

MEMO



To: Robert Forrest, Valley Metro

From: Laura Paty, HDR

Date: October 19, 2012

Re: GILBERT ROAD EXTENSION ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT - Visual and Aesthetics Evaluation

VISUAL AND AESTHETICS EVALUATION

The visual aesthetic quality of a community is an integral component to community pride. Visual aesthetics concern both the character of the visual experience and the effect upon the viewer. Assessing visual quality is subjective; however, there are federal, state, and local policies and regulations that provide guidance as to what the general public considers a desirable visual environment. The visual landscape encompasses both natural (topography, water, vegetation) and man-made (buildings, roads) features. Areas that are generally recognized as sensitive include residential, parks, water bodies, historic or culturally important resources, and public facilities.

1.0 Affected Environment

1.1 Methodology

The evaluation area for the Gilbert Road Extension project included the road right-of-way and areas visible from the right-of-way. The project team conducted field surveys of the evaluation area. Using the information gathered, the team divided the evaluation area into visual assessment units based on landform, land use, length, and the presence of special features in the foreground, middleground, or background. Since the entire evaluation area is within an urban area, the units were defined by observable changes in land use and visual character. Numerous photos were taken to document the existing character and views.

Potential impacts of the proposed action were assessed against the current visual setting. The impact analysis sought to evaluate the effects on the scenic quality and cohesiveness that each of the proposed alternatives would have on the area's visual conditions and the sensitivity frequent viewers would have to changes in the visual landscape.

1.2 Existing Visual Setting

The evaluation area is within the City of Mesa, within the Phoenix metropolitan area which lies within the Basin and Range Physiographic Province. This province is characterized by rocky mountain ranges that alternate with desert basins as the primary landform organization. The dominant landform visible in the Study Area is the Superstition Mountains to the east. The McDowell Mountains can be seen when looking north along major cross streets; however, this is a view most likely seen by pedestrians and bicyclists who have time to look in that direction. The elevation of the evaluation area is almost unchanged from the beginning to the end.

The natural biotic zone in which the evaluation area is located is the Sonoran Desert scrub vegetative community, characterized by saguaro, bursage, creosote bush, ocotillo, prickly pear/cholla, paloverde, and ironwood. However, native plant communities have been completely replaced by ornamental plants used in the urban area landscapes. The typical palette of plants includes California fan palms, mesquite trees, palo verde trees, petite oleanders, red bird of paradise, hesperaloes, and Texas sage. The right-of-way landscape palette, where it exists, is fairly consistent from beginning to end of the evaluation area.

The entire evaluation area is within an urban commercial land use setting. From beginning to end the street is lined on both sides with primarily commercial and retail businesses along with two small mobile home parks and one very small apartment complex. The building types include single structures, small and large strip malls, and large structures with large parking areas. There are only a handful of two-story buildings—three motels and three office buildings. The majority of buildings are several decades old, of no particular architectural style, and with minimal architectural detailing.

The roadway has a raised median with left-turn bays for the entire length. Where there is room, the median is wide enough to include a landscape of tall, vertical trees and lower shrubs. The medians also contain aqua green street light poles with two-headed cobra light fixtures. There are attached, 5- to 6-foot concrete sidewalks (wider in a few locations) along the entire length, as well as a bicycle lane. None of the driveways have the preferred ADA layout with a level sidewalk wrapping behind the driveway ramp. On-street parking is available in small segments where space allows.

1.3 Description of Visual Assessment Units

After field review, the project team divided the evaluation area into three visual assessment units. The units were divided primarily based on building size and building proximity to street. All other visual factors (vegetation, views, utilities, building condition, type of business) are similar throughout the length of the evaluation area. The three visual assessment units are shown in Figure 1.



View west at Harris Drive. Power poles on the south; vertical palms in the median in the distance.



View west at Horne. No planting room in median west of Horne.

