

XIII. VISUAL RESOURCES

A. INTRODUCTION

The City of Morro Bay is located in a physical setting with spectacular visual qualities. The visual resources of the community serve as valuable assets to both City residents and visitors, and the protection and enhancement of the resources is one of the foremost policies of the Coastal Act of 1976.

Scenic views of unique and varied coastal scenes are important to people both in terms of aesthetics and functional qualities. Aesthetically, viewing an attractive scene can be, for many, a rewarding experience. For other people, scenic views give identity, character and value to their community. Visually attractive areas are good locations for recreational activities and facilities, and moreover, are good sites for ports, commercial activities and residential developments, all of economic importance.

This chapter will address the visual quality concerns of the following areas in the Community and will organize the discussion by planning area:

- (1) Morro Rock
- (2) Morro Bay State Park
- (3) Morro rock City Beach/Atascadero State Beach
- (4) Morro Creek and the adjacent flatlands
- (5) State Highway One
- (6) Embarcadero Area
- (7) Central Morro Bay
- (8) PG&E Power Plant
- (9) Coleman Park
- (10) Residential Neighborhoods
- (11) Undeveloped Land within the City

Additionally, visual concerns relating to the following issues will be addressed:

- (1) Signs and sign regulations
- (2) Landscaping
- (3) Utility Lines
- (4) Property Maintenance

B. COASTAL ACT POLICIES

Since protection and preservation of coastal scenic resources is one of the primary goals of the coastal Act of 1976, several sections specifically address the visual preservation of coastal areas.

Section 30251. "The scenic and visual qualities of coastal areas shall be considered and protected as a resource of public importance. Permitted development shall be sited and

designed to protect views to and along the ocean and scenic coastal areas, and to minimize the alteration of natural land forms, to be visually compatible with the character of surrounding areas, and where feasible, to restore and enhance visual quality in visually degraded areas. New development in highly scenic areas such as those designated in the California Coastline Preservation and Recreation Plan prepared by local government shall be subordinate to the character of its setting."

The Coastal Act also recognizes the pressures exerted on coastal communities insofar as development is concerned. In order to address this issue and at the same time protect and preserve the coastal natural resources, the following policy was included.

Sec. 30253. 1. Assure stability and structural integrity, and neither create or contribute significantly to erosion, geologic instability, or destruction of the site or surrounding area in any way that would require the construction of protective devices that would substantially alter natural land forms along bluffs and cliffs:

2. Where appropriate, protect special communities and neighborhoods which, because of their unique characteristics, are popular visitor destination points for recreational uses."

C. ASSESSMENT OF SCENIC VALUES

In order to implement the policies of the coastal Act regarding visual resources, the City must identify areas providing significant public views such as Morro Bay, Morro Rock, and the Pacific Ocean.

To accomplish this task, it is necessary to define scenic views. For the purpose of this document, a scenic view shall be defined as something that is looked at which has significant man-made or natural qualities and which contributes to the identity of a community or area.

These scenic views can then be further evaluated based upon the following criteria:

- (a) the abundance and variety of forms and textures;
- (b) the richness and range of color;
- (c) the distance and extent of views;
- (d) uniqueness of scenic qualities;
- (e) the availability of street furniture and public facilities;
- (f) the ease of access on foot or by motor vehicle;
- (g) the extent of public information.

Because man-made visual quality and natural visual quality are aesthetically pleasing and desirable in different ways, urban views are evaluated under different criteria than natural views.

The criteria used for assessing views of the urban environment include such things as:

- (a) the enhancement of the City's character through the use of building materials and scale of the structures.

- (b) the compatibility with surrounding structures.
- (c) the compatibility with the natural features of the area (i.e. topography);
- (d) the preservation of public views;
- (e) the enhancement and definition of the City's image;
- (f) the uniqueness of the City's image.

Based upon these criteria, natural open space areas, residential neighborhoods, and commercial zones with significant scenic resources or community character were identified and evaluated. Figures 30 and 31 show the location of scenic views and identify areas of visual significance.

