

## Chapter 6: Visual Resources

### Physical Setting

The rural character of the Gaviota Coast is one of a working agricultural landscape nestled between the mountains and the sea, a unique natural setting. Visually, the landscape of the Gaviota Coast is one of open vistas of chaparral-covered sandstone mountains, numerous wooded canyons, grasslands, coastal bluffs, narrow sandy beaches, and the Pacific Ocean bounded by the Channel Islands. The complexity of this natural landscape blended with grazing lands and orchards creates a dramatic environment with a rural character. Agriculture, from grazing to row crops and orchards, has been historically prominent and continues to define the character of the coast. The rugged mountains provide a striking backdrop to the coastal terrace and Santa Barbara Channel with the views of the mountains and ocean generally unimpeded and unfragmented.



Artist: Chris Chapman

The Gaviota Coast is lightly inhabited, visible residential structures are relatively few and generally of modest size, and agricultural structures are generally simple and functional. There are three industrial developments (PXP Point Arguello, Las Flores Canyon, and Tajiguas Landfill) on the coast with the most visible being the PXP Point Arguello site near the Gaviota Tunnel. The Gaviota Coast is bisected by the transportation corridor of Highway 101 and the railroad. However, with the exception of these corridors, the visual character of the Gaviota Coast is relatively undisturbed by these urban elements; the built environment is largely subordinate to the scenic natural features and pastoral qualities of the Gaviota Coast.

### Regulatory Setting

The Land Use Element and Open Space Element of the County Comprehensive Plan include policies to protect and enhance visual resources. The Land Use Element Hillside and Watershed Protection Policies, as well as the Hillside and Ridgeline Protection Ordinance (Ordinance 3714), regulate development on slopes to minimize grading, disruption of natural vegetation, and erosion.

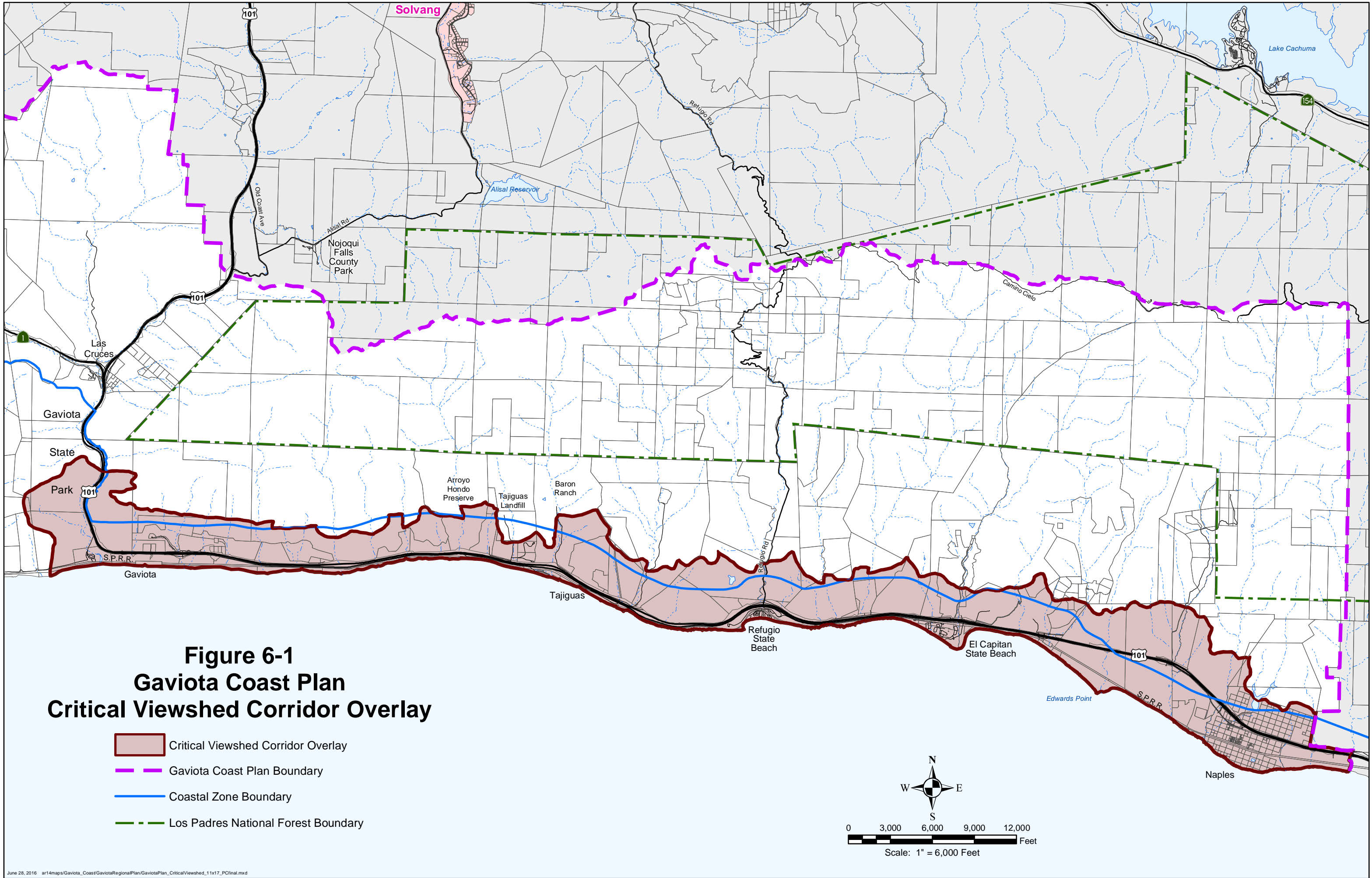
Visual Resource Policies of the Land Use Element include measures to ensure compatibility of structures with the surrounding natural environment and/or existing community through structural design review and landscaping requirements, limitations on signs that disrupt public views (also regulated by the County Zoning Ordinances), and requirements for undergrounding new utilities.

