

Landscape Architecture

Scoping Questionnaire

to Determine

Visual Impact Assessment Level

August 2023

# Introduction

This questionnaire assists the qualified visual impact assessment (VIA) preparer (i.e., California Licensed Landscape Architect) in determining whether a VIA report is needed, in estimating the potential visual impacts of a proposed project on the environment, and in understanding the degree and breadth of the possible visual impact issues. The goal is to develop VIA documentation that is appropriate to the scale of the project and is thorough, concise, and defensible.

Enter basic information about the project and its visual context, visual resource regulatory context, and the expected visual change and sensitivity in the Baseline Information Form and then consider each of the 12 questions below. The resulting score will serve as a guide to help determine the appropriate level of VIA documentation for the project. For some projects with no or minimal visual impact, this questionnaire is all that is necessary. Both capital and maintenance projects should be reviewed. Select the response that most closely applies to the proposed project. The score is automatically computed at the bottom of the questionnaire. The total score should be matched to one of the four groups of scores at the end of the questionnaire that include recommended levels of VIA documentation (i.e., this completed questionnaire, VIA memorandum, standard VIA report, and advanced VIA report) and reference to associated annotated outlines for these documents.

Use the scoring system as a preliminary guide rather than a substitute for professional analysis on the part of the preparer. Although the total score may recommend a lower level of VIA document, circumstances associated with any one of the 12 questions may indicate the need to elevate the VIA to a greater level of detail. For projects on the State Highway System, the District Landscape Architect should be consulted when scoping the VIA level and provide concurrence on the findings of this questionnaire.

# Preparer Qualifications

[The Standard Environmental Reference, Volume I: Chapter 27-Visual & Aesthetics Review](https://dot.ca.gov/programs/environmental-analysis/standard-environmental-reference-ser/volume-1-guidance-for-compliance/ch-27-visual-aesthetics-review) (website link) lists preparer qualifications for conducting the visual impact assessment process:

“Scenic Resource Evaluations and VIAs are performed under the direction of licensed Landscape Architects. Landscape Architects receive formal training in the area of visual resource management with a curriculum that emphasizes environmental design, human factors, and context sensitive solutions. When recommending specific visual mitigation measures, Landscape Architects can appropriately weigh the benefits of these different measures and consider construction feasibility and maintainability.”

This questionnaire shall be prepared by, or under the direct supervision of a California Licensed Landscape Architect. It shall be signed and stamped by that Landscape Architect, and written concurrence shall be provided by the District Landscape Architect (for projects on State Highway System).

# Project and Visual Context Baseline Information

Project and visual context baseline information is gathered early in the Establishment Phase of the VIA process to identify key information and issues applicable to the preparation of the VIA Scoping Questionnaire. Should the baseline information change in the course of the project, the questionnaire should be updated accordingly.

Gathering of the baseline information may be accomplished through desktop research, field reconnaissance, coordination with the Caltrans environmental and project development teams, and consultation with key stakeholders. The Caltrans VIA Handbook ([website link](https://design.onramp.dot.ca.gov/downloads/design/files/Design%20Updates/Landscape/VIA_Handbook.pdf)) includes further information about the Establishment Phase.

Complete the following Baseline Information Form to document the baseline project and visual resource information that was available at the time of preparation of the questionnaire:

# Project and Visual Context Baseline Information Form

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Project Name: | <Insert project name> |
| EA or EFIS Number | <Insert EA or EFIS number> |
| Project Location (Dist-Co-Rte-PM): | <Insert project location> |
| Questionnaire Preparer Name and CA LA License Number: | <Insert preparer name>  <Insert license number> |
| District Landscape Architect (DLA) Providing Concurrence, CA LA Lic. #: | <Insert District Landscape Architect name>  <Insert license number> |
| Visual Features of Project and its Alternative(s). | <Describe the project character, integrity, memorability (vividness - how its features would look in terms of form, line, color, texture, and scale), coherence (unity – the project patterns), potential lighting and glare issues>  <Consider project elements, such as proposed roadway width, lanes, medians, shoulders, signs, lighting, traffic control devices; horizontal alignment and vertical profile; anticipated cut-and-fill slopes, rock/slope cut locations, vertical elements (walls, bridges, sound walls, other structures) and their scale, form and materials, ground disturbance footprint, vegetation clearing and landscaping.> |
| Additional Visual Context Remarks: | <Insert additional visual context remarks> |

