounding the buildings with sparse landscaping. The built-up, industrial landscape continues on the east side of the alignment. Small commercial, single-story mini-malls and the historic Santa Clara Caltrain Station are located near the northern terminus of the alignment. There is landscaping in this area. The primary viewer groups would be workers in nearby industrial and commercial buildings and passengers at the Santa Clara Caltrain Station. Elements of the Santa Clara Caltrain Station, the Santa Clara Station Depot (historic Depot) and Santa Clara Tower (historic Tower), are historic scenic resources in this visual analysis area.

4.14.4 REGULATORY CONSIDERATIONS

The cities of Fremont, Milpitas, San Jose and Santa Clara general plans provide guidelines and policies related to the visual quality, character, and future development and design within their jurisdiction. The general plans identify scenic resources (including scenic vistas, views, and routes). Applicable general plan policies are discussed by city jurisdiction below.

City of Fremont

The following scenic routes, designated by the City of Fremont General Plan, would have views of the BEP and SVRTP alternatives:

- State Scenic Route: I-680 (east of the alignment)

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- County Scenic Route: I-880 (west of the alignment)
 - City Scenic Routes: Fremont Boulevard (west of the alignment), Warm Springs Boulevard (east of the alignment), East Calaveras Boulevard, and Warm Springs Boulevard. In addition, the City of Fremont General Plan considers the existing BART alignment as a scenic route.

The City of Fremont General Plan also identifies the following Unique Visual Resource that may be visible from the alignment:

- Mission Hills and Mission Peaks (to the east of the alignment)

The following objectives, policies, and goals were taken from Visual Resources section of the Natural Resources Chapter of the City of Fremont General Plan:

- Policy NR 14.1.2 (Implementation 2): Proposed uses that could have a negative impact on the quality of the visual character of an area adjacent to a scenic route shall be required to screen or in other ways limit the visual impacts of the use.

City of Milpitas

The primary scenic resources defined in the City of Milpitas General Plan are the foothills to the east of the city and the Coyote Creek corridor. The scenic routes identified in the general plan include scenic corridors, which are designated streets passing through scenically valuable areas, and scenic connectors, which are designated streets that connect or provide access to scenic corridors or distant scenic views. The alignment for both the BEP and SVRTP alternatives will intersect with East Calaveras Boulevard (SR 237), which is considered to be a scenic connector. Additionally, the alignment will be located between I-680 and I-880, which are both considered to be scenic connectors and major visual gateways.

The Guiding Principles listed in the Scenic Resources and Routes section of the City of Milpitas General Plan Open Space & Environmental Conservation Element emphasize the preservation and enhancement of visual resources and encourages activities that facilitate viewing access of these resources. The Implementing Policies that support the Guiding Principles generally focus on imposing restrictions to new development projects, guiding landscaping activities and signage along scenic corridors and routes, and other site-specific policies. No Guiding Principles or Implementing Policies are relevant to the proposed alternatives.

City of San Jose

The City of San Jose General Plan identifies several scenic resources, including broad views of Santa Clara Valley, the hills and mountains surrounding the valley, the urban skyline, and the baylands. Thoroughfares providing visual access to San Jose's scenic

resources are designated as scenic routes, of which there are two types: rural scenic corridors and landscaped throughways¹. Neither the BEP Alternative nor SVRTP Alternative is located on or near any rural scenic corridors, as designated on the City of San Jose's Scenic Routes and Trails Diagram. Roadways designated as landscaped throughways by the City of San Jose include I-680, I-880, US 101, and SR 87. The SVRTP Alternative will cross US 101, SR 87, and I-880 and the proposed Alum Rock Station will be located adjacent to US 101, which may also have adverse effects on views from these landscaped throughways.

The following relevant guiding principles and policies were taken from the Aesthetic, Cultural and Recreational Resources Section of the Goals and Policies Chapter of the City of San Jose General Plan:

- Policy 1: Development within the designated Rural Scenic Corridors and along designated Landscaped Throughways should be designed with the intent of preserving and enhancing attractive natural and man-made vistas.
- Policy 4: Any development occurring adjacent to Landscaped Throughways should incorporate interesting and attractive design qualities and promote a high standard of architectural excellence.
- Policy 5: Any development along Landscaped Throughways entering the City should be designed to provide attractive gateways to the City.

City of Santa Clara

The City of Santa Clara General Plan does not identify any scenic resources or routes within the study area. Additionally, the general plan does not include any specific policies relating to visual resources or scenic routes within the City of Santa Clara. As a result, the BEP and SVRTP alternatives are not subject to any visual resource policies in the City of Santa Clara.

¹ Also known as urban throughways on the City of San Jose's Scenic Routes and Trails Diagram. Personal communication with Stan Ketchum, Principal Planner, City of San Jose.