The Open Space Element identifies the County's scenic beauty as a principal factor in the attraction of residents and visitors, evaluates the visual quality of natural resources and travel corridors, and emphasizes the importance of urban perimeters. The Open Space Element's scenic values model includes intensity, design, and arrangement of development, preservation of natural features, and

variety in landscaping as criteria for the protection of visual resources. The segment of U.S. Highway 101 through the Gaviota Coast Plan area is also eligible for designation as a California Scenic Highway.

The Coastal Act mandates that scenic and visual qualities of the coast shall be considered and protected as a resource of public importance. In particular, views to and along the coast shall be protected. New development shall be visually compatible with the character of surrounding areas. Local Coastal Plan (LCP) policies ensure that new structures are compatible with the height, scale, and design of existing buildings. Significant views to and along the coast continue to be protected by LCP policies, and the preservation of visually prominent ridgelines is also addressed. The LCP protects the existing character of the Coastal Zone, while still accommodating compatible new development.





**Figure 6-1**  
**Gaviota Coast Plan**  
**Critical Viewshed Corridor Overlay**

- Critical Viewshed Corridor Overlay
- Gaviota Coast Plan Boundary
- Coastal Zone Boundary
- Los Padres National Forest Boundary

Scale: 1" = 6,000 Feet

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## Planning Issues

Santa Barbara County has a set of policies designed to minimize direct visual impacts from development, in addition to protecting against the degradation of existing broader scenic vistas from public viewing places. The key goals of the countywide rural visual policies are for development to: 1) be subordinate to the natural surroundings, 2) limit visual disturbance of the natural terrain, and 3) not intrude into the skyline. In general, development is required to blend into the surroundings as much as possible. This countywide rural visual policy approach does not require development to be hidden or fully screened. The key role of the adopted visual and aesthetic resources policies is to ensure the retention of the vital rural character of the coast as experienced visually from public viewing places. The policies in this Plan augment the existing countywide regulations to protect the unique visual character of the Gaviota Coast.

Given the above discussion, there are areas where, due to the potential for impairment of particularly scenic vistas, it is desirable to further limit potential impacts from development. The most prominent example of this is the coastal view corridor along Highway 101 from Goleta to the Gaviota Tunnel. This corridor provides the greatest opportunity for ocean and inland public views of the highest quality in the region. In addition, stretches of this view corridor are highly susceptible to visual degradation due to broad near-field views largely devoid of major stands of trees or intervening topographical breaks. Based on this, a higher standard of review for development in this area is therefore warranted. There may be other individual sites where the potential spoilage of important vistas (e.g., rock formations) would also entail appropriate review of proposed development. Another impact to the aesthetic values of the Gaviota Coast is the potential of the encroachment of significant additional night lighting associated with development and other infrastructure such as roads and entry kiosks. A part of the rural character of the Gaviota Coast is the relative darkness of the night sky.