1. Area 1 - North Morro Bay

a. Morro Rock City Beach/Atascadero State Beach: A stretch of sandy beach running from Morro Rock northerly to Cayucos that affords long unobstructed views of the coastline. Landward of the sea, these beaches have a backdrop of shifting sand dunes and shallow sandy bluffs that give the user a sense of privacy and closeness to nature.

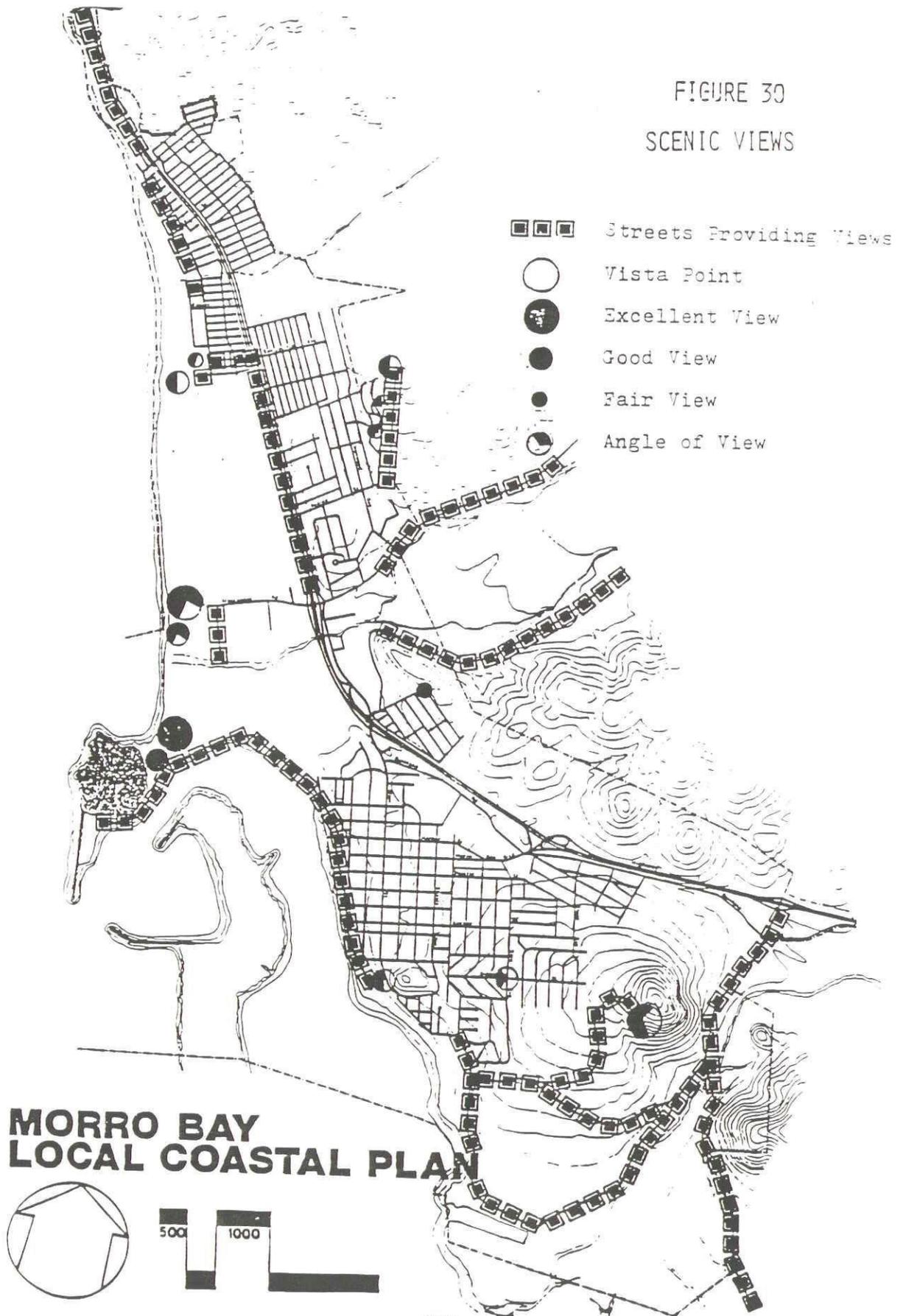
b. Atascadero Beach Tract: A low-lying, single family residential area characterized by its single-level buildings, its proximity to Atascadero State Beach and the open views of the beach from Beachcomber Drive, and the visual corridors afforded by mature groves of Eucalyptus along San Jacinto Street and on the Cloisters parcel.