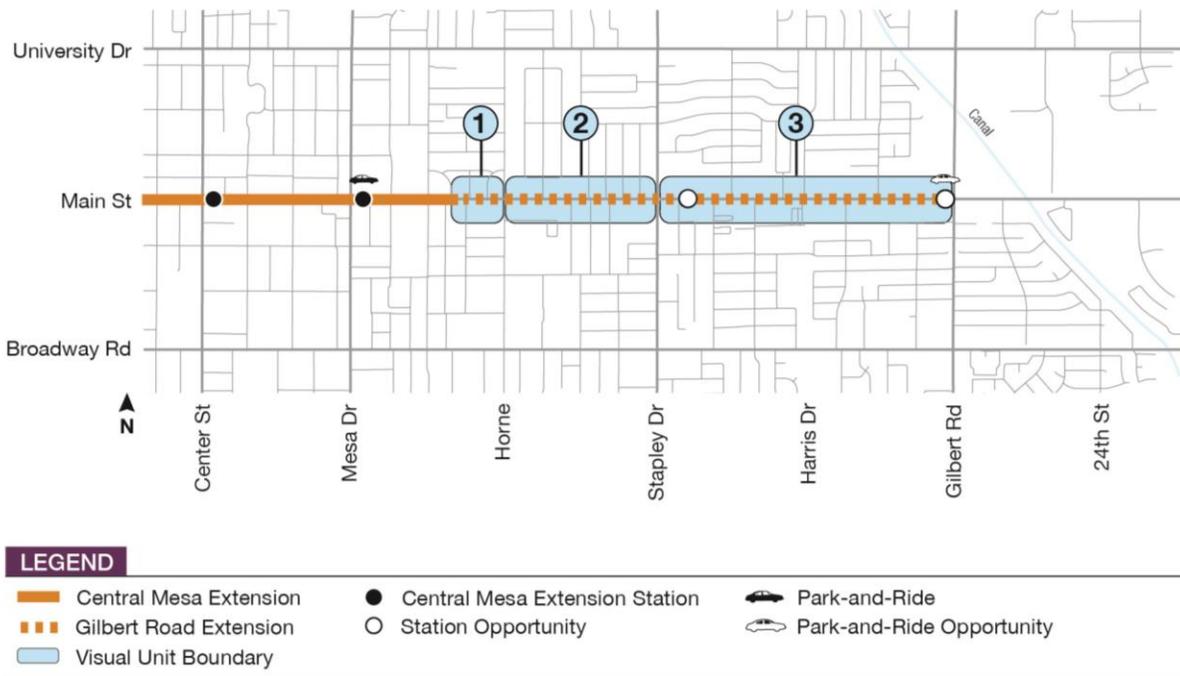


View east at Temple St. The Superstition Mountains are always visible when headed east on Main Street.



View west at Miller. Vertical plants in median diminish the appearance of the street light poles; a large specimen tree dominates the north side of the road.

FIGURE 1: VISUAL UNITS



1.3.1 Unit 1 – Edgemont to Horne

Unit 1 begins at the evaluation area’s west end, just east of Edgemont, and continues to Horne. The visual characteristics are described in Table 1, followed by photos of some of the businesses and an apartment complex.

1.3.2 Unit 2 – Horne to Stapley Drive

Unit 2 begins at Horne and continues to Stapley Drive. The visual characteristics are described in Table 2, followed by photos of some of the businesses.

1.3.3 Unit 3 – Stapley Drive to Gilbert Road

Unit 3 begins at Stapley Drive and continues to Gilbert Road. The visual characteristics are described in Table 3, followed by photos of some of the businesses.

TABLE 1: UNIT 1 CHARACTERISTICS

Visual Factor	Description
Land use	Commercial, retail, restaurants, motels, apartments
Building type	One story
Parking	Lots to the front, side, and rear of the buildings; on-street
Building to street relationship	The buildings and parcels in this unit are generally smaller, closer to the street, and have smaller parking lots (relative to Units 2 and 3)
Building condition	Overall good; buildings are painted with no visible signs of excessive disrepair. Currently, none appear to be vacant.
Vegetation	Only a couple of the businesses have right-of-way landscaping of the palette noted in Section 1.2. The remaining businesses have either no planter areas or empty planters.
Utilities	The median, since there is no landscape, is dominated by the street light poles (aqua colored, two-headed cobra style)
Viewers	Motorists, pedestrians, bicyclists
Views	Background--Superstition Mountains to the east; middleground—commercial and retail uses