# Regulatory Framework

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Potential Agencies that may have to be Involved: | Federal  State  Local  Tribal  Other  Notes: |

# Visual Change and Sensitivity

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Landscape Observations: | Water  Visually dominant landforms  Natural vegetation  Visually Appealing Structures  Other features of interest  Notes: |
| Impact of Project on Natural, Cultural, and Existing Project Environments: | Highly compatible  Moderately compatible  Not compatible  Other  Notes: |
| Landscape Context and Development Patterns: | Natural/Undeveloped  Rural  Suburban  Urban  Notes: |
| Scenic, Visual and Historic Resource(s) within the Area of Visual Effect: | Officially designated State Scenic Highway  Eligible Scenic Highway  Visual resources  Federally (or otherwise) designated historic, scenic resource  Notes: |
| Expected Agency Involvement: | <Insert expected agency involvement> |
| Expected Public Feedback: | Scenic resources identified as important  Not important  No public feedback  Notes: |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Regulatory Context | 0 |
| 1. Does the project’s aesthetic approach appear to be consistent with applicable laws, ordinances, regulations, policies, or standards? | 0 |
| Although the State is not required to comply with regional and local planning ordinances and other regulations, these documents are critical in understanding the importance that communities place on visual resources. The Caltrans Environmental Planning branch may have copies of the planning documents that pertain to the project. If not, this information can be obtained by contacting the local planning department. | 0 |
| Select a Response (Score) | 0 |
| * + Low Consistency (4 Points)   + Moderate Consistency (3 Points)   + High Consistency (2 Points)   + Not Applicable (1 Point) | Choose an item. |
| * Assumptions/Issues: <insert assumptions, issues, potentially applicable regulatory requirements> | 0 |
| 1. Will permits be required by outside regulatory agencies (i.e., federal, state, or local)? | 0 |
| Permit requirements can have an unintended consequence on the visual environment. Anticipated permits, as well as specific permit requirements may be determined by talking with the project Environmental Planner and Project Engineer. Note: coordinate with the Caltrans representative responsible for obtaining the permit prior to communicating directly with any permitting agency. | 0 |
| Select a Response (Score) | 0 |
| * + Yes, both federal and state, or multiple permits required (4 Points)   + Yes, either federal, or state, or federal and local, or state and local (3 Points)   + Yes, local or multiple local only (2 Points)   + No (1 Point) | Choose an item. |
| * Assumptions/issues: <insert assumptions, issues, likely permits that will be required> | 0 |
| Visual Change | 0 |
| 1. Will the project character be compatible with the visual character of the existing landscape? | 0 |
| Consider the types of adverse changes to the scenic integrity of the landscape caused by the project. Evaluate the scale and extent of the project features compared to the surrounding scale of the community. Is the project likely to give an urban appearance to an existing rural or suburban community? | 0 |
| Select a Response (Score) | 0 |
| * + No Compatibility (4 Points)   + Low Compatibility (3 Points)   + Moderate Compatibility (2 Points)   + High Compatibility (1 Point) | Choose an item. |
| * Assumptions/issues: <insert assumptions, issues, why compatible, why not compatible> | 0 |
| 1. Will the project contrast adversely with the memorability (vividness), natural harmony and/or cultural order (unity) of the existing landscape? | 0 |
| Evaluate the scale and extent of the project features compared to the scale of the visual elements within the surroundings. Is the project likely to change the appearance in a way that is contrasting with the line, color, form, and texture of the existing landscape visual character? | 0 |
| Select a Response (Score) | 0 |
| * + High Adverse Contrast (4 Points)   + Moderate Adverse Contrast (3 Points)   + Low Adverse Contrast (2 Points)   + No Contrast (1 Point) | Choose an item. |
| * Assumptions/issues: <insert assumptions, issues, why contrasting or not> | 0 |
| 1. Will the project, when viewed together with other past or foreseeable projects, result in a cumulative adverse change in the visual quality or character of the existing landscape? | 0 |
| Identify any projects in the area (both Caltrans’ and others’) that have been recently constructed and/or are reasonably foreseeable and/or currently planned for future construction. The window of time and the extent of area applicable to possible cumulative impacts should be based on a reasonable anticipation of the viewing public’s awareness of cumulative change. | 0 |
| Select a Response (Score) | 0 |
| * + Project may result in substantial adverse cumulative visual impacts (4 Points)   + Project will result in noticeable adverse cumulative visual impacts (3 Points)   + Project is unlikely to result in noticeable adverse cumulative visual impacts (2 Points)   + Project will not result in cumulative impacts (1 Point) | Choose an item. |