2. Area 2 - Atascadero Beach

a. Cloisters Parcel: A beach front parcel at the southern end of the Atascadero Beach tract that has been proposed for State acquisition due to its physical and visual access to the beach and its unique grove of Eucalyptus trees.

b. Large Undeveloped Parcel: Located in Morro Bay, seaward of State Highway One, between the Morro Bay High School and the Atascadero Beach Tract, this affords viewers along State Highway One and in the hillside residential areas of northern Morro Bay with a broad vista in the tidelands beach area of shifting pristine sand dunes and marshy lowlands

FIGURE 30
SCENIC VIEWS



3. Area 3 - Del Mar

a. Del Mar Park: A ten acre or more site in the hills of northern Morro Bay that when developed will provide its users with significant views of the sea, Morro Rock, Atascadero Beach, and the dunes between them.

4. Area 4 - Morro Highlands

a. Morro Heights Area: A mixed residential area that is visually appealing primarily because of landscaping and rural character. Mature Monterey pines are interspersed among residences some of which have been designed to take advantage of the trees and serve to frame views and create pleasant settings for homes.

b. Adjacent Hillsides: The backdrop of the community, the hills climbing up from the coastal bench and the agricultural flatlands of the Morro and Chorro Valleys are a significant visual resource. Those portions of hillsides in the City that are already developed provide spectacular views of the sea, bay and rock, as well urban areas to the residents of these areas.

The undeveloped hillsides and ridgelines, left open for grazing, add an important visual dimension to the City. Their color, texture and shape contrast sharply with the urban areas and coastline, serve to give a visual definition to the urban form of the City, and reinforce Morro Bay's image and character as a rural, small scale waterfront community.

5. Area 5 - Morro Rock

a. Morro Rock: The landmark of the community, Morro Rock is the most significant visual feature of the area which can be seen from almost any location in Morro Bay. To those who travel to the base of the rock, they are offered views of the harbor mouth, the sea, the sandspit and the City urban areas.

