

## 4.1 AESTHETICS

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### 4.1.1 Issues

Development of Downtown Cotati in accordance with the Downtown Specific Plan will alter the visual character of the planning area by introducing additional buildings, lighting, landscaping, and other physical improvements.

### 4.1.2 Setting

#### General

The urban form dominates the visual environment in and around Downtown Cotati. While rural hills to the east are visible from the planning area, the dominant view from major roadways is of a built environment. Within the planning area, the primary views consist of urban sights such as streetscapes, buildings, and transportation facilities (Highway 101).

In the planning area, the visual quality of the urban environment is diminished by the lack of uniformity in terms of both type and design of existing structures. While some examples of period architecture along Old Redwood Highway can be distinguished upon close inspection, the overall character and quality of Downtown is obscured by automobile-related land uses at the northern end of the planning area, and more modern structures or facades, which lack a distinct character.

#### View Corridors, Scenic Drives and Scenic Vistas

**View Corridors.** View corridors are human-made or natural features that afford line-of-sight views of distant visual resources such as peaks, ridgelines, and valleys. In Downtown Cotati, view corridors are formed along major arterial roadways, and from prominent public viewing areas such as La Plaza Park. Within the planning area, Old Redwood Highway is considered an important view corridor.

**Scenic Drives.** Scenic drives are roadways that afford views of important visual features to travelers. There are no designated scenic drives within the planning area.

**Scenic Vistas.** Scenic vistas are viewpoints accessible to the public that provide views of areas that exemplify a community's environment (i.e., scenic resources). The Cotati General Plan identifies Highway 116 (Old Redwood Highway) west and south of the City, and the hills west of Highway 101 as major scenic resources in the area. Existing development partially obscures views of the hills from the portion of Old Redwood Highway running through the core of Cotati, as defined in the proposed plan. Primary views in the planning area are of urban development, consisting of streetscapes and buildings, along with public spaces such as La Plaza Park. In addition, in some locations the hills to the east are visible.

#### Light and Glare

**Existing Sources.** During the day, sunlight reflecting from structures is a primary source of glare, while nighttime light and glare can be divided into both stationary and mobile sources. Stationary sources of nighttime light include structure

illumination, interior lighting, decorative landscape lighting, and streetlights. The principal mobile source of nighttime light and glare is vehicle headlamp illumination. This ambient light environment can be accentuated during periods of low clouds or fog.

The varieties of urban land uses in the planning area are the main source of daytime and nighttime light and glare. They are typified by single and multi-family residences, commercial structures, industrial areas, and streetlights along Old Redwood Highway and Highway 116. These areas and their associated human activities (inclusive of vehicular traffic) characterize the existing light and glare environment present during daytime and nighttime hours in the planning area. Sources of glare in Downtown come from light reflecting off surfaces, including glass, and certain siding and paving materials, as well as metal roofing. The Downtown contains sidewalks and paved parking areas which reflect street and vehicle lights. The existing light environment found in the project area is considered typical of suburban areas.

**Sky Glow.** Sky glow is the effect created by light reflecting into the night sky. Sky glow is of particular concern in areas surrounding observatories, where darker night sky conditions are necessary, but is also of concern in more rural or natural areas where a darker night sky is either the norm or is important to wildlife. Due to the urban nature of the planning area, a number of existing light sources affect residential areas and illuminate the night sky. Isolating impacts of particular sources of light or glare is therefore not appropriate or feasible for the project.

#### **Existing Visual Conditions**

Although Downtown Cotati is bordered by relatively natural, rural areas to the south and west, the urban nature of the planning area limits the visibility of these surroundings. Yet, the overall visual attractiveness is framed by the views of the surrounding natural environment throughout Cotati, which still reflects the rural character.

The visual condition of the planning area varies depending on whether the viewer is located in the Historic Core or in the Northern Gateway. There are several uncharacteristic features in both areas that detract from a cohesive urban design, although elements of historic character are visible. These include discontinuous built space along the roadway, indistinct architecture in more recent buildings and remodels, lack of landscaping or inconsistent landscaping, and dominant streetscape.



**East Cotati Avenue at La Plaza**

The primary viewers of the DSP area are persons traveling in vehicles and pedestrians on foot or bicycle. Old Redwood Highway is considered a primary travel route. The main users of Old Redwood Highway are local travelers, who may have a heightened concern for visual quality. Regional travelers are more typically on Highway 101 and would not visually experience the DSP area.



