

PART 2, CHAPTER 5

AESTHETIC EFFECTS

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PART 2, CHAPTER 5

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5.1 OVERVIEW

5.1.1 Purpose

Pursuant to **23 United States Code (U.S.C.) § 327** and the implementing Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) executed on May 26, 2022, the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) has assumed and Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) has assigned its responsibilities under the **National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)** for highway projects on the State Highway System (SHS) and Local Agency Program (LAP) projects off the SHS (**NEPA** Assignment). In general, FDOT's assumption includes all highway projects in Florida which source of federal funding comes from FHWA or which constitute a federal action through FHWA. **NEPA** Assignment includes responsibility for environmental review, interagency consultation and other activities pertaining to the review or approval of **NEPA** actions. Consistent with law and the MOU, FDOT will be the Lead Federal Agency for highway projects with approval authority resting in the Office of Environmental Management (OEM).

Transportation actions can affect communities and influence aesthetic qualities. The FDOT [Landscape, Policy No. 000-650-011](#) was created to conserve, protect, and enhance Florida's natural resources and scenic beauty when planning, constructing, and maintaining the State Transportation System. FDOT considers Aesthetic Effects (AE) during project development because it influences community cohesion, community values, and can affect the travel experience. As such, FDOT identifies practical and feasible opportunities to improve project aesthetics during project delivery.

This chapter contains FDOT's procedures for evaluating AE during project delivery. The chapter also includes special considerations for outdoor advertising (ODA) and scenic highways. AE can be either positive or negative and should be evaluated based on the existing and proposed context of the project area. The aesthetic qualities of a community or area are defined by a combination of visual resources and other qualities that define the character of that community. The evaluation of AE should address the community's aesthetic ideals while producing an affordable, biddable, constructible, and maintainable design.

The AE process assesses the existing aesthetic context of the project area, evaluates a proposed project's aesthetic effects, and determines the most appropriate opportunities for enhancement within the project area by:

1. Developing transportation facilities that are compatible with the surrounding natural and/or man-made environment;
2. Balancing transportation design concepts with the community vision;

3. Selecting appropriate design approaches, materials, forms, styles, scale, color, pattern and texture; and
4. Accommodating existing and proposed landscapes.

5.2 PROCEDURE

The evaluation of AE begins in the Planning phase with data collected as part of the Efficient Transportation Decision Making (ETDM) process. The evaluation continues through the Project Development & Environment (PD&E) process and into the Design and Construction phases ([Figure 5-1](#)).

An AE evaluation for a proposed transportation project should meet the following objectives:

1. Identify current aesthetic resources (e.g., Florida Scenic Highways, other special roadway designations, existing forested areas, wildflower areas, trees, landscape, community features, stormwater ponds and drainage features, bridge structures and other architectural features);
2. Analyze and categorize the aesthetic resources that could be affected;
3. Assess the value of the aesthetic resources to the community or study area;
4. Assess potential impacts; and,
5. Identify potential avoidance, minimization, mitigation and enhancement measures.

The typical considerations that should be weighed as part of an AE evaluation are summarized in [Table 5-1](#).

Table 5-1 Typical Aesthetic Effects Considerations

CHARACTER	Used to understand the aesthetic resources unique to the studied community and its environment(s). Each of the following may be identified and described before any value and/or impact assessments begin: adjoining architectural styles; adjoining land uses; available transportation modes; corridor width and alignment; context classification; level of (historical) maintenance; lighting; common materials; visual rhythms, patterns, forms, lines, colors and textures; vegetation; and vehicle speed; sounds; odors; and vibrations.
COMPATIBILITY	These base considerations may be evaluated in the land use context proposed: access; community cohesiveness; existing design characteristics; planned growth and land use patterns; sense of ownership /public boundaries; traffic patterns/congestion; design compatibility with community setting; and color and materials coordination (with evident patterns).
COMMUNITY VALUES	To utilize in understanding how the transportation project can contribute to public perceptions, and will inform the determination of the intensity of potential AE impact. May include the following: community goals; cultural significance; gateways and focal points; local plan consistency; open space; quality of life; safety; and special community designations.