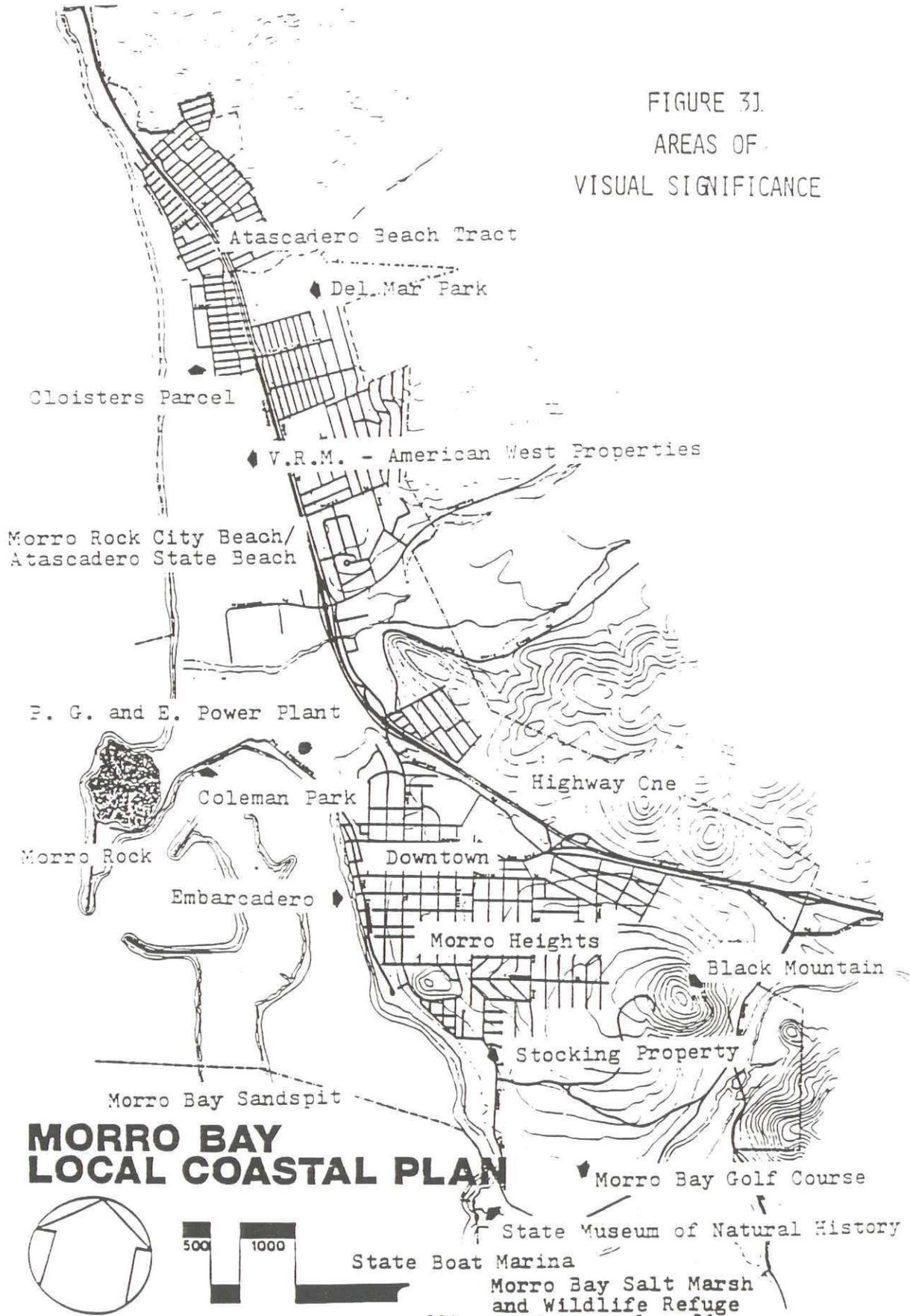
b. PG&E Power Plant: A massive installation that is the dominant man-made form in Morro Bay. While many aspects of the power plant have detracted from the visual character of Morro Bay, the main facility with its three stacks thrusting skyward have been a part of Morro Bay's visual character.

c. Coleman Park: The city park located at the bayfront between Morro Rock and the PG&E power plant that could take better advantage of its potential views of the bay to the south and Morro Rock Beach and Atascadero Beach to the north.

Area 6 - Bayfront:

a. Embarcadero: A heavily developed area along the waterfront of Morro Bay that still provides its users with views of the bay, the sandspit, Morro Rock and a picturesque collection of fishing and recreational boats. Made up of a mixture of visitor serving and harbor related land uses, the Embarcadero is the major tourist attraction of the community.

FIGURE 31.
AREAS OF
VISUAL SIGNIFICANCE



7. Area 7 - Central Morro Bay

a. Highway One: The State Highway traveling north to south while bisecting Morro Bay probably provides more poor views than good ones. Nonetheless, travelers are afforded significant views of Morro Rock, of the open grazing lands flanking the southeastern entrance to the Community, the ridgetops to the east of Morro Bay that help define its urban form, the large vacant area between the road and the sea to the north of the high school, and an immediate view of the sea and coastal bluffs at the northernmost point of the community.

b. Downtown: The Central Business District of Morro Bay is primarily located along Morro Bay Boulevard. This area is composed of small businesses serving both visitors and residents. Views of the bay and Morro Rock are provided from various points within the downtown area.

8. Area 8 - State Park

a. Morro Bay State Park: A resource of both man-made and natural beauty located in the southern part of the community that contributes significantly to the visual quality of Morro Bay. It contains the following scenic features;

(1) Morro Bay Salt Marsh and Wildlife Refuge: an area possessing a variety of wildlife and scenic qualities that provides unique views to users of the Parks.

(2) Black Mountain: the backdrop of Morro Bay State Park which as a road and viewing area, viewers are provided with a full vista of the bay, the sea, and the communities of Morro Bay, Baywood and Los Osos.