Newer development style



Motel



Small office building



Small strip mall



Small apartment complex



Mixed building and architectural types

TABLE 2: UNIT 2 CHARACTERISTICS

Visual Factor	Description
Land use	Commercial, retail, restaurants, motels
Building type	Predominantly one story
Parking lots	Lots to the front, side, and rear of the buildings; on-street
Building to street relationship	In this unit, there are larger buildings and strip malls, set further back from the street, with large expanses of parking in front
Building condition	Overall good; buildings are painted with no visible signs of excessive disrepair. There are several vacant buildings which give this unit a neglected feeling
Vegetation	Only a couple of the businesses have right-of-way landscaping of the palette noted in Section 1.2. The remaining businesses have either no planter areas or empty planters. There is only one raised median in this unit wide enough to accommodate vegetation and it includes tall, vertical fan palms and vertical trees. The vegetation helps mask the street light poles (noted below). There is one specimen tree in this unit, a ficus tree at the business Mi Hacienda. While not a native species, this tree is distinctively large.
Utilities	The median has street light poles (aqua colored, two-headed cobra style). Along the south side of the street are wooden power poles for almost the entire length with occasional lines extending over the street to individual poles on the north side.
Viewers	Motorists, pedestrians, bicyclists
Views	Background--Superstition Mountains to the east; middleground—commercial and retail uses



Strip mall



Vacant restaurant building



Shopping center



Vacant big box building



Small retail businesses



Corner office building

TABLE 3: UNIT 3 CHARACTERISTICS

Visual Factor	Description
Land use	Commercial, retail, restaurants, motels, mobile home parks, auto/RV/boat sales and repair
Building type	Predominantly one story
Parking lots	Lots to the front, side, and rear of the buildings; on-street
Building to street relationship	In this unit, the buildings and strip malls get even larger and are set even further back from the street, creating larger expanses of parking in front (relative to Units 1 and 2)
Building condition	Overall good; buildings are painted with no visible signs of excessive disrepair. There are several vacant buildings which give this unit a neglected feeling
Vegetation	Only a couple of the businesses have right-of-way landscaping of the palette noted in Section 1.2. The remaining businesses have either no planter areas or empty planters. There is a raised, landscaped median in this unit with tall, vertical fan palms and vertical trees. The vegetation helps mask the street light poles (noted below).
Utilities	The median has street light poles (aqua colored, two-headed cobra style). Along the south side of the street are wooden power poles for almost the entire length with occasional lines extending over the street to individual poles on the north side.
Viewers	Motorists, pedestrians, bicyclists
Views	Background--Superstition Mountains to the east; middleground—commercial and retail uses



Mobile home park



Retail business



Motel



Large big box building



Small retail



Two-story office building

2.0 Impact Assessment

2.1 Methodology

To determine the effects on the visual environment, the project team used a rating system, similar to systems used by United States Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, and Federal Highway Administration, to depict the levels of impact the project might have on the visual quality in each visual assessment unit. The ratings used were:

Impact	Definition	Mitigation
None	None or negligible change	None needed
Low	Minor change, elements introduced are similar to existing features	Mitigation may not be required
Moderate	Noticeable change, elements obstruct or alter views or character	Mitigation needed to reduce impacts
High	Major change, elements obstruct views or substantially alter character	Extraordinary mitigation needed to reduce impacts

Viewer type and length of stay in the project area were also considered. Sensitivity is usually higher for those viewers who live or work in a project area versus those who are driving or riding transit through the area.