All proposed residential development and larger scale agricultural structures in the Gaviota Coast Plan Area will be subject to the Outdoor Lighting Ordinance and undergo the Design Review process of the Board of Architectural Review. In addition to making qualified judgments to ensure that proposed development is consistent with visual resources policy, the Board of Architectural Review reviews the integrity of all aspects of development design including site layout, architecture, color, landscaping, etc.

## Site Design Hierarchy

A systematic hierarchy of site design and treatment issues has been developed to ensure a consistent approach to implementation of visual resources protection on the Gaviota Coast. Site selection is a primary design consideration in conforming to the visual resources policies for new development. This design component, when properly executed, contributes to optimum results for a successful development from a visual policy perspective. Ideal site selection reduces visual impacts and alterations to land forms. It is recognized that many properties lack such an ideal development site, and may require screening landscaping, increased grading, or other design solutions to avoid or lessen visual impacts. When an optimum site is available, screening plants and other treatments may in some cases be warranted to further support subordination of the visual impact from development to the natural setting. This situation may cause tension between the various policies and may require development to minimize visibility at the expense of increasing grading to lower finish floor elevations. The following site design hierarchy is the framework for siting and design criteria under the visual resource policies. The Roman numerals below show priority ranking for the preferred design component to utilize first.



## I. Site Selection

- Visibility - Eliminate or reduce the visibility of proposed development.
  - Site selection is the primary tool for minimizing the visibility of development. Development shall be subordinate to the setting, visually compatible with and complementary to the environment, and an integral part of the existing landscape.
  - To the maximum extent feasible, eliminate or reduce the visibility of development on the skyline as well as lesser or subordinate public viewshed ridgelines, as required by Policy VIS-2 and Policy VIS-3 and existing Santa Barbara County policies.
- Topography
  - The natural topography of the site shall be utilized to the maximum extent feasible to reduce the visibility of proposed development, including its infrastructure.
- Accessibility
  - All else being equal, development that minimizes the need for new access is preferred to development requiring significant new access roads or utilities. Any new roads or driveways should follow the natural contours of the site.
- Resource Sensitivity
  - To the extent feasible, development should avoid environmentally sensitive habitat (ESH) areas including riparian and wildlife corridors but where unavoidable, impacts shall be minimized consistent with existing County policy.
- Consideration of Agriculture
  - The development shall avoid or minimize significant impacts to agriculture to the maximum extent feasible by siting structures so as to minimize impacts to productive agricultural land, prime soils, and adjacent agricultural operations.
- Fire and Hazard Protection
  - Site development to minimize fire hazards and reduce the impacts of required fire access and vegetation clearance requirements.
    - Additional hazards include but are not limited to oil and gas development and geologic concerns.
- Map the Building Site
  - To make the planning process clear and efficient, applicants should map their building site to identify and address the above listed concerns, as well as:
    - *Water availability, including quality and quantity; and*
    - *View corridors, solar orientation, and prevailing wind direction.*

## II. Architecture

- Design Compatibility
  - The design of a project shall be compatible with the character of the surrounding setting. When more than one structure is proposed in proximity to others, they shall share a consistent or complementary architectural design vocabulary and should be arranged in a harmonious grouping.





- Mass, Bulk and Scale
  - Building masses should be interesting and building elevations shall be articulated, allowing the forms to integrate, accommodate and respond to the natural features of the site.
  - The size and scale of any structure should be determined by the natural features of the site, the impact of the development’s footprint, and the proposed structure’s visibility from off site.
- Materials and Details
  - Materials that are compatible and complement the surrounding area shall be used. No reflective finishes (other than windows, hardware fixtures, and photovoltaic panels) shall be used on exterior surfaces.
  - Lighting.
    - *Consistent with Policy VIS5 exterior lighting shall be minimized and shielded to reduce impacts on nocturnal ecosystems and night sky.*
    - *Interior lighting should be carefully planned to prevent exterior light spread and a “lantern effect.”*
- Colors
  - Exterior colors shall blend harmoniously with the site’s natural features and complement the subtle, natural characteristics of the site.
  - Exterior surfaces shall have a light reflective value (LRV) of less than 30. White, off-white, or other light colors of similar brightness or reflectance do not blend with the environment and are not permitted.
- Utility Structures and Fencing
  - Fencing should be unobtrusive and visually subordinate. Fencing should consider wildlife passage and/or corridors where appropriate and feasible.
  - Energy development (e.g. wind, solar, oil and gas, and associated infrastructure) shall conform to the visual requirements of the Gaviota Coast.
  - The visibility of utilities, like all other development, shall be eliminated or minimized from public viewing places. Water tanks for residential use will fall under the review of the CBAR, consistent with Policy VIS-9.

