

LAGUNA BEACH GENERAL PLAN

Scenic Highways Element



SCENIC HIGHWAYS ELEMENT
GENERAL PLAN

Prepared by
Department of Planning and Development

Approved by
Planning Commission
March 11, 1975

Adopted by
City Council
April 2, 1975

SCENIC HIGHWAYS ELEMENT

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I. WHAT IS A SCENIC HIGHWAY?

The concept of a scenic highway stems from the idea that since both the landscape and the townscape are what we see from the roadway and become a part of the driving experience, they should be taken into consideration during the highway design and should be respected and encouraged to remain or to develop aesthetically, rather than be subjected by the road and allowed to deteriorate. The basic concept is not new, but the implementation is. The idea of a "complete highway" which incorporates safety, utility, economy and beauty has been around since the early 1940's. The scenic parkways of the eastern states were the first national commitment to this idea. It wasn't until the California State Highway Department began consideration of the reconstruction of Highway 1 along the Monterey County coastline in order to bring it up to modern freeway standards that the scenic highway idea managed to win any legislative support in California. The action in 1960 led to the State designation of scenic routes and the study of implementation measures.

A scenic highway doesn't need to be a new road. As a matter of fact, probably the most important reason for not building new rights-of-way is due to aesthetics. New roads tend to be dull because they cut across the grain of the very landscape they are intended to view. Landscapes develop naturally and to put a new road through one would give an artificial perspective. The other problem with creating new scenic routes is that our engineers' standards for new roads are too high. One of the best qualities of our older roads is the tightness of scale. "You go around abrupt curves, up sudden crests, under a canopy of overhanging foliage, sometimes the view opens up to distant hills; sometimes it narrows almost to a tunnel..."² It is this tightness of scale that gets improved away, standards straighten the curves, flatten the crests, and move the trees back out of harm's way. The edge of the landscape gets moved back and the road is no longer an integral part of the environment.

It is fairly obvious that efforts should go into improving and protecting existing roads, especially in the Laguna area, where major new roads will mean significant changes to the topography. This element of the general plan will not explore the concepts of new road

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1. Whyte, William H., The Last Landscape, Doubleday and Company, Inc., Garden City, New York, 1968. p. 322.
 2. *Ibid*, p. 327.

design for scenic highways, but will look at what can be done for our existing roadways. Good examples of new road design criteria can be found in Man Made America: Chaos or Control? by Christopher Tunnard and Boris Pushkarev.⁴ If major new roadways are built into Laguna, they should all be constructed with scenic road criteria put foremost.

II. WHAT DOES THE SCENIC HIGHWAY ELEMENT DO?

The scenic highway element is the initial step leading toward the official designation of a road as a scenic highway.⁴ The element is not intended as a scenic corridor plan, but rather as a study of scenic resources, potentials and goal statements which will lead to the preparation of a specific scenic corridor plan by the responsible agencies.

The major thrust of the element is to explore methods which will develop the interface between the roadway and the environment -- especially in areas which have outstanding scenic or aesthetic value. As such, there is a very strong relationship between this element and the open space element. Perhaps a stronger relationship with a non-mandatory element, the community design element, also exists. Possible programs for inclusion in an effort to protect the scenic corridors should be explored in the element as a step towards inclusion in zoning, subdivision, or other ordinances as implementation of scenic corridor objectives. The element is not a specific corridor plan, but sets the process in motion for the development of the same.

The scenic highway element also becomes a policy guide against which decisions on projects affecting the corridors must be weighed, and provides additional guidance for the formation of the annual budget and city capital improvement programs. Because this element satisfies a mandatory legal requirement and because of a lag in governmental priorities, cities and counties rarely go beyond the stage of the scenic highway element to actively pursue designation of a route as an official scenic highway. However, the element itself can provide a basis of protection of the scenic corridor if the local agency makes a policy commitment to it and budgets for its implementation.

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3. Tunnard, Christopher and Boris Pushkarev, Man Made America: Chaos or Control? Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1963.
 4. Council on Intergovernmental Relations, General Plan Guidelines, State Printing Office, 1973.