Viewer Type	Definition
Residents	Residents are the most sensitive viewers. They spend the most time near the project elements
Business owners/clientele	People working in or visiting businesses spend typical business hours in the area or make frequent but short buying trips
Motorists	Motorists generally travel parallel to the project and their exposure is short term
Pedestrian/bicyclists	Pedestrians and bicyclists generally travel parallel to the project but at slower rates than motorists; however, their overall exposure is still considered short term

2.2 No-Build Alternative

Under the No-Build Alternative, the Gilbert Road Extension Project would not be constructed, and the visual conditions would not change due to the project described herein. Changes in views to the right-of-way would result from development of commercial areas driven by typical market forces. Visual effects resulting from future improvements assumed under the No-Build Alternative would be the responsibility of

the agencies and jurisdictions implementing the improvements. It is expected the general character of the area would remain constant. Therefore, neither the existing character of the corridor nor pending changes would be affected with the decision to implement the No-Build Alternative.

2.3 Build Alternative (4-Lane)

Constructing this Build Alternative would cause short-term construction impacts to the visual environment as well as long-term changes in how the area looks. Construction impacts are described in Section 3.20 of the Gilbert Road Extension Environmental Assessment.

Once constructed, the Build Alternative (4-lane) would not substantially alter the general urban visual character along and adjacent to the right-of-way. It would cause moderate impact to viewers in the evaluation area. Although fixed elements of the light rail extension project would not obstruct long-range views, foreground and middle views would change due to the addition of new elements. These include the addition of track, overhead catenary system, traction power substations, lighting, and station platforms and elements.

The most noticeable change would be the loss, or substantial remodeling, of three buildings and one structure (an awning), all located at or near the intersection of Main Street and Stapley Drive in Unit 2. The new right-of-way needed for this alternative encroaches into the buildings themselves, potentially making them unusable. One exception is the westernmost building in the shopping center at the southwest corner of Main Street and Stapley Drive. It is a long block of businesses, facing perpendicular to the street. Only the suite closest to the right-of-way is directly impacted. It may be feasible to renovate the building and only remove a portion of the structure and move the impacted tenant(s) to another suite in the mall.

A second noticeable impact would be the change from tall vertical palms, trees, streetlights, and overhead wires in the median to poles and overhead catenary wires in the median for light rail and streetlights along the sides of the street. New trees and shrubs would be located at the stations and in some locations along the sides of the street. Given that there are already power poles and overhead wires along the south side of the street for most of the route, the impact would be predominantly perceived as a change in visual clutter, rather than substantially more or less clutter.

Lastly, the stations in the median at Stapley Drive and Gilbert Road would create a noticeable change at those intersections, as would the pocket track west of the station at Gilbert Road. These elements would result in the placement of large vertical, partially opaque, elements in what is now essentially a flat, open median. However, these are busy, urban intersections with an existing abundance of visual distraction. In addition,

the views east to the Superstitions Mountains would not be obstructed and the viewers in this area are predominantly motorists passing through or customers making short trips to the businesses, neither group considered to be sensitive viewers. The addition of sensitively designed stations would not cause a significant change.

2.4 Build Alternative (2-Lane)

Constructing this Build Alternative would cause short-term construction impacts to the visual environment as well as long-term changes in how the area looks. Construction impacts are described in Section 3.20 of the *Gilbert Road Extension Environmental Assessment*.

Once constructed, the Build Alternative (2-lane) would not substantially alter the general urban visual character along and adjacent to the right-of-way. It would result in the least change to the visual environment because the three buildings and awning near Main Street and Stapley Drive would not be remodeled or demolished. It would cause low impact to viewers in the evaluation area. Although fixed elements of the light rail extension project would not obstruct long-range views, foreground and middle views would change due to the addition of new elements. This includes the addition of track, overhead catenary system, traction power substations, lighting, and station platform and elements.

The most noticeable impact would be the change from tall vertical palms, trees, streetlights, and overhead wires in the median to poles and overhead catenary wires in the median for light rail and streetlights along the sides of the street. New trees and shrubs would be located at the stations and in some locations along the sides of the street. Given that there are already power poles and overhead wires along the south side of the street for most of the route, the impact would be predominantly perceived as a change in visual clutter, rather than substantially more or less clutter.