SENSITIVE AREAS	Many of these contribute subtly to a community's identity and may need to be considered in the broader Community Values context (level of sensitivity to each): areas of recognized beauty; bicycle routes; commercial centers; historic or other culturally-important resources; parks and recreation areas; pedestrian facilities; public facilities (hospitals, colleges, universities); public parking areas (and access to them); residential areas; specific historic or cultural features; transit facilities; and specially designated water bodies.
VISUAL FEATURES	These are usually rated as very important and highly valuable by communities. They should be considered in the context of potential for both short- and long-term impacts of the project. They may include: scenic spaces (views and vistas); tree cover; natural shade/shadow patterns; vegetation and screening; water bodies; light features and evident lighting levels; other natural green spaces; recognized safety features; visual clutter (if present); and, simplicity and attractiveness of signage.

5.2.1 Efficient Transportation Decision Making Screening Evaluations

Projects qualifying for screening through the ETDM process receive early consideration of AE during the sociocultural effects (SCE) evaluation ([Part 2, Chapter 4, Sociocultural Effects Evaluation](#)). Additional information regarding SCE evaluations can be found on FDOT's [SCE Evaluation Process Website](#). The results of the SCE evaluations conducted during the ETDM Planning and Programming Screens provide descriptions of the existing visual resources, experiences and features that could be affected (both positively or negatively) by the proposed transportation project, including forested areas, wildflower areas, trees, landscaping and other aesthetic features. The evaluation should include input provided by the public, local planning organizations, and the Environmental Technical Advisory Team (ETAT). The AE evaluation builds upon information gathered during the SCE evaluation, and is used to determine the level of effort necessary to adequately address aesthetic issues during the PD&E Study. The level of effort and expertise required are dependent upon the context, complexity and scope of the project and its potential for effects.

Generally, evaluating AE during ETDM includes describing the following information in the Preliminary Environmental Discussion (PED):

1. Planning Screen Evaluation – When conducted, identification of existing visual resources and features that could be affected or improved by the proposed transportation project, including forested areas, wildflower areas, trees, landscaping, scenic views, and other aesthetic features and the identification of issues related to aesthetics.
2. Programming Screen Evaluation - provide commentary about effects, summarize scoping recommendations, and identify public concerns to further understand the extent of potential aesthetic impacts and to determine methods for further evaluation during the PD&E phase.

5.2.2 Project Development & Environment

The AE evaluation during the PD&E phase builds upon previous planning and programming screening information by filling information gaps, analyzing issues of

concern identified in ETDM, gathering public or community input, and completing the appropriate level of analysis.

5.2.2.1 Aesthetics Effects Evaluation

The AE evaluation should be tailored to the context, scope, complexity and public comments associated with the project. The District may use the ***Guidelines for the Visual Impact Assessment for Highway Projects*** for methods for determining the level of AE evaluation. The typical AE considerations presented in [Table 5-1](#) should be considered during each step of the AE evaluation. If the District determines the evaluation completed during ETDM screening efforts is sufficient to address aesthetic issues, then effects should be summarized in the Environmental Document and include evaluation in the project file within the StateWide Environmental Project Tracker (SWEPT). These steps are not necessarily followed in this order, and may also be combined.

PD&E projects that require AE evaluation should follow the steps below.

Step 1: Describe Existing Conditions - The study area is determined by the District and will vary depending on the project context, resources involved, visual effects, and potential project impacts. Once the study area has been defined, the District will describe the existing aesthetic characteristics, such as existing forested areas, wildflower areas, trees, special highway designations and landscape.

This step may include using AE information available on the Environmental Screening Tool (EST) Area of Interest (AOI) tool, the SHS Video log, aerial photography, Roadway Characteristics Inventory (RCI), and other online tools. The analysis should include field reviews to verify data collected during the desktop review.

Step 2: Evaluate Effects - This evaluation should identify the effects a project may have on the visual resources and qualitative physical characteristics of a study area.

Using the typical AE considerations in [Table 5-1](#), assess the positive and negative effects of the project on the study area's aesthetic resources. The interrelationship of effects varies with the type of transportation action and the affected community. The District should coordinate with appropriate program specialists (e.g., cultural resources, landscape architecture, scenic highways, water quality, noise, air quality) to determine how the project affects these areas from an aesthetic perspective. The District should describe the effects providing sufficient information to determine their magnitude. If there are multiple alternatives, provide sufficient information to differentiate between them (including the no-build alternative) when possible.

Step 3: Determine Impacts - Based on knowledge of the affected area and the impact analysis, the District must determine if the perceived AE is significant. Significance of the impact will vary with the setting of the proposed action and the surrounding area. To determine significance, the severity of the aesthetic impact should be examined in terms of the type, quality and sensitivity of the aesthetic resource involved; the location of the proposed project; the duration of the impact (short or long term); and the community's

value of the aesthetic resource. The determination of impacts is documented in the Environmental Document.