| * Assumptions/issues: <insert assumptions, issues, list other known projects> | 0 |
| 1. Will the project produce a new source of substantial light or glare, which will adversely affect daytime or nighttime views within the area? | 0 |
| Identify new sources of lighting and glare and how day- and nighttime visual conditions may change*.* | 0 |
| Select a Response (Score) | 0 |
| * + High potential for adverse effects (4 Points)   + Moderate potential for adverse effects (3 Points)   + Low potential for adverse effects (2 Points)   + No potential for adverse effects (1 Point) | Choose an item. |
| * Assumptions/issues: <insert assumptions, issues, list potential sources of light and glare> | 0 |
| Visual Sensitivity | 0 |
| 1. What is the potential that the project proposal will be controversial within the community? | 0 |
| Assess the level of public concern by talking with local agency management and staff familiar with the affected community’s sentiments as evidenced by past projects and/or current information. | 0 |
| Select a Response (Score) | 0 |
| * + High Potential that project will be controversial (4 Points)   + Moderate Potential that project will be controversial (3 Points)   + Low Potential that project will be controversial (2 Points)   + No Potential that project will be controversial (1 Point) | Choose an item. |
| * Assumptions/issues: <insert assumptions, issues, potential concerned viewer groups> | 0 |
| 1. How sensitive are potential viewer groups likely to be regarding visible changes proposed by the project? | 0 |
| Consider among other factors who the viewer groups represent, the number of viewers within the group, probable viewer expectations, activities, viewing duration, and orientation. The expected viewer sensitivity level may be scoped by applying professional judgment, and by soliciting information from other Caltrans staff, local agencies and community stakeholders familiar with the affected community’s sentiments and demonstrated concerns. | 0 |
| Select a Response (Score) | 0 |
| * + High Sensitivity (4 Points)   + Moderate Sensitivity (3 Points)   + Low Sensitivity (2 Points)   + No Sensitivity (1 Point) | Choose an item. |
| * Assumptions/issues: <insert assumptions, issues, sensitive scenic resources and reasons why> | 0 |
| 1. What level of local concern is there for the types of specific project features (e.g., bridge structures, large excavations, sound barriers, or median planting removal) and construction impacts that are proposed? | 0 |
| Certain project improvements can be of special interest to local citizens, causing a heightened level of public concern, and requiring a more focused visual analysis. | 0 |
| Select a Response (Score) | 0 |
| * + High Level of Concern (4 Points)   + Modern Level of Concern (3 Points)   + Low Level of Concern (2 Points)   + No Concern (1 Point) | Choose an item. |
| * Assumptions/issues: <insert assumptions, issues, project features of concern> | 0 |
| 1. Are there federally, state, locally designated scenic or historic resources, or other visual resources within the project area of visual effect (i.e., viewshed)? | 0 |
| For example: protected viewsheds, visually sensitive public use areas, national historic/scenic trails, historic sites or structures, scenic designated viewpoints, wild and scenic rivers, state scenic highways or federal scenic byways, or potential visual resources such as stands of trees, rock outcroppings, etc. | 0 |
| Select a Response (Score) | 0 |
| * + Multiple designated scenic resources (4 Points)   + Multiple potential visual resources or a single designated  scenic resource (3 Points)   + One potential visual resource (2 Points)   + No identifiable scenic resources (1 Point) | Choose an item. |
| * Assumptions/issues: <insert assumptions, issues, list known scenic/visual resources in AVE> | 0 |
| Design Process Considerations | 0 |
| 1. Will the project sponsor or public benefit from a more detailed visual analysis in order to help reach consensus on a course of action to address potential visual impacts? | 0 |
| Consider the proposed project features, possible visual impacts, and probable environmental commitments. | 0 |
| Select a Response (Score) | 0 |
| * + High Benefit (4 Points)   + Moderate Benefit (3 Points)   + Low Benefit (2 Points)   + No Benefit (1 Point) | 4 |
| * Assumptions/issues: <insert assumptions, issues, and/or enhancements> | 0 |
| 1. Will the project likely require design changes to reduce the extent of visual resource impacts? | 0 |
| Consider design changes and enhancements such as realignment, additional alignment alternatives, vertical profile adjustments, extensive landscaping, architectural treatment, color and texture treatments and/or lighting of aboveground structures. | 0 |
| Select a Response (Score) | 0 |
| * + Extensive changes and/or redesign (4 Points)   + Some redesign or minimization measures (3 Points)   + Minimal design changes (2 Points)   + No design changes (1 Point) | 2 |
| * Assumptions/issues: <insert assumptions, issues, and/or enhancements> | 0 |
| Highlight the number below and press FN+F9 to calculate the final project score.  Project Score: | **6** |