In addition, the stations in the median at Stapley Drive and Gilbert Road would create a noticeable change at those intersections, as would the pocket track west of the station at Gilbert Road. These elements would result in the placement of large vertical, partially opaque, elements in what is now essentially a flat, open median. However, these are busy, urban intersections with an existing abundance of visual distraction. In addition, the views east to the Superstitions Mountains would not be obstructed and the viewers in this area are predominantly motorists passing through or customers making short trips to the businesses, neither group considered to be sensitive viewers. The addition of sensitively designed stations would not cause a significant change.

2.5 Any Difference if the 2-Lane Roundabouts Option is Implemented?

Yes, but Minor. The 2-lane roundabout option would match the 2-lane option except at the five intersections where the roundabouts would occur. The main difference would be

a reduction or removal of the poles and other features associated with traffic signals at the two locations where those exist—Horne and Main Street and Lazona Drive and Main Street. This would help to visually declutter those intersections. However, signal poles for the pedestrian crossings at each of the roundabouts would increase the number of poles overall along the street, adding to the visual clutter. At all the roundabout locations there would be space for decorative landscape which would be a visual enhancement.

3.0 Park-and-Ride

3.1 Park-and-Ride (North Option)

A park-and-ride facility would not be that dissimilar to the existing shopping center. In the case of surface parking only, the buildings would be removed, a noticeable change, but there would still be large expanses of asphalt with parking lot lights. In the case of a park- and-ride structure, the structure would replace the existing bulk of the shopping center buildings, resulting in little change. The heaviest hours of activity would be predominantly during the daytime and evening, similar to the activity of the shopping centers. The park-and-ride facility would be an improvement over the existing parking lot as they typically include a substantial amount of interior and perimeter landscaping, providing more shade and softening the impact of a parking structure, should that be included.



Park-and-Ride (North Option) site



Park-and-Ride (North Option) site

3.2 Park-and-Ride (South Option)

The park-and-ride option on the southwest corner of Main Street and Gilbert Road would displace three automobile sales businesses and one recreational vehicle/auto sales business. The existing use is visually distracting with cars up against the back of the sidewalk, banners, tall light poles, and virtually no landscape. A surface park-and-

ride lot would be similar to what exists but would be an improvement since the design would include interior and perimeter landscape to screen the vehicles. A structured park-and-ride facility on this site would be visually taller and larger than anything in the current condition, creating a more noticeable impact. This would be balanced by new perimeter landscaping and trees to mitigate the building.



Park-and-Ride (South Option) site



Park-and-Ride (South Option) site

MEMO



3.4 Summary of Impacts with Mitigation

Table 4 summarizes the impacts of the different alternatives to the existing character of the evaluation area.

TABLE 4: VISUAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT WITH MITIGATION SUMMARY

Visual Unit	Description			Visual Impact				
	Length (feet)	Land Use	Features	Build Alternative (2-Lane)	Build Alternative (2-Lane Roundabouts)	Build Alternative (4-Lane)	Park-and-Ride (North Option)	Park-and-Ride (South Option)
Unit 1	770	Mix of commercial, retail, 50s-era motel, Mexican food takeout restaurant, small apartment complex	Four-lane road; background views east to the Superstition Mountains; middle ground views of one-story buildings; no median landscape; almost no edge landscape; streetlights down center median	Low	Low	Moderate	n/a	n/a
Unit 2	2,700	Mix of commercial, retail, motel, restaurants, vacant businesses and restaurant pads, reception halls, carwash, pawn shops	Four-lane road; background views east to the Superstition Mountains; middle ground views of one- and two-story buildings; landscaped median with tall vertical palms and trees; almost no edge landscape; streetlights down center median, overhead powerlines along south side of road	Low	Low	Moderate	n/a	n/a

Visual Unit	Description			Visual Impact				
	Length (feet)	Land Use	Features	Build Alternative (2-Lane)	Build Alternative (2-Lane Roundabouts)	Build Alternative (4-Lane)	Park-and-Ride (North Option)	Park-and-Ride (South Option)
Unit 3	5,210	Mix of commercial, retail, large vacant buildings, 50s-era motel, restaurants, mobile home parks, office buildings, auto/RV sales, public storage, vacant lots, batting cages	Four-lane road; background views east to the Superstition Mountains; middle ground views of one- and two-story buildings; landscaped median with tall vertical palms and trees; almost no edge landscape; large, non-landscaped parking lots; streetlights down center median, overhead powerlines along south side of road	Low	Low	Moderate	Low	Low
Residents				Low	Low	Low	Low	Low
Business owners/clientele				Low	Low	Moderate	Low	Low
Motorists				Low	Low	Low	Low	Low
Pedestrian/bicyclists				Low	Low	Low	Low	Low