Step 4: Recommend Measures to Resolve AE Issues - As a project moves through the PD&E process and AE are identified, the District considers potential solutions to address effects or enhance the aesthetics of the proposed transportation project. In keeping with FDOT's [Complete Streets, Policy No. 000-625-017](#); consideration of solutions that would make the project fit the needs of the community may be warranted. The District should consider both standard and unique aesthetic enhancements based on community input. The District should coordinate with other District offices to determine if a potential solution is feasible. There may be engineering, financial and maintenance reasons that make a potential solution not feasible.

Methods for resolving negative aesthetic effects associated with a transportation project can include: **avoidance, minimization, mitigation, and enhancement measures**, for example, the preservation of existing forested areas, wildflower areas, or relocation of trees, landscape and other aesthetic features. Measures should consider short-term effects (during construction), and long-term effects as appropriate. The District considers the effects of these measures on the community and determines whether the approach supports the project's purpose and need. The public is given the opportunity to provide input on measures to avoid, minimize or mitigate adverse AE, or measures to enhance aesthetics through the public involvement process ([Part 1, Chapter 11, Public Involvement](#)).

Application of aesthetic enhancements that are to be considered on structural elements, such as bridges and noise or retaining walls, should reflect documented community desires. Possible options for a project should be identified, and evaluated for safety, constructability, maintainability and costs. Project enhancements may need to be funded and maintained by local government agencies.

Aesthetic features should avoid conflicts with permitted ODA.

5.2.2.2 Commitments

Prior to finalizing any aesthetic commitments, the District must coordinate with the District Design, Construction, Maintenance and other offices as appropriate, to ensure that FDOT standards are considered and that proposed commitments are feasible. Some aesthetic enhancements may require a local agreement before such commitments can be made. AE commitments are documented and tracked according to [Part 2, Chapter 22, Commitments](#) and [Procedure No. 650-000-003, Project Commitment Tracking](#).

5.2.2.3 Documentation

The AE evaluation findings are documented in the appropriate Environmental Document as described below:

1. **Type 2 Categorical Exclusions (CE)** - The AE evaluation should be a brief summary documented in the ***Type 2 Categorical Exclusion Determination Form***. In some cases the summary can serve as the AE evaluation depending on the projects involvement with AE. The AE summary should present the impact analysis and recommend avoidance, minimization, mitigation, and enhancement measures. Additional supporting information should be included in the SWEPT project file, if applicable. It is recommended that these documents be placed within the Aesthetic Effects folder in SWEPT.
2. **Environmental Assessments (EA) and Environmental Impact Statements (EIS)** - The AE evaluation is summarized in the AE section of the EA or EIS. The AE summary should present the impact analysis and recommend avoidance, minimization, mitigation, and enhancement measures.
3. **State Environmental Impact Report (SEIR)** - The results of the AE evaluation are included in the SEIR. The AE summary should present the impact analysis and recommend avoidance, minimization, mitigation, and enhancement measures.

5.2.2.4 Re-evaluation

If major design changes have taken place since approval of the Environmental Document, the Re-evaluation must assess changes to AE per [Part 1, Chapter 13, Re-evaluations](#). Changes in AE will need to be documented and may need to be coordinated with other internal offices and the community.

5.2.3 Outdoor Advertising

ODA regulations are found in **Chapter 479, Florida Statutes (F.S.)**, and in **Chapter 14-10, Florida Administrative Code (F.A.C.)**. When there are existing permitted ODA signs and when there is a potential to impact the location of ODA signs or their view zones, the District must review the ODA permit status, and the (ODA) view zones, as early as possible during project development. The District should coordinate with FDOT's Outdoor Advertising Office (OAO), as appropriate, as issues with the anticipated blocking of the view of or impacts to ODA signs are identified. Consideration of the view of or impacts to ODA signs being affected by the proposed project should be carried throughout project delivery as summarized below:

1. **ETDM Screenings** – During the screening process, current permitted sign locations can be identified utilizing the EST or the OAO website and confirmed by contacting the OAO as needed. The District should begin to consider how the view or disposition of the permitted sign could be affected by the proposed project. Consider for example, whether a sign is conforming or non-conforming (coordinate with OAO). Also note if any community preferences have been identified regarding the role of ODA in the proposed project.