### III. Grading

- Excavation
  - Site selection that minimizes significant grading is preferable. However, significant grading may be advantageous; for example, if the bulk of the excavation is under the building and it results in partially undergrounded structures that reduce visibility and/or creates stepped building massing that allow for better architectural integration with the natural topographical features.
  - Shale and permeable base roads compatible with wildlife corridors and animal husbandry should be encouraged.



- Stepped Foundations and Basements
  - Stepped foundations and basements should be used on slopes to decrease the overall footprint and visual impact of a structure.
- Retaining Walls
  - Retaining walls shall be utilized to fit a structure into the natural contours of a site. Retaining walls that are visible from public viewing places and with the naked eye shall have an organic shape and be composed of and/or compatible with, the natural materials and colors on the site, consistent with Policy VIS-8.
- Berming
  - Berms should only be used as a screening method if other methods have been fully exhausted, they reflect a continuation or conform to existing landforms and are consistent with Policy VIS-7.

#### IV. Landscape

- Visual Softening and Screening
  - Landscaping should complement and be an integral part of the architecture of a building, and not used in place of good siting or design.
  - Landscaping is not permanent and should not be relied upon for permanent reduction of visual impacts.
  - Landscaping, with the exception of agricultural plantings, should be in proximity to the development with larger areas of land remaining undisturbed (with the exception of S.B. County Fire Department clearing requirements).
  - Landscaping should be used with restraint because too much landscaping can visually increase the bulk and mass of the development it is meant to screen.
  - Consistent with Policy VIS-14 non-agricultural landscaping, when mature, shall not obstruct public ocean views, or mountain views from Highway 101.
- Native Plants and then Non-native Plants
  - In landscaping, encourage the use of native plants before considering non-native plants.
  - Utilize materials consistent with the surroundings and the intended function, prioritizing the use of natives, ahead of adaptive non-native plants.
  - Landscape plans and palettes shall exclude plants considered invasive by the California Invasive Plant Council (Cal-IPC) and plants that are considered noxious according to Section 4500 of the California Code of Regulations.

The following core planning tools address the visual planning issues unique to Gaviota and, in the long term, will enhance the visual quality of the Plan Area:





### Critical Viewshed Corridor Overlay

The near-field views on the south and portions on the north of Highway 101 are visually critical and warrant additional protection from the potential for impacts of development. Therefore a Critical Viewshed Corridor Overlay has been created and will be implemented through the County Zoning Ordinances (see the attached map). Among other requirements, development under the overlay is required to be screened according to the site design hierarchy. Under this overlay, development would be required to be screened to the maximum extent feasible as seen from public viewing places. This is a higher standard for development to meet, whereas all other areas require that development only be visually subordinate to the surroundings.

### Scenic Highway Corridor/Scenic Corridor

Both the Scenic Highway Corridor and the Scenic Corridor areas highlight areas of potential scenic value along public travelways without applying additional specific policy requirements. Rather, they highlight these areas for visual issues related to potential development. To formalize the recognition of the scenic values from Highway 101, an application for scenic highway status for Highway 101 is included as an item for future action.



Artist: Chris Chapman

### Outdoor Lighting Ordinance

Due to its rural character, low intensity of development, and its distance from more intensely illuminated urban areas; the Gaviota Coast retains an invaluable nighttime visual resource. The proposed Gaviota Coast Outdoor Lighting Ordinance establishes development standards for the Plan Area intended to reduce the effects of excessive and inefficient lighting on the environment, visual resources, and neighboring properties.

## Policies and Implementation

### a. Visual Resources Goal

**GOAL VIS-1: To protect and enhance the rural, scenic, and visual qualities of the Gaviota Coast.**

### b. Visual Resource Policies

#### Plan Area-Wide Policies

**Policy VIS-1: Visual Compatibility.** The height, scale, and design of structures shall be compatible with the character of the surrounding natural and agricultural environment.

**Policy VIS-2: Visually Subordinate Development.** Development outside of the Critical Viewshed Corridor shall be visually subordinate to the natural and agricultural environment as seen from public viewing places. Visual subordination shall be achieved through adherence to the Site Design Hierarchy and Design Guidelines.

**Policy VIS-3: Skyline Intrusion.** Where feasible, development shall be sited so as not to intrude into the skyline as seen from public viewing places.