III. WHAT IS THE PROCESS OF DESIGNATION?

According to The Scenic Route, A Guide for the Official Designation of Scenic Highways, prepared by the State Department of Transportation (now referred to as CALTRANS), there are four basic steps to achieve designation as an official scenic highway. These steps are:

1. State Legislature must enact legislation making the route eligible as a scenic highway. This action adds the route to the State Master Plan. This step can also include a County Board of Supervisors or local City Council adopting a route as a county or city scenic highway to be treated and protected in a similar manner.
2. The local governmental agencies having jurisdiction over the land within the corridors must request by resolution that the State (or agency designating the road as scenic) prepare a corridor survey and highway facility study. This would be performed by the county on a county scenic route, or the city on a local scenic route.
3. The local government must prepare a program to protect and enhance the scenic corridor which is defined in the second step.
4. After the protection program has been developed and approved, a request is made for an official scenic highway designation from the state. Upon designation, scenic highway markers can be placed along the corridor.

The first step of the above process has essentially been accomplished. Coast Highway through Laguna has been included in the State Master Plan of Scenic Highways⁵, and Laguna Canyon Road has been designated as a rural scenic highway by Orange County⁶. It is possible, although not necessary, to have Laguna Canyon Road (State Route 133) placed on the State Plan, but this can only be done by action of the State Legislature. This would require joint action of the State Senate and Assembly.

The only difference between being an Orange County Scenic Highway and a State Scenic Highway would be in which agency prepares the corridor survey and the highway facility study, which is the second step of the process. Laguna Beach and the County would jointly prepare the studies if the

5. California Streets and Highways Code, Section 263.

6. Orange County Planning Department, Scenic Highways, 1972.

road were to remain a county scenic highway, but as a state corridor, the studies would be prepared by the District Scenic Highway Coordinator. The reports should contain the following:

- a. Suggested scenic highway corridor boundaries. (The corridor is defined as the area of land generally adjacent to and visible from the highway which requires protective measures to insure perpetuation of its scenic qualities);
- b. Scenic elements within the suggested corridor;
- c. The relationship of the roadway to its surrounding environment;
- d. Proposed realignments or improvements of the route; and
- e. Potential locations of roadside rests, vista points, and areas for public or commercial information sites.

The third step of the process is for the local jurisdiction to develop and adopt a program of corridor protection which will protect and enhance the scenic quality of the route. The minimum requirements include (1) regulation of land use which may include density and/or intensity of development; (2) detailed land and site planning; (3) control of outdoor advertising; (4) careful attention to and control of earth-moving and landscaping; and (5) the design and appearance of structures and equipment.

IV. WHAT IS THE RELATION BETWEEN SCENIC HIGHWAYS AND LAND USE?

There is one basic principle of land use and urban design which is important to the scenic highways concept -- that principle is defining a sense of place. In general terms, place relates to the ability to distinguish one area from the next. This is becoming increasingly difficult -- particularly in the heavily populated areas of Southern California. The nationally franchised fast food chains, the easy availability of standard construction materials, standard construction techniques, and the standardization of building and zoning codes, are all factors which tend to destroy the uniqueness of an area. Urbanized areas blend together, city entrances become lost, and separate communities appear as one.

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7. Coad, Gary, Urban Design San Diego, American Institute of Architects, San Diego, California, 1973.

Transition. From one area to the next are very important and many areas of the county has lost the opportunity to use city entrances as an element of the city design. Attempts have been made to distinguish "blended" cities from one another, yet nothing in the county can compare with Laguna's entrances. It should be noted that city entrances do not have to be coterminous with city limits.

Two of our entrances exhibit this point: Laguna Canyon and South Coast Highway. These same two entrances are not defined at a single point but by a sequence of events. In Laguna Canyon, for example, open space and development gradually blend into one another while the city limit is far removed, closer to the location of the lakes. In the south end of town, the city limit at the small dip by Nyes Place is not where the city visually begins. The experience of entering the city can be better experienced as one goes through the dip at Aliso Creek. If it were not for this dip, Laguna and South Laguna would have blended together visually.

The third city entrance has the closest correlation with the city limits. Here, development begins abruptly at the city limit defining a sharp edge at the end of the open space. It should be noted that areas of open space are critical to the character of the city's existing entries. This element is designed to enhance the land uses along the corridors.

V. WHAT CAN WE DO FOR OUR CORRIDORS?

Laguna's entrances play a major role in shaping the character of the town. The goal of the scenic highway element is to preserve and accentuate the visual uniqueness and character of the city's entrances and circulation corridors.

