

Visual Quality

Studies and Coordination

This section is based on observations of the project area during a number of site visits originating in July 2007 and continuing to the present. Proposed design plans and aerial photographs were also used to analyze the anticipated visual impacts of the proposed project.

Affected Environment

The project area lies on a glacial outwash terrace bordered by the glacially carved valleys of the Snohomish and Pilchuck Rivers to the west and south. This geology has resulted in topography in the project area that ranges from the steep grade between the US 2 Trestle and Cavalero Road, to a gently undulating landscape from Cavalero Road east to 91st Avenue SE and beyond. On a clear day from the crest of Cavalero Hill, scenic and sweeping vistas to the west of the green stretches of the Snohomish River floodplain and the Olympic Mountains can be experienced. To the east, the snow-covered peaks of Three Fingers Mountain and Mount Pilchuck are prominent features of the regional landscape, although generally obscured by intervening scenery around the project area. The 20th Street SE corridor is an important transportation link between the highly-developed areas of the southwest county, and the more tranquil areas of Lake Stevens and the foothills of the Cascade Mountains.

The project area is surrounded by a primarily rural environment that features scattered low-density residential areas, interspersed with numerous pasture lands and a large forested area on the south side of the roadway between 79th and 83rd Avenues SE. These open areas contribute to the rural setting as they contain trees, wetlands and stream corridors that are remnants of the native landscape that was present before settlement of the area. Recently, however, the area primarily north of 20th Street SE has been experiencing rapid development evidenced by higher-density residential developments. Several developments that will be built at Cavalero Road and at 79th Avenue SE are currently in the permitting stages and early construction stages, and some intersection upgrades have been implemented.

Impacts – Visual Quality

During Construction

Preferred Alternative

Changes in the visual character of the surrounding environment from short-term construction related activities can generally be described in terms of vehicle and equipment activity, construction staging, stockpiling of excavated material, temporary signage and traffic congestion. Developed and naturally vegetated areas adjacent to 20th Street SE would be cleared for the construction of additional roadway lanes that would increase impervious surface areas,

and the modification of topography to create fill slopes and cut slopes for retaining walls. Construction activities will lead to increased levels of dust, indirect transfer of dirt between locations, and localized glare from lighting sources assembled to ensure the safety of construction crews and vehicle drivers.

No Action Alternative

With the absence of construction activities, 20th Street SE will generally remain in its present state except for intersection improvements and additional turn lanes associated with developer installed residential developments. The views of the undulating, vegetated landscape and vistas to the west from Cavalero Hill will not be obscured by clearing and excavation activities.

During Operation

Preferred Alternative

The expansion of 20th Street SE would permanently change views and the visual quality of the corridor due to an expanded roadway width, topography and grade changes, increase in the amount of impervious surface area, and construction of retaining walls.

Vegetation removal in the form of scattered trees and hedges along the new right-of-way would result in a reduction of vegetative screening, leading to increased impacts from reflective glare from the roadway surface and potentially from retaining walls for property owners adjacent to 20th Street SE. Light impacts would also come from the removal of fences and from illumination, particularly at signalized intersections.

The acquisition of additional right-of-way would also result in homes being located closer to a busy roadway. This change would narrow property owners' previously expansive views of the natural environment, and replace it with heavy vehicle use, and pedestrian and bicyclist activities due to sidewalks and bike lanes that will be installed as part of the project. With the increased road capacity, residential areas may be developed at greater densities than in the past. This would mean the conversion of existing undeveloped lots, which would further detract from the existing rural setting. However, views from the crest of Cavalero Hill west across the Snohomish River floodplain to Puget Sound are unlikely to suffer any encroachment by the completed roadway.

No Action Alternative

The area will generally remain in its present state, however, the lack of additional roadway capacity will likely increase the level of slow-moving traffic beyond peak travel times. Development would continue to occur and the area will appear to be more urban in character. These changes are likely to occur more slowly without the roadway improvements.

Mitigation – Visual Quality

During Construction

Preferred Alternative

Visual quality impacts associated with staging areas could be minimized by grading excavation cuts into the existing slope at the top and sides to make them more natural in appearance, and

making minor shifts in the alignment to conform to the existing topography and to reduce vegetation clearing in open pasture, forested, wetland, stream and other visually attractive areas. Staging areas would be located away from visually sensitive areas where practicable and where land is available. Construction activities would be primarily limited to daylight hours to eliminate the need to use high-wattage lighting sources to operate during nighttime hours.

Areas disturbed during construction will be revegetated with native species to provide visual buffering of similar function to the previous, and to soften the appearance of the roadway to adjacent viewers. The project would replace privacy fencing in the same form as the structure that was removed. Trees may be planted around the perimeters of, and native vegetation planted within, proposed stormwater quantity and water quality treatment facilities.

No Action Alternative

No mitigation is required because no impacts will take place under this alternative.

During Operation

Preferred Alternative

A range of measures would be used to lessen the visible impacts of the proposed project. These would include reducing vehicle headlight glare by designing intersections with appropriate approach angles, and lights at signalized intersections will be timed to improve traffic flow. Where lighting structures are proposed, shielded backlighting would be used to avoid excessive backlighting. These lights would consist of devices which direct light toward the subject area and avoid sending light great distances from the roadway. Proposed standards for intersection lighting would require fixtures to be constructed of galvanized steel. These galvanized surfaces would naturally oxidize within a short time following installation and would not cause reflective daytime glare. Retaining walls would also be constructed with low-sheen and non-reflective surface materials. Roadway signs would conform to Snohomish County design standards and would consider design and location.

The project would be consistent with *Snohomish County General Policy Plan* Transportation Policy 6.A.3. which states: “Aesthetic and visual values shall be considered in the location and design of transportation facilities,” and the applicable implementation landscaping standards contained in the *Snohomish County Engineering Development and Design Standards*.

No Action Alternative

No mitigations are required because the roadway will not be widened under this alternative.

Significant Unavoidable Adverse Impacts

The expansion of 20th Street SE would permanently change views and the visual quality of the corridor due to an expanded roadway width, topography and grade changes, increase in the amount of impervious surface, and construction of retaining walls. The acquisition of additional right-of-way would also result in homes being located closer to a busy roadway.