Visual Unit	Description			Visual Impact				
	Length (feet)	Land Use	Features	Build Alternative (2-Lane)	Build Alternative (2-Lane Roundabouts)	Build Alternative (4-Lane)	Park-and-Ride (North Option)	Park-and-Ride (South Option)
Unit 1	770	Mix of commercial, retail, 50s-era motel, Mexican food takeout restaurant, small apartment complex	Four-lane road; background views east to the Superstition Mountains; middle ground views of one-story buildings; no median landscape; almost no edge landscape; streetlights down center median	Low	Low	Moderate	n/a	n/a
Unit 2	2,700	Mix of commercial, retail, motel, restaurants, vacant businesses and restaurant pads, reception halls, carwash, pawn shops	Four-lane road; background views east to the Superstition Mountains; middle ground views of one- and two-story buildings; landscaped median with tall vertical palms and trees; almost no edge landscape; streetlights down center median, overhead powerlines along south side of road	Low	Low	Moderate	n/a	n/a

MEMO

The Build Alternative (4-lane) would cause the greatest change in the visual environment due to substantially modifying or removing existing structures to accommodate the widened right-of-way needed to build the project. The Build Alternative (2-lane) would have the least impact of the build options. The non-vegetative vertical elements in the median would be replaced with similar vertical elements—streetlight poles and overhead wires would be replaced with overhead catenary power poles and wires; however, the overhead catenary power poles and wires would not be as tall as the existing streetlight poles and overhead wires. The edges of the project (the existing curb) would remain the same but with the addition of streetlight poles. The Build Alternative (2-lane Roundabouts) would have very similar impacts as the Build Alternative (2-lane) but with the additional changes due to the roundabouts (reduced number of traffic signals, increased number of pedestrian crossing signals, and additional landscape).

4.0 Mitigation

The Gilbert Road Extension is located within an existing transportation corridor. The Gilbert Road Extension would introduce new visual elements, such as two stations, pocket track, pedestrian walkways, park-and-ride facility, overhead catenary power poles and wires, and traction power substations, into the existing visual setting of the study area. The Gilbert Road Extension and associated facilities would have a less than substantial effect on sensitive resources and viewers.



A simulation of typical project improvements (shown in the downtown area)

Most impacts to the existing visual setting are low or moderate, depending on the alternative or viewer sensitivity. The 4-lane Alternative has the moderate impact that may result from the removal or substantial remodeling of adjacent buildings. The inclusion of additional landscape will soften the change. Over time, these parcels may redevelop with a new, smaller building in the same location; however, these future changes are outside the purview of this assessment. The final design of the project will include incorporating specific aesthetic station, platform, and traction power substation

guidelines and mitigating the impact of overhead catenary power poles and wires and trackway, where possible. The project will conform to the guidance and specifications contained in the *Urban Design Guidelines* (June 2001) and *METRO Central Mesa LRT Extension Urban Design Guidelines* (July 2010), as well as METRO's applicable design criteria for stations, landscape, etc. These documents include methods to enhance and maintain the urban continuity and to blend the project's features into the existing setting. Methods that could be adopted are listed below.

- Integrate new facilities with area redevelopment plans
- Minimize the height of facilities to extent possible to reduce their visibility
- Use plant materials to provide screening for sensitive visual resources and viewers
- Use light fixtures that will not cause light spillover into residential areas
- Carefully select TPSS sites, provide screening, and use architecture of a style that is compatible with the surrounding environment
- Provide new landscape to create continuity throughout the project area
- Connect the stations to the surrounding neighborhoods with sidewalks and paths within a 1/4-mile radius of each station