- A. Open Space. The city should actively pursue the preservation of the remaining open space which separates Laguna from other communities. In most cases, these are the same as the "buffer areas" and have been discussed in both the Conservation and Open Space Elements as being necessary open space. All available implementation techniques should be explored, including zoning, open space easements, and acquisition. A program of open space preservation should be added to the Planning Commission's work program.
- B. Landscaping. The use of vegetation within the scenic corridor can add significantly to the visual qualities and help soften the visual impact of urban structures. Landscaping should be an integral part of any project in the scenic corridor.
 1. The City should budget for the design and implementation of a comprehensive street tree planting program and for additional landscaping in unused right-of-way where it might enhance the scenic corridor. Street tree planting should be done on an annual incremental basis, and should include the replanting of the existing median strip on Laguna Canyon Road and the replanting of Coast Highway in the CBD with trees that have stronger character and form.

The desire intensity and type of street trees should be evaluated and a comprehensive plan of street furniture and trees should be developed. This should be part of an urban Design Element to the General Plan.

2. The city should coordinate with the owners of large vacant parcels in the corridor to institute a program of native wildflower planting on hillsides and meadows. This program can be partly accomplished through Laguna's capital improvement program.
 3. Existing specimens and stands of trees and other plant materials of outstanding value within the scenic corridors should be preserved. An example of this is the preservation of the Eucalyptus Grove on Laguna Canyon Road.
- C. Signs. Depending on how signs are handled, they can either be a handicap or boost to the scenic quality of an area. As a significant element of the corridor, the use of signs should give the maximum visual flexibility while retaining design controls to provide some consistency.
1. In cases where our sign ordinance may make it difficult to accomplish the needs of a scenic highway, consideration should be given to amending the ordinance accordingly. This needs to be evaluated by the Design Review Board and their considerations should be incorporated in the Urban Design Element.
 2. While public signs within street rights-of-way are generally necessary for safety and regulations, they can become as much of a visual problem as private signs. An inventory of signs in the public right-of-way should be made to determine which are not necessary, which can be combined, and which can be redesigned or relocated.
- D. Underground Utilities. Overhead utility lines detract from the visual qualities of any area and as such, no new utility lines or poles should be added when they can be undergrounded. All existing lines should be undergrounded at the maximum rate feasible. Past undergrounding district expenditures have been well spent and include:
1. Cliff Drive/Heisler Park.
 2. Library area.
 3. Main Beach Park.
 4. Area between Forest Avenue and Ocean Avenue.
 5. Irvine Bowl area (in planning stage).

Laguna's funds allocated by the Public Utilities Commission should be spent on a high priority bases in areas where they can be matched with assessment district funds. Priorities for the expenditure of the annual allocation should include:

1. All utility lines visible from Coast Highway;
2. The downtown area;
3. Along other major traffic routes and commercial areas.

Undergrounding in residential neighborhood should be done by assessment district only, unless a major public view will be enhanced. Because of the tremendous expense and the regional significance of the route, Laguna should attempt to get Orange County and the State to cooperate in the undergrounding or relocation of utilities along Laguna Canyon Road.

- E. View Preservation. Natural vistas of the hillsides and ocean are very important to the quality of Laguna's scenic corridors and should be preserved to the greatest extent possible. The traveler on Coast Highway is not given views of the sea which are characteristic of Laguna. Coastal design standards should ensure visual as well as physical access to the beaches and ocean. Although the hillsides will remain, it is important whether these vistas present development or open space. These are points of concern to remember when considering a subdivision or other hillside development plans. Hillside subdivision plans should consider the view of the development as it relates to the hillside and to surrounding hillsides.

New hillside roads in subdivisions should include provisions for scenic turnouts in areas where significant vistas can be provided.

- F. Landform Preservation. Because the hills of Laguna are a major natural resource, they must be treated with respect with regards to earthmoving operations. The views of the hillsides in Laguna Canyon should remain essentially undeveloped. Any landform alterations should not extend into the visual corridor unless they can be treated to present a natural appearance.
6. Recreation Potentials. The scenic corridors should be treated as if they were elongated parks stretching through town. Convenient rest facilities should be provided for both hikers and bicycle riders. Foot trails should be provided through the corridor, paralleling the road and branching off into wilderness trails.

The Laguna Lakes are a major resource of the scenic corridor and should be developed as a regional park, with the lake on the Sycamore Hills side restored to a wilderness condition. The City should encourage the State to realign the road to the Irvine Company side so that it would no longer bisect the lakes.