**Old Redwood Highway**

### 4.1.3 Regulatory Setting

#### Cotati General Plan

Visual character and quality in the City of Cotati is regulated primarily by the application of General Plan goals and programs, and standards expressed in the Land Use Code. In the General Plan, applicable policies and programs are contained mainly in the Community Identity Element:

*Goal 13 Protect the integrity of the natural, visual environment of Cotati, for its aesthetic and cultural value.*

*Objective 13.2 Improve the visual character along Cotati's transportation routes.*

#### Draft DSP Policies Related to Aesthetics

The DSP addresses aesthetics and visual resources in a number of locations in the Plan, including the following:

##### Plan-wide Policies

*SP4 – Ensure a variety of building types, styles and sizes are constructed within downtown: Build a variety of buildings.*

##### Commerce Avenue

*CA-2 – Define and unify streetscape in support of highway retail.*

##### Northern Gateway

*NG-2 – Reconfigure Old Redwood Highway into a vibrant, mixed use, multi-modal and beautiful urban street.*

##### Connectivity Objectives

*C-3 – Apply 'context sensitive' design throughout the block and street network.*

*C-4 – Configure street sections to the desired context of the particular segments through which they pass.*

##### Street Design Objectives

*SD-6 – Compatible downcast lighting that is effective for commerce, pedestrians, and cyclists.*

##### Open Space Objectives

*OS-4 – Streetscapes as a major component of thoroughfares, shall help spatially define the street space as a safe environment for automobiles, cyclists and pedestrians while adding beauty and shade to the street.*

### 4.1.4 Methodology

The assessment of visual quality and character is not an exact science. There have been few comprehensive programs designed to incorporate visualization tools into modeling systems, or to evaluate the usefulness and applicability of such systems. As a result, visual resources are often evaluated in a qualitative manner, as they are in this section.

#### **4.1.5 Significance Thresholds**

The CEQA Guidelines state that a project could result in a significant aesthetic impact if it would:

- a. Have a substantial adverse effect on a scenic vista.
- b. Substantially damage scenic resources, including, but not limited to, trees, rock outcroppings, and historic buildings within a scenic state highway.
- c. Substantially degrade the existing visual character or quality of the site and its surroundings.
- d. Create a new source of substantial light or glare which would adversely affect day or nighttime views in this area.

#### **4.1.6 Impacts and Mitigation Measures**

The implementation of the Downtown Specific Plan would not have a substantial adverse effect on a scenic vista (threshold a). Existing development in the Downtown is largely single- and two-story construction of a variety of architectural styles and materials. The DSP will allow commercial building heights consistent with the existing LUC standards for commercial structures (35 feet for commercial buildings), and will continue to allow up to 50 feet in some locations. The Regulating Plan of the DSP states that buildings are intended to be no more than two to three stories in the planning area.

Nevertheless, the massing of new development under the DSP would be greater than the current condition. Buildings could be taller and would be built to the edge of the sidewalk. For this reason, views beyond the planning area may be blocked by future development. Because the existing views are intermittent and not a strong element of the Downtown, this is not considered a significant impact. See the photo below for a common view along the Redwood Highway. Note that while there are occasional views of the hills in the far background, these are not a dominant feature of the downtown visual experience.



**Typical view in the planning area**

The implementation of the Downtown Specific Plan would not damage scenic resources, including historic buildings, located within the project area (threshold b). The Specific Plan provides a program to eliminate blighting conditions in the planning area, through improved streetscape and infill development. The proposed development is subject to a set of development standards which specify appropriate lot placement, form, architectural style, pedestrian space, and landscaping. Application of this program in a uniform manner across the planning area will ensure consistent development patterns and styles, and will therefore increase the sense of unity throughout the planning area. The development standards are based in part on an assessment of the planning area's historic pattern and style, and application of such standards.



**Exchange Bank restored.**

The Specific Plan is principally occupied with the design, form and character of the planning area. Therefore, much of the Specific Plan, through goals, text, maps, and standards, addresses aesthetic issues. The Specific Plan sets forth design guidelines, for example, to ensure future development is compatible with important historic and cultural features in the area. The Specific Plan includes a detailed landscape and street tree plan, as well as other measures to improve pedestrian areas and the wider streetscape. Impacts are less than significant.

The implementation of the Downtown Specific Plan would alter the existing visual character and quality of the planning area (threshold c). One the main goals of the DSP is to revitalize and improve the visual qualities of Downtown Cotati through a comprehensive program of public and private investment. Within the public realm, the City and Redevelopment Agency, as well as private development in applicable situations (e.g., when they are fronting private property) will be responsible for making streetscape improvements to improve the pedestrian orientation of the area through the provision of pedestrian amenities such as street trees, benches and public art.

New private development accommodated by the DSP will consist largely of infill on vacant and underutilized lots, governed by the DSP which sets forth standards derived from the prevailing architectural styles and character. New development designed consistent with this code will complement and enhance the visual qualities of the Downtown while protecting important views. This is the stated intent of the DSP code.