(3) Morro Bay Golf Course: a well maintained 18-hole golf course affording views of the bay, sandspit and sea to its users while establishing a forested, rural character or nearby residential areas.

(4) State Museum of Natural History: located on a strategic point overlooking the bay, this facility provides users with views of the bay and sandspit as well as information regarding its natural characteristics and wildlife.

(5) State Boat Marina: a small boat marina with a quaint visual character of its own.

b. Vacant Property: A significant parcel of vacant land on the coastal bluff above the bay immediately north of Morro Bay State Park on Main Street that provides significant views of the bay and sandspit framed by a grove of large Eucalyptus trees. The openness of the parcel also gives neighboring residential areas a view of the bay and the imposing grove of trees that is also the site of Morro Bay's heron rookery. This vacant property is pending development.

9. Area 9 - Harbor and Navigable Ways

a. Harbor: Like the Morro Rock area, the dominant view from the central section of the City is the harbor. It is a major focal point of the City and the primary theme for setting the visual character of the visitor serving area of the community.

10. Area 10 - Sandspit

a. Morro Bay Sandspit: A pristine, windblown spit of sand dunes separating the bay from the sea, the sandspit can be seen from and provides spectacular views to the hillside residential areas in the City.

D. CONFLICTS AND ISSUES

While Morro Bay has been blessed with a physical setting of unique and spectacular visual quality, the community can improve, take better advantage of, and prevent abuses to its visual character.

It is desirable to enhance Morro Bay's views. It is equally desirable that the city consciously seek to take better advantage of its visual qualities while attempting to restore and repair the damage that had been done to those qualities.

1. Property Maintenance:

One issue that has detracted from the visual character of Morro Bay is poor property maintenance. An inordinate number of abandoned buildings are cars, buildings with peeling paint, accumulated debris and junk, substandard housing, unscreened trash containers, and conflicting non-conforming uses have served to tarnish Morro Bay's natural beauty. It has become such a problem that the City has developed a property maintenance code to designate poor property maintenance as a nuisance and violation of the code subject to formal citation and abatement. The problems of poor property maintenance are particularly acute in the neighborhoods of northern Morro Bay and in the Downtown, Quintana, North Main, and Embarcadero Commercial Areas, and their correction is necessary for Morro Bay to restore and enhance its visual character.

2. Signs and Sign Regulations

Signs in Morro Bay have come to be a problem, detracting from the visual quality of the community and in some cases interfering with important views. Among some of the problems associated with signs are:

- (a) Failure to removed old, non-functional or nonconforming signs.
- (b) The allowable height and size of signs are excessing under the existing ordinance.
- (c) The lack of realistic and enforceable timetable for the amortization of nonconforming signs.
- (d) The proliferation of lighted signs that have excessive glare or are offensive to nighttime vision in the community.
- (e) The lack of appropriate design standards that would better guide the size, type, color, location, lighting and materials of construction of signs.

- (f) Failure to consider views when reviewing applications to erect and light signs.

3. Overhead Utility Lines

Throughout Morro Bay's residential neighborhoods and most of its commercial areas, there seems to be a maze of overhead utility lines daring in every direction. While this problem is not unique to Morro Bay, it seems particularly acute in this community, particularly in the northern sections of the City. This web of lines serves to both:

- (a) create a jumbled, blighted appearance for those areas in which it is most predominant;
- (b) interfere with, obstruct, and in some cases render unsightly views that would otherwise be spectacular.

Existing utility lines will continue to plague what is visually pleasant about Morro Bay and detract from property values unless a concerted effort is taken to eliminate this eyesore.

4. Landscaping

With the notable exceptions of the Morro Heights area, isolated tree groves in selected areas of the community and those few locations where a street tree program has been implemented, Morro Bay requires additional landscaping.