Any future work on Laguna Canyon Road should include provisions for street trees and other landscaping, and a two-way bicycle path separated from the travel lanes

by a planted median. The Precise Plan of Streets should be amended where necessary to allow for the acquisition of additional right-of-way for bicycles from Canyon Acres Drive to El Toro Road.

- H. Future Planning and Land Use. The use of the land within the scenic corridors and especially within the city entrances should be carefully integrated within the physical and environmental constraints present. Any new construction in the city entrances should require the design review process to determine conformance to the scenic highways concept. Design review should take into consideration not only the individual aesthetics of a project, but also the project's relation to the scenic corridor, to the topography, and to other uses in the area. New uses in the city entrances should create unity in the corridor and provide for the enhancement or restoration of the natural environment.

ADDENDUM TO THE SCENIC HIGHWAYS ELEMENT

The following policies were derived from the South Laguna Specific Plan (SLSP) and are herein by reference added to the Laguna Beach Scenic Highways Element. In an effort to consolidate the SLSP with the Laguna Beach General Plan, some policies from the SLSP have been added to either the Land Use Element, the Open Space/Conservation Element, the Transportation/Circulation Element or the Housing Element. Other policies have been eliminated due to the existence of comparable policies in the City's General Plan. The following additions/changes are to be included in the text of the Scenic Highways Element upon the update and reprinting of the document.

SCENIC HIGHWAYS

The Scenic Highways Element designates Pacific Coast Highway as a scenic highway. The visual corridor was established for Pacific Coast Highway in each direction and combined into a composite viewshed analysis (Figure 4). The visual corridor was established by placing station points (view origin points) along the center line of Pacific Coast Highway at regular intervals. A viewing template of the drivers' cone of vision under normal conditions was made to establish the visual boundaries. Visual boundaries are determined by combining topographic relief and the plants or man-made structures added to it. It is assumed the structures are opaque and vegetation is also opaque. The view is determined by an angle of vision taken at a point five feet above station point and extending from the station points until blocked by various visual boundaries. This establishes the edge of the visual corridor.

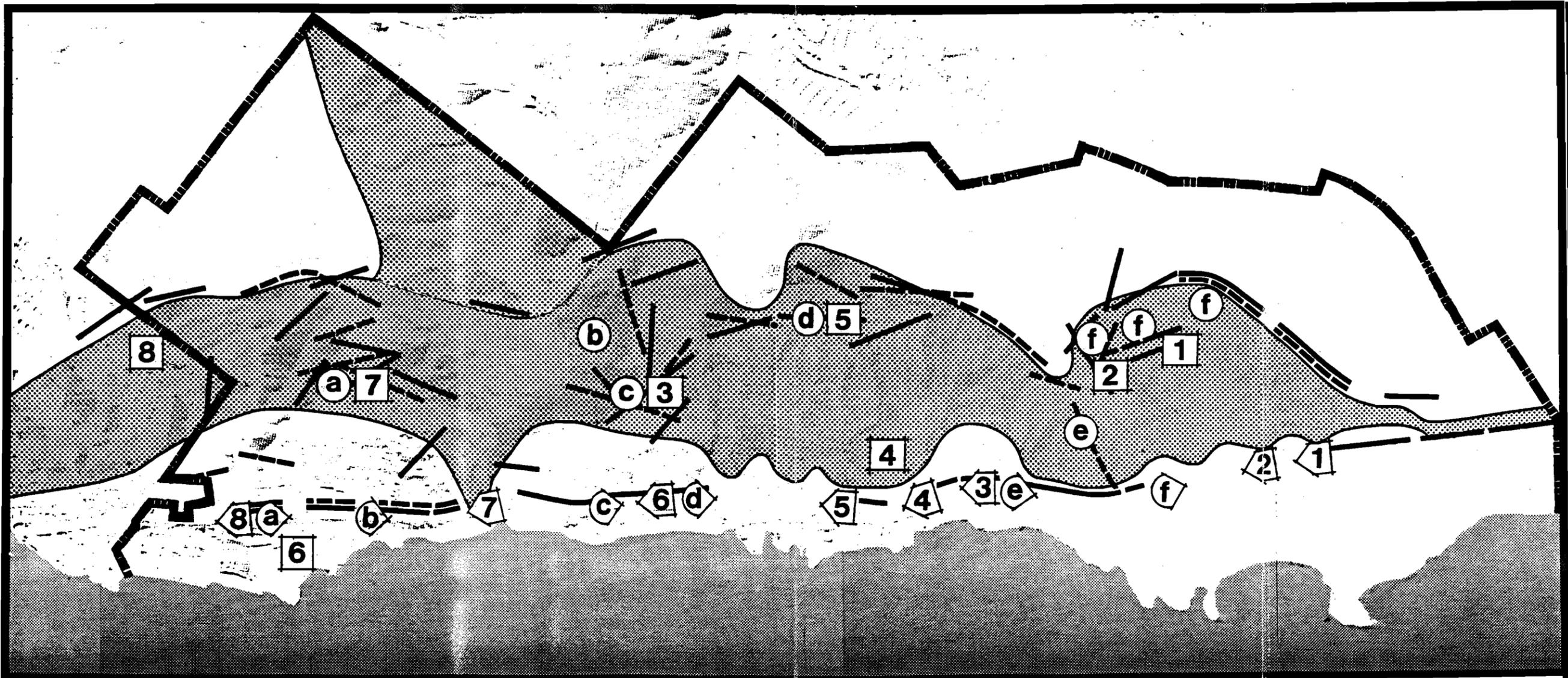
The views from Pacific Coast Highway are important for they probably represent the most frequently seen features of the community. Other views, however, are also important and would include: views from the beaches and from the ocean, views from residential areas within the community, and views from the hillside open space and trail system.

