# 4.13 VISUAL RESOURCES

This section provides an analysis of the potential impacts of the project on aesthetic and visual resources within the community and is based primarily on review of local ordinances and policies related to visual resources. Visual simulations are presented in this section to demonstrate the likely affect of the project on the visual setting from key vantage points.

## 4.13.1 ENVIRONMENTAL SETTING

### SITE SETTING

Topography within and around the project site is relatively flat. The site gently slopes to the west and ranges from 185 to 190 feet above mean sea level (msl). The site is currently undeveloped except for an irrigation water well and high-voltage power line structure. The western one-third of the site consists of an almond orchard, and the eastern two-thirds consist of agricultural fields. The northern, southern, and part of the northeastern boundary of the fields contain irrigation ditches. Overhead power lines run north to south through the eastern portion of the site, continuing to the north and south off-site. The site is bordered by roads on three sides: Childs Avenue on the north, Gerard Avenue on the south, and Tower Road on the east. Kibby Road extends north from Childs Avenue at the point where the site transitions from fields in the east to orchard in the west.

Another orchard lies west of the site, as does a Merced Irrigation District canal. The future Campus Parkway will be located approximately 925 feet to the west of the project site, at the west edge of this orchard. A new residential development is located on the northwest corner of the future Campus Parkway and Gerard Avenue. Sweeping vistas exist that provide views across and beyond the open fields that compose the eastern two-thirds of the site, from any point on this section of the site and from any nearby point to the east, north, or south. Residences on large lots to the south and east have views of the site. Agricultural lands also exist to the south and east. To the north lie undeveloped lands and industrial lands, including warehousing operations directly across Childs Avenue from the project site. Nearby industrial uses include Central Valley Processing, McClain Pacific (a grocery distribution operation), and an electric substation.

### VIEWS OF PROJECT SITE AND SURROUNDING LAND USES

Exhibits 4.13-1 through 4.13-6 show varying views of the site as it currently exists.

**View West from Childs/Tower** **Exhibit 4.13-1**

Exhibit 4.13-1 shows a view westward into the site from the area near the corner of Childs Avenue and Tower Road. In the foreground are the overhead power lines that run north-south through the site. On the right in the background is the Central Valley Processing facility, which lies across Childs Avenue to the north. In the left background is the orchard that composes the western one-third of the site.


**View of Site from Tower/Gerard** **Exhibit 4.13-2**

Exhibit 4.13-2 shows a view of the site looking northwest from the corner of Tower Road and Gerard Avenue. The open fields of the site are in the foreground. In the left background is the orchard that composes the western one-third of the site, and in the right background are some of the industrial facilities north of the site.

**View of Orchard on Site** **Exhibit 4.13-3**

Exhibit 4.13-3 shows a view of the orchard in the western portion of the site as it looks from both Childs Avenue to the north and from Gerard Avenue to the south.

**View North through the Site** **Exhibit 4.13-4**

Exhibit 4.13-4 looks north through the site from Gerard Avenue. This view follows one of the ditches on site. The industrial facilities north of the site are in the background.

**View Southwest from Childs/Tower** **Exhibit 4.13-5**

Exhibit 4.13-5 shows a view looking southwest through the site from the corner of Childs Road and Tower Road. In the foreground are the open fields of the eastern portions of the site. In the right background is the orchard that composes the western portion of the site. In the left background are trees on the residential and agricultural parcels south of the site.

**View West along Gerard** **Exhibit 4.13-6**

Exhibit 4.13-6 looks west along the south edge of the site. This view follows Gerard Avenue, from a point west of the overhead power lines. The open fields of the eastern portions of the site are to the right. The orchards of the western portion of the site are in the right background. The existing well structure lies at the leftward end of the orchard in the background. On the left in both the background and foreground are the agricultural parcels to the south.

## 4.13.2 REGULATORY SETTING

### FEDERAL PLANS, POLICIES, REGULATIONS, AND LAWS

There are no federal plans, policies, regulations, or laws related to land uses that are applicable to the proposed project.