Among some of the problems associated with landscaping and the need to provide more landscaping to enhance and/or restore Morro Bay's visual qualities are the following:

- (a) The lack of landscaping along Highway One exposes numerous views that detract from Morro Bay's visual qualities.
- (b) There are no regulations to prevent the removal of existing trees and vegetation that have helped establish a rural character for some of Morro Bay's neighborhoods.
- (c) The City's street tree program has not been progressing and some of the specimens called for by the Master Tree List are inappropriate.
- (d) The lack of water will continue to inhibit any attempts to make significant landscaping improvements in Morro Bay.
- (e) While there are zoning districts that call for special landscaping and architectural treatment in new developments, there are areas critical to the community's visual quality -- i.e. the downtown -- that are not included in these districts.
- (f) The lack of clear regulations and standards for landscaping of buildings and parking lots is inhibiting opportunities to take better advantage of Morro Bay's visual qualities.

(g) Landgrading operations have created unattractive scars and cut faces in hillside areas, and there are no regulations governing the protection of cut slopes with attractive, erosion preventive plant materials. (This can be solved with enforcement of a grading ordinance; see Chapter X - Hazards).

(h) Morro Bay has relied upon the County to develop a Scenic Highways Element that it could adopt by reference, but as yet neither the city nor County have a Scenic Highways Element.

5. Hillside Development and Grading Practices

Some hillside areas within the community have not been developed with regard for the natural topography. Existing subdivisions reflect design criteria more suitable for flat land areas. Some past grading practices also did not take into account the natural topography of the terrain, leading to erosion and scarring of the hillsides.

Some of the problems associated with these subdivisions have been:

(a) Existing development has not followed the natural contours of the hillsides, detracting from the visual qualities this scenic backdrop can provide;

(b) Streets in these portions of the community traverse directly up the hillside, often at ninety degrees to the natural contour.

(c) Ridgelines that help define the eastern edge of the community are not protected from development that would lessen the visual quality of the hillside areas.

(d) Grading practices are not required to reflect as much as possible the natural contours resulting in substantial and unnecessary alteration of the landscape.

For further discussion of hillside concerns see Chapter X, Hazards.

6. Protection of Neighborhood Character

One of the priorities of the Coastal Act is the protection of the character of the community and its neighborhoods. Morro Bay recognizes the need to preserve the unique character of its varied neighborhoods and to create a higher quality visual environment within them. Among some of the issues that predicate the establishment of policy to preserve neighborhood character are the following:

(a) New residences and new residential additions are often out of scale and character with other residences in the vicinity.

(b) The current allowable height and bulk for residential development is not appropriate for some portions of the community. Such buildings would in many cases block important views and conflict with the character of individual neighborhoods.

(c) Standards of guidelines are needed to create buffers between conflicting land uses;

- (d) There is a need for balancing formula governing the allowable height and bulk of residential and commercial buildings.

There are three neighborhoods which require consideration for neighborhood character protection. These are the Embarcadero, the Downtown and Atascadero Beach Tract (Planning Area 1). It should be noted that protection of community character does not mean protection of or continuation of dilapidated buildings, no community improvements or no progress. It means that the enjoyable qualities of the area should be preserved as much as possible.

a. Embarcadero

Development of waterfront areas along the Embarcadero, as well as along the bluff above the waterfront is an integral part of the views of the bay and Morro Rock and the views from this area should be enhanced.

The Embarcadero is a random mix of tourist and harbor-related uses that creates certain circulation problems, both vehicular and pedestrian. The random mix does, however, give the area a charm and honesty not found in pre-planned area. The honesty and individualist appearance should be encourage, mindful of a desire for harmony (rather than homogeneity) and its waterfront/bay orientation. Visual problems present on the Embarcadero include:

- (1) A lack of landscaping to soften and screen the less pleasing visual impacts of the existing developments;
- (2) An additional need for public improvements, specifically the paving of parking lots, upgrading restroom facilities and park improvements;
- (3) A need to establish standards for signs;
- (4) A need to screen rubbish and storage areas;
- (5) A need for underground utility lines on the Embarcadero and along the Bluff;
- (6) A need for an effective clean-up and maintenance program.