Policies

1. Plans for scenic highways shall be integrated with open space plans as they are developed.
2. Scenic highway corridors shall be designed to maximize the compatible multi-purpose objectives of open space planning such as recreation, conservation, public health and safety, and preservation of scenic-aesthetic amenities.
3. The scenic highway should traverse areas of relatively high aesthetic, recreational or cultural value which may include such features as: lakes, streams, creeks, rivers, wetlands and other bodies of water; unusual geologic formations; outstanding scenic vistas; exceptional pastoral views or

mountain scenes; notable urban scenes; and cultural and historical features offering enjoyment and edification for the motorist.

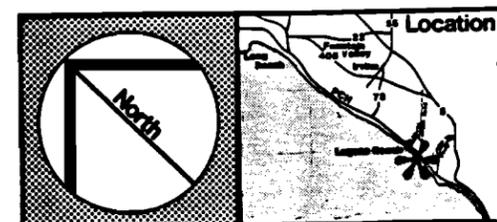
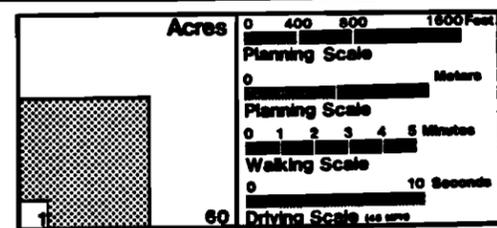
4. The scenic corridor plan should not provide impetus for other forms of development detrimental to the values of the scenic highway corridor.
5. Construction of any scenic highway should be subordinate to the scenery; in rural areas, scenic vistas and views should be protected; in urban areas, man-made landscapes should be created as well as protecting sites with distinct urban vistas.
6. Any scenic highway should be linked, when possible, to regional parks, trails, wildlife areas and historical sites, greenbelts and other recreation-open space areas without being detrimental to them.
7. Where possible, a scenic highway should be connected to State Scenic Highways and other scenic highways to form a linked system.
8. In urban, or urbanizing areas, consideration should be given to the design of any scenic highway and its corridor as a buffer between communities and as an open space link between other open space and recreation areas.



SOUTH LAGUNA SPECIFIC PLAN LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM

Legend :

-  VIEW ORIGIN POINT (LOOKING SOUTH FROM PCH)
-  VIEW ORIGIN POINT (LOOKING NORTH FROM PCH)
-  VISIBLE TOPOGRAPHIC BOUNDARY (SOUTH)
-  VISIBLE TOPOGRAPHIC BOUNDARY (NORTH)
-  VISIBLE POINT (LOOKING SOUTH FROM PCH)
-  VISIBLE POINT (LOOKING NORTH FROM PCH)
-  VISUAL CORRIDOR (VARIABLE EDGE)



Information Source:
GENGE, 1980.

Prepared For:
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