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Complexity of the visual impact analysis should fit the size and scope of the project

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When designing a new project or rehabilitating an existing project, what the potential visual impacts of the project will be varies depending on the location of the project. Although the laws in most states indicate that no one is "entitled" to their existing view unless they purchased a view easement, the reality is that most Planning and Zoning Boards require that an applicant acknowledge and address that the existing views of the project and from the surroundings will change. The complexity of review will depend on the location of the project, the sophistication of the opposition, and type of project being proposed.

In the late 1960s to the early 1980s, several federal agencies developed procedures for determining what the visual affect a project might have and how to modify the project to minimize that affect. The National Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management, and the National Park Service all developed models that remain in use today. Each of these models has the same steps. First, identify the view points and view-shed affected by the project. Second, classify the visual resources within the viewshed. Third, rate both the visual resources affected and the potential change to the views. Lastly, identify mitigations to reduce or eliminate the changes to viewshed in accordance to how the impact has been rated. All these agencies identify landscape architects as the qualified professional to complete these visual studies.

Unless your project is a large scale road project (like the relocation of I-95) or regionally required project (like a trash to energy plant and cooling stack), most site specific development projects will require a scaled down version of a full blown visual impact assessment (VIA).

The scaled down version of a VIA is known as, in descending order of complexity, a visual impact analysis, or a viewshed report, or a view study. A visual impact analysis would, typically, address issues related to a residential neighborhood, highway views or a multiple potential sensitive receptors. A sensitive receptor is any location that has the potential for people to stand or be in a car and view the site longer than a few seconds. These include residential neighbors, public properties, parks, pathways and other scenic viewpoints. A report would include photos, sections, and photo simulations from many locations. The documentation for a visual impact analysis can get quite extensive. A viewshed report reduces the documentation required but not necessarily the background work or number of receptors. Lastly, a view study is typically used when there are less than five potential receptors and they are all within close proximity to the proposed project.

Each of these types of visual studies has the first and last steps in common with the federal models. Every analysis of potential visual impacts should locate where views of the property will be affected by the proposed project. This is usually presented in a Viewshed Map. If you are lucky, the project landscape architect will determine that only the adjacent properties will be affected after a site visit and drive around. Your project viewshed is then very limited and you can go on to the next and last

phase - mitigation.

Typically, if your viewshed is limited, most of the potential visual impacts can be addressed by small modifications to the building location and the addition of strategically placed planting. As landscape architects, we always recommend that the potential visual impacts, even on small projects, be considered at the beginning of the project. Small changes to the building configuration and placement are far more effective than relying on just planting and do not necessarily result in reduction in building size or parking.

Once the project has a viewshed beyond the immediate neighbors, a viewshed report or visual impact analysis would be required to address questions regarding the potential visual impacts. For larger projects or ones that have organized opposition, the viewshed report or visual impact analysis must be prepared by a qualified professional who is required to determine the nature and characteristics of both the existing and future views of the project. The professional must provide a judgment regarding the level of potential impact on the viewer. This is very different from simply acknowledging that there will be a change in view. Landscape architects are considered to be the only professional trained in landscape aesthetics and for this reason, landscape architects are usually the only professionals qualified to prepare visual impact analysis or the more complex VIA.

Overall, the complexity of the visual impact analysis should fit the size and scope of the project. As there are various sizes of projects, visual impact reports also vary significantly in complexity from before / after pictures to a VIA looking at a one mile radius. There are acknowledged procedures for each level of review.

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