[Store a copy of this completed questionnaire in the project file.](javascript:window.print())

Attach a copy of this completed questionnaire to the VIA report.

# Project Score

## Select an Outline Based on Project Score

The total score will indicate the recommended VIA level for the project. In addition to considering circumstances relating to any one of the 12 questions that would justify elevating the VIA level, also consider any other project factors that would influence level selection.

### Score 12-18 – VIA Questionnaire

No visual resource related regulatory requirements. No or negligible visual changes to the environment are proposed. None or minimal public concern has been identified. This **Questionnaire** with rationale for selected responses to questions in the available spaces after each question along with a statement of no visual resource impact is appropriate and provides a sufficient rationale why a technical study is not required.

### Score 19-28 –VIA Memorandum

Very limited visual resource related regulatory requirements. Minor visual changes to the environment are proposed. Minor public concern from the public may be expected. A **VIA Memorandum** is appropriate in this case. The VIA Memorandum should briefly describe project features, impacts and any environmental commitment measures. Visual simulations are not necessary. Go to the Directions for using and accessing VIA Memorandum Annotated Outline ([website link](https://design.onramp.dot.ca.gov/visual-impact-assessment-guidance-and-training)).

### Score 29-38 – Standard VIA Report

Several visual resource related regulatory requirements. Moderately noticeable visual changes to the environment are proposed. Moderate public concern may be expected. A fully developed **Standard VIA Report** is appropriate. The report should describe in detail the project’s visual attributes, its visual impact and potential environmental commitment measures. Visual simulations are recommended. This report will likely receive public review. Go to the Directions for using and accessing the Standard VIA Annotated Outline ([website link](https://design.onramp.dot.ca.gov/visual-impact-assessment-guidance-and-training)).

### Score 39-48 – Advanced VIA Report

Extensive visual resource related regulatory requirements and clearly noticeable changes to the environment are proposed. Moderate to high public concern may be expected. A fully developed **Advanced VIA Report** is appropriate. The report should describe in detail and numerically score the project’s visual change and sensitivity, its visual impact and any environmental commitments proposed. Visual simulations are required. It is appropriate to alert the Project Development Team to the potential for highly adverse impacts and to consider project alternatives to avoid those impacts. This technical study will receive close public review. Go to the Directions for using and accessing the Advanced VIA Annotated Outline ([website link](https://design.onramp.dot.ca.gov/visual-impact-assessment-guidance-and-training)).