2. **PD&E** – Identify or confirm the presence of existing signs and their permit status. Determine how each sign and/or its view zone is affected by the proposed project. Continue coordination with OAO, and the District Right of Way (ROW) Office as appropriate.
3. **Re-evaluation**– The District should initiate or continue coordination with OAO to identify or confirm existing signs and their permit status along with the status of any plans for proposed signs. The District should also update any pertinent signage related commitments as appropriate and advise the PD&E staff of any changes. Review design plans and consider view zones (see [FDOT Design Manual, Part 1 Chapter 127, Topic No. 625-000-002](#)).

5.2.4 Florida Scenic Highways and Other Specially Designated Highways

There are four types of specially designated highways: local, state, national and legislative. Each designation may have different levels of protection, preservation, and public involvement.

The intent of the Florida Scenic Highways Program (FSHP) is to protect and to promote awareness of community resources that are valued by Florida’s residents and tourists. These can include scenic, natural, historic, cultural, recreational and archaeological resources in accordance with the [Florida Scenic Highways Program Guidance; July 2016](#) and FDOT [Procedure No. 650-050-005, Florida Scenic Highways Program](#).

The AE evaluation of potential project impacts to Florida Scenic Highways includes identification of intrinsic qualities or resources that are present on the project corridor and a determination of how a proposed project will potentially affect these resources. This evaluation also considers community preferred opportunities to conserve or enhance scenic highway qualities.

The District should, when practical and feasible, identify opportunities to avoid, minimize, or mitigate impacts to the documented resources on scenic highways. Accommodation of scenic resources on a designated highway within the limits of a project may require the application of flexibility in highway design through use of appropriate Design Exceptions and Design Variations. Each Florida Scenic Highway is associated with a Byway Organization and a Byway Management Plan (BMP). The concept of Context Sensitive Solutions (CSS) allows for collaboration with the Byway Organization and other corridor stakeholders and should be considered during the development of projects.

Consideration of designated scenic highways affected by the proposed project should be carried throughout project delivery as summarized below:

1. **ETDM Screenings** – Contact the District Scenic Highways Coordinator (DSHC) for identification of designated Florida Scenic Highways. The District should also review the [FDOT Legislatively Designated Scenic & Historic Highways Report](#)

which identifies many of the scenic and historic highways and provides limitations on altering these highways. Use guidance in [Part 2, Chapter 8, Archaeological and Historical Resources](#) to evaluate historic highways designated by special legislation. The presence of locally designated scenic or historic highways should be coordinated with the local authorities.

2. **PD&E Evaluation** – The District should confirm results from the ETDM screenings to determine whether the proposed project would impact these resources. Additionally, the District, in coordination with the DSHC should become familiar with the regulations and BMP for a designated scenic or historic highway. Based on a review of scenic or historic highway legislation, the District will be able to coordinate with the District Scenic Highways Coordinator and District Environmental Manager to evaluate the regulations and potential impact of the project on the designated corridor.

Review the project setting to determine which scenic highway intrinsic qualities exist and analyze project data to determine potential impacts. The scenic highway evaluation should include an assessment of potential opportunities for FDOT to help fulfill goals identified in the BMP or partner on resource related issues. The evaluation should also recognize the relationship between existing intrinsic qualities on the scenic highway and community goals and objectives for the corridor as expressed in the BMP. The AE section of the Environmental Document should discuss whether the project has the potential to affect the scenic or historic highway.

If the project impacts the resources of a scenic highway, the byway organization and the public can provide additional input to identify ways to avoid, minimize or mitigate adverse impacts or identify aesthetic enhancements during the public involvement process ([Part 1, Chapter 11, Public Involvement](#)). The Byway Organization's vision, goals and objectives as outlined in the BMP may be considered to collaboratively identify, preserve, maintain, or enhance the intrinsic qualities or resources while maintaining safety and mobility. Commitments are documented and tracked in accordance with [Part 2, Chapter 22, Commitments](#) and [Procedure No. 650-000-003, Project Commitment Tracking](#).

3. **Re-evaluation** – The District should work with the DSHC or District Environmental Manager to reconfirm/identify the presence of designated Florida Scenic Highways or other specially designated highways within the project boundaries. For Florida Scenic Highways, continue coordination with the Byway Organization through the DSHC providing updates on project status and AE commitments.