Circulation problems on the Embarcadero include:

- (1) A need to widen sidewalks;
- (2) A need to locate long-term parking for sports fishing activities where such use will not create parking congestion.

b. Downtown

The Downtown business center presents an uninteresting visual appearance to the public. A poor mixture of architectural styles have served to visually frame this district and sever its connection with the Embarcadero. Other visual concerns facing the downtown are:

- (1) A lack of continuity in colors and building materials which lessens visual quality and denies the area character; it also does not emphasize unification and common business goals of the downtown area;
- (2) Landscaping is lacking, especially when needed to screen parking areas that lessen scenic qualities;
- (3) Overhead utility lines are an eyesore and should be undergrounded;
- (4) A lack of design continuity in signs also lessens visual qualities and character.

c. Atascadero Beach Tract

This ocean front neighborhood is visually well defined, consisting mostly of single story residences. Problems facing the protection of this neighborhood's visual qualities are:

- (1) Existing zoning would allow new residences with height not in keeping with neighborhood characteristics;
- (2) Existing Eucalyptus groves add a visual quality to the neighborhood but can be a problem species;
- (3) Development on adjacent vacant property may impact the visual characteristics of the Atascadero Beach Tract.

E. VISUAL RESOURCES POLICIES

Policy 12.01 The scenic and visual qualities of coastal areas shall be considered and protected as a resource of public importance. Permitted development shall be sited and designed to protect views to and along the ocean and scenic and coastal areas, to minimize the alteration of natural land forms, to be visually compatible with the character of surrounding areas, and where feasible, to restore and enhance visual quality in visually degraded areas. New development in highly scenic areas such as those designated on Figure 31, shall be subordinate to the character of its setting.

Policy 12.02 Permitted development shall be sited and designed to protect views to and along the coast and designated scenic areas and shall be visually compatible with the surrounding areas. Specific design criteria shall be established for the following areas:

- a. The Embarcadero (as defined in Policy 2.03)
- b. Downtown commercial area.

The criteria shall include the following specific requirements and shall be applied to proposed projects on a case-by-case basis during architectural review:

- a. Building height/bulk relationship compatible with existing surrounding uses;
- b. Landscaping to restore and enhance visually degraded areas using native and drought resistant plant and tree species;
- c. Preservation and enhancement of views of the ocean, bay, sandspit and Morro Rock;
- d. Any other requirements applicable from Coastal Commission conceptual approval of the Urban Waterfront Restoration Plan.

Policy 12.02A The City shall develop special design criteria for the development of the Coleman Drive planning area to include the following:

- (1) Development of the landward portion of the area shall be limited to only low profile structures necessary to support development of commercial fishing facilities. Structures shall be sited to protect existing views available to Morro Rock and to and along the ocean and structures shall be subordinate to the character of the setting.
- (2) New development shall not encroach within the setback areas of the sensitive habitat located on Morro Rock.

Policy 12.02B The City shall require a detailed development plan for Mixed Use Area G consistent with Policy 0.6. Any development shall be subordinate to the unique and sensitive visual character of the area. Design methodology shall include areas of clustered development, varying building heights, roof lines and setbacks, visible common open space areas and landscaping controls which ensure that full grown tree species are selected for heights which do not obscure views. The development plan shall preserve to the maximum extent feasible traditional public visual access from Highway One of the dunes, Morro Rock, and the open ocean and coastal headlands to the north. The plan shall at a minimum include the following visual resource design standards:

1) The public view corridor from Highway One is established as defined in Figure 32. As a condition of future development approval, a long term scenic conservation easement agreement shall be entered between the property owners and the City covering the area within the designated public view corridor. Such a scenic conservation easement covering the north bound view corridor shall be dedicated prior to the second final map recording, unless the entire property is included in one map, in which case, a scenic conservation easement covering the entire view corridor (north and south) shall be dedicated with that map.

Within the view corridor the following development limitations shall apply and these shall be reflected in the scenic conservation easement:

- a. no structure shall exceed four (4) feet in height above grade pursuant to Morro Bay Municipal Code Section 17.12.310 (B) and as hereafter amended except for small public restrooms,
- b. landscape screening shall not exceed eight (8) feet in height, or block more than 10% of the viewshed from Highway One,
- c. only open space, lateral access, parking areas, golf, passive recreational uses and mariculture activities shall be allowed in the public view corridor.