**Policy VIS-4: Ridgeline Development.** Development shall be prohibited from locating on ridgelines to the maximum extent feasible, as implemented by the *Ridgeline and Hillside Development Guidelines*.

**Policy VIS-5: Lighting.** The night sky and surrounding land uses shall be protected from excessive and unnecessary light associated with development.

**Policy VIS-6: Design Review.** All permit applications for structures, additions to structures, or signage within the Gaviota Coast Plan Area shall be reviewed and considered for approval by the County Board of Architectural Review unless exempt pursuant to the County Zoning Ordinances. P&D and the Board of Architectural Review shall consider the Gaviota Coast Plan Design Guidelines in approving future development.

**Policy VIS-7: Artificial Berms.** Artificial berms that unnaturally modify slopes so as to be visually evident shall be discouraged.

**Policy VIS-8: Walls and Fencing.** Walls and fencing shall not be visually dominant or disruptive in relation to their surroundings. Highly reflective or bright materials or colors shall not be permitted, and use of natural materials such as unfinished wood allowed to weather shall be encouraged.

**Policy VIS-9: Water Tanks.** Residential water tanks shall be designed to blend in with natural land forms and background colors and textures, and minimize intrusion into the public viewshed.

**Policy VIS-10: Energy Development.** Energy development (e.g., wind, solar, oil and gas, and associated infrastructure) shall demonstrate to the extent feasible consistency with the visual resources policies of the Gaviota Coast Plan.



**Policy VIS-11: Utility Pole Removal.** The community shall encourage Caltrans and the railroad to remove old, unused utility poles from the transportation corridor to enhance the scenic qualities of the coastline.

### **Critical Viewshed Corridor Policies**

These policies supplement the Plan Area-Wide Policies and apply solely within the designated Critical Viewshed Corridor Overlay area.

**Policy VIS-12: Critical Viewshed Corridor.** Protection of the ocean and mountain views of the Gaviota Coast from Highway 101 is critically important. Therefore, a Critical Viewshed Corridor Overlay, providing more protective viewshed policies for development permits within the overlay, is designated for the Gaviota Coast.

**Policy VIS-13: Development Visibility.** Development within the Critical Viewshed Corridor shall be screened to the maximum extent feasible as seen from Highway 101. Screening shall be achieved through adherence to the Site Design Hierarchy and Design Guidelines.

**Policy VIS-14: Landscaping.** Non-agricultural landscaping, when mature, shall not obstruct public mountain or ocean views.

**Policy VIS-15: Ocean Views.** To the maximum extent feasible, development shall be sited and designed to preserve unobstructed broad views of the ocean from Highway 101, and shall be clustered to the maximum extent feasible.

**Policy VIS-16: Building Height.** Building height south of Highway 101 shall not exceed one story or ~~16~~15 feet above existing grade, unless an increase in height would facilitate clustering of development and result in greater view protection, or a height in excess of ~~16~~15 feet would not impact public views to the ocean.

**Policy VIS-17: Unobstructed Broad Views of the Ocean.** For properties within unobstructed broad views of the ocean, development shall be designed so that exposed structural elevations are at an appropriately proportioned mass and scale to the unobstructed broad views of the ocean.

### **c. Visual Resources Implementing Actions**

**Action VIS-1: Design Guidelines.** The County shall work with the community to develop and adopt Gaviota Coast design guidelines, including signage and lighting matters, which may be used by P&D and the Board of Architectural Review in approving future development.

**Action VIS-2: Energy Development.** To respond to the dynamic evolution of energy development, the County shall develop or revise policies as needed to facilitate community needs consistent with protecting visual resources.

**Action VIS-3: State Scenic Highway Designation.** The County shall apply to Caltrans for a scenic highway designation for Highway 101 from the Goleta City boundary to Highway 1.

#### d. Visual Resources Development Standards

**Dev Std VIS-1: Fuel Management Zone Buffers.** Structures shall be sited and designed to minimize the need for vegetation clearance for fuel management zone buffers. Where feasible, necessary roads and driveways shall be incorporated into fuel management zone buffers.

**Dev Std VIS-2: Roadway Alignment and Siting.** When reviewing the alignment and siting of proposed new roads and driveways serving residential development, Planning & Development shall evaluate methods to minimize excessive road/driveway construction and reduce or redesign fuel management zone buffers to minimize the removal of natural vegetation and related visual impacts, while ensuring projects meet the Santa Barbara County Fire Department’s Private Road and Driveway Standards.