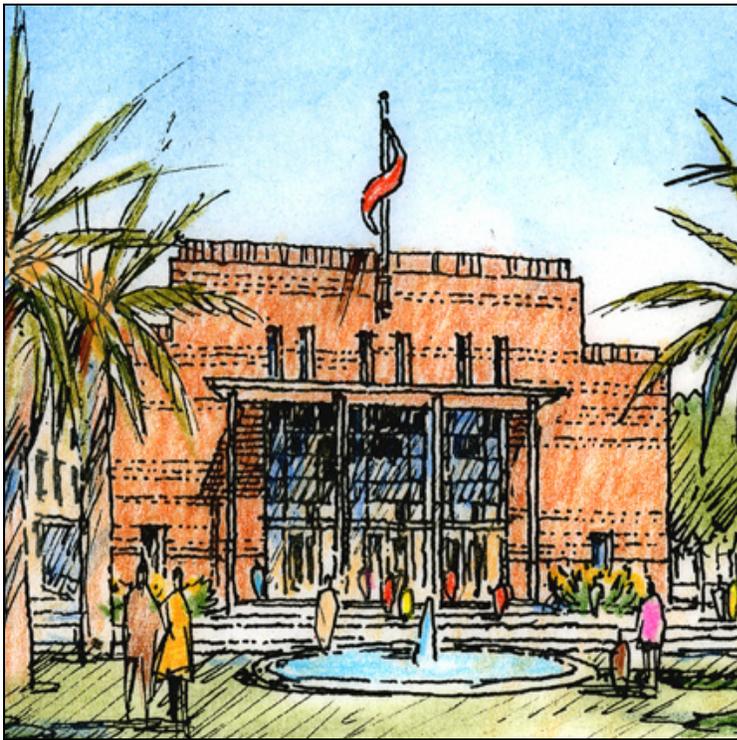
**Areas of the downtown could be improved**

Overall, given that the existing visual condition and quality of the planning area is moderate, implementation of the plan would not substantially degrade visual quality or scenic vistas. One of the DSP's primary goals is to improve visual quality in the

area through improved architecture, removal of inconsistent elements, and improved landscaping, among other strategies. The DSP is consistent with General Plan goals to concentrate development and support infill. The loss of views from and within the planning area is not a significant impact.

The DSP provides a program to eliminate blighting conditions in the planning area, including improved streetscapes and infill development. Proposed developments will be subject to a set of development standards which specify appropriate lot placement, form, architectural style, pedestrian space, landscaping, etc. Application of this program in a uniform manner across the planning area will ensure consistent development patterns and styles, and will therefore increase the sense of unity throughout the planning area. The development standards are based in part on an assessment of the planning area's historic pattern and style, and application of such standards.

Examples of the application of these standards are shown in the illustrations below.



**Civic Building in the "Northern Gateway" area**



**La Plaza Park**



**Old Redwood right of way through the park**



Mixed use buildings around La Plaza



Mixed use buildings in the "Northern Gateway"

The DSP is principally focused on the design, form and character of the planning area. Therefore, much of the DSP, through goals, text, maps, and standards, addresses aesthetic issues. The DSP sets forth design guidelines, for example, to ensure future development is compatible with important historic and cultural features in the area. The DSP includes a detailed landscape and street tree plan, as well as other measures to improve pedestrian areas and the wider streetscape.

The implementation of the Downtown Specific Plan could increase sources of light and glare in the planning area (threshold d). The planning area is largely urban and supports land uses that generate light and glare. Buildout of the area in accordance with the DSP may increase the sources of light and will increase the number of sensitive receptors (e.g., residences). The DSP specifies sensitive, pedestrian-scale lighting fixtures, and includes a tree planting plan that will partly reduce the amount of new light visible in the nighttime sky. Since new light sources will be carefully designed, in accordance with LUC §17.30.060, which includes requirements for shielding and glare reduction to neighboring properties, the impact will be less than significant.

#### **4.1.7 Cumulative Impacts**

Implementation of the DSP would not make a cumulatively considerable contribution to any significant cumulative aesthetic impacts in the region.

The existing cumulative impact is not significant. This conclusion is based in part on the conclusion in the EIR for the current Cotati General Plan. The General Plan EIR concluded that there would not be significant impacts to these resources.

The DSP's impacts are less than significant and it does not result in a significant cumulative impact. Specifically, the impact of the project will/will not make a cumulatively considerable contribution to the significant cumulative impact. The reason for this conclusion is the area encompassed by the DSP does not include any of the designated scenic resource areas set forth in the General Plan (including rural hillsides or scenic roadways), and will not contribute to adverse impacts to these resources. Therefore, the implementation of the Specific Plan, when viewed in light of continuing development in the Cotati area, will not contribute substantially to a cumulatively significant impact.

#### **4.1.8 References**

City of Cotati. *Land Use Code*. June 2005.

City of Cotati. *1998 General Plan Update*. Amended through November 10, 2004.