Policy 12.02C Consistent with Policy 6.05, a specific development plan shall be required if and when supplemental uses are found to be consistent with the agricultural policies contained in the LUP and the Coastal Act. visual resources for the specific plan shall include:

1. Development shall be sited in clusters on the most level portions of the site adjacent to Highway One. Development shall be compactly clustered onto the portions of the site that have stable slopes of 5 to 15% and shall not cover more than 2% of the gross acreage of the property both within and outside the City.
2. Prior to the siting of new structures, a detailed geotechnical report shall be prepared in accordance with Policy 9.04. The report shall define which portions of the site are less suitable for new development due to geologic constraints.

3. Portions of the site outside of the approved development area shall be retained in open space or agricultural use to preserve the visual and rural character of the area.
4. Structure heights shall not exceed 18 feet above the average finished grade of each site pad except that structures designed and approved for visitor-serving lodging may be two stories not to exceed 25 feet in height, above existing grade.
5. The visual impact of any development on views from Highway One shall be minimized to the maximum extent feasible through the utilization of native plant species indigenous to the area.

Policy 12.03 Development between State Highway One and the ocean in Planning Areas 1, 2 and 5 shall provide view corridors as defined in Policy 12.02B and by Figure 32 so as not to significantly block views of travelers on the Highway. New development shall be subordinate to the character of its setting and shall be visually compatible with the surrounding areas.

Policy 12.04 The City will pursue enforcement of the Property Maintenance code in order to continue improving the visual characteristics of Morro Bay. Also, the City shall identify and work towards the removal or require the mitigation of the effects of those nonconforming uses that cause visual blight or otherwise demean the character of residential neighborhoods and commercial districts.

Policy 12.05 The City shall, as part of the implementation phase of the LCP, adopt new provisions to:

- a. Require monument and surface mounted signs and discourage roof mounted and pole signs;
- b. Require that view protection and the nighttime characteristics of the sign be mandatory considerations of any sign installation;
- c. Prohibit billboards;
- d. Reduce allowable height and size where they interfere with views to and along State Highway One.
- e. Develop and adopt sign criteria for signs appropriate for Morro Bay's commercial districts.

Policy 12.06 New development in areas designated on Figure 31 as having visual significance shall include as appropriate the following:

- a. Height/bulk relationships compatible with the character of surrounding areas or compatible with neighborhoods or special communities which, because of their unique characteristics, are popular visit destination points for recreation uses.

- b. Designation of land for parks and open space in new developments which because of their location are popular visitor destination points for recreation uses.
- c. View easements or corridors designed to protect views to and along the ocean and scenic and coastal areas.

Policy 12.07 The City shall establish a policy for undergrounding of utilities in connection with new development or major redevelopments. In the event that funding becomes available for the undergrounding of existing utility lines not in connection with new development or major redevelopment, priority shall be given to the undergrounding of lines in the Embarcadero and Downtown areas and entrances to the City.

Policy 12.08 Morro Bay shall request the division of Highways to develop a plan and program for landscaping the entire length of State Highway One as it traverses through the community that would:

- a. Frame and protect important views;
- b. Screen unattractive views;
- c. Accentuate entrances to the City.

Policy 12.09 Morro Bay will modify its ordinances so as to:

- a. Develop clearer requirements, standards, and criteria for installation of landscaping and retention of existing specimen trees as part of new developments, parking lots, etc.
- b. Prohibit land grading that will create large cut faces, and where minor alteration is necessary, require plantings and appropriate maintenance to conceal and prevent erosion of cut faces.

Policy 12.10 Morro Bay will request that the County and State consider designating State Highway 41 east of the City, State Highway One, South Bay Boulevard, and Main Street in the Morro Bay State Park area as scenic highways when completing the County and City Scenic Highway Elements.

Policy 12.11 Industrial development shall be sited and designed in areas specifically designated in the Land Use Plan to protect views to and along the ocean and scenic coastal areas, to minimize land alteration, to be visually compatible with the character of the surrounding areas, and where feasible, shall include measures to restore and enhance visually degraded areas. In addition, industrial development shall be subordinate to the character of its setting.