### STATE PLANS, POLICIES, REGULATIONS, AND LAWS

There are no state plans, policies, regulations, or laws related to land uses that are applicable to the proposed project.

### LOCAL PLANS, POLICIES, REGULATIONS, AND ORDINANCES

#### Merced Vision 2015 General Plan

The City of Merced's (City's) *Merced Vision 2015 General Plan* (City General Plan) (City of Merced 1997) includes the following goals and policies for industrial development and/or development in general that are relevant to the visual resources issues covered in this environmental impact report (EIR). The following provide design guidance for the appearance and layout of sites and structures within the City.

### GOALS

- **GOAL AREA UD-2:** Overall Community Appearance
  - A Unique Community Image

- Attractive Neighborhoods and Districts

► **GOAL AREA OS-1:** Open Space for the Preservation of Natural Resources

- Preservation of Scenic Corridors and Resources

## POLICIES

**L-2.5**. Maintain attractive industrial areas.

2.5.a Continue to require Site Plan Review of new industrial development and the application of standards regarding landscaping, appearance, circulation, access, and parking.

2.5.b Consider requiring the planting of parking lot trees in industrial areas, perhaps at reduced standard instead of the one tree for each six parking spaces required in other areas, to provide shade, reduce glare, and reduce reflective heat.

2.5.c Require the removal or screening of all rubbish, abandoned buildings, processing wastes, old equipment, or other forms of blight in industrial areas.

2.5.d Investigate the possibility of regulating industrial development on the basis of or in combination with performance standards instead of strictly by definition of specific uses as in the Zoning Ordinance.

**UD-2.2** Maintain and enhance the unique community appearance of Merced.

2.2.b Encourage the design of buildings that are in scale with adjacent development and harmonize with the character of the area or neighborhood.

2.2.c Discourage the visual monotony along major streets created by designs which use uninterrupted walls or fences with little or no landscaping.

2.2.d Encourage the development of methods to require acceptable levels of landscaping for new development and for effective maintenance in highly visible areas of the community.

2.2.f Expand the city's policies which require architecturally suitable means of screening utility equipment and garbage containers.

**OS-1.3** Promote the protection and enhancement of designated scenic routes.

1.3.a Identify, and where appropriate, designate scenic routes within the city's expanded SUDP.

1.3.b Preserve the nine currently-designated Scenic Corridors.

1.3.c Utilize established guidelines for the review of projects proposed within a designated Scenic Corridor.

1.3.d Explore the feasibility of creating some scenic corridors in South Merced through the use of special landscaping standards. *(As part of the specific planning process proposed for South Merced, potential scenic corridors can be identified and preliminary policies proposed for adoption.)*

## 4.13.3 ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

### METHOD OF ANALYSIS

Assessment of impacts to aesthetics and visual resources is based on an objective evaluation of the proposed project's effects on the visual environment of the site and its surroundings. This includes consistency with local ordinances and policies adopted for visual integrity of the community, impact on viewsheds and scenic areas identified as important or valuable to the community, and change in visual character of the site as compared to existing conditions.

Consideration and evaluation of visual resources, as addressed in this report, is defined narrowly to include only analysis of objective, quantifiable characteristics of visual form, including physical site characteristics, lighting, height, and form of proposed structures, viewsheds, and the like. The analysis does not include subjective evaluation of characteristics such as colors, architectural styles, or other matters of personal preference. Only those visual factors which may be shown to objectively impact the environment or surrounding area are considered.

### THRESHOLDS OF SIGNIFICANCE

Based on Appendix G of the State CEQA Guidelines, a visual impact is considered significant if implementation of the proposed project would do any of the following:

- have a substantial adverse effect on a scenic vista;
- substantially damage scenic resources, including, but not limited to, trees, rock outcroppings, and historic buildings within a state scenic highway;
- substantially degrade the existing visual character or quality of the site and its surroundings;
- create a new source of substantial light or glare that would adversely affect day or nighttime views in the area; or
- substantially conflict with goals or policies in the City General Plan related to visual resources and/or aesthetics.

### IMPACT ANALYSIS

IMPACT 4.13-1 