5.3 REFERENCES

- American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO) Highway Subcommittee on Design Task Force for Environmental Design. June 1991. A Guide for Transportation Landscape and Environmental Design
- FDOT. FDOT Design Manual, Topic No. 625-000-002
- FDOT. Construction Project Administration Manual, Topic No. 700-000-000
- FDOT. Project Commitment Tracking, Topic No. 650-000-003
- FDOT. Complete Streets, Topic No. 000-625-017
- FDOT. Landscape Policy No. 000-650-011
- FDOT. Florida Scenic Highways Program Guidance, July 2016.
<https://floridascenichighways.com/>
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- FHWA. May 1999. Procedures for Considering Environmental Impacts, Order 5610.4, Docket No. EP-1, Notice 5
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5.4 HISTORY

2/15/1999, 11/14/2012, 9/30/2014, 8/7/2015, 6/14/2017: NEPA Assignment and re-numbered from Part 2, Chapter 15, 1/14/2019, 7/1/2020

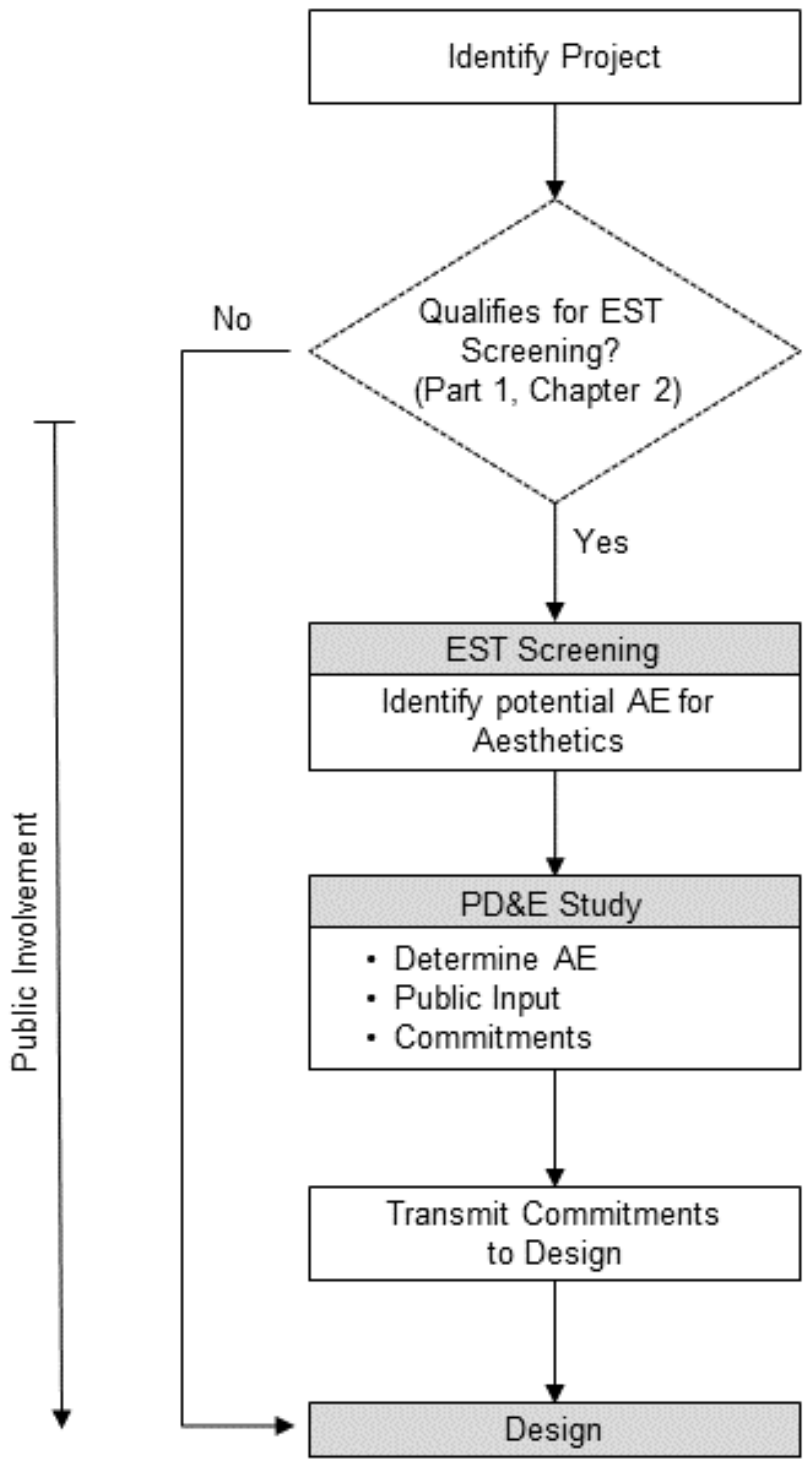


Figure 5-1 Aesthetic Effects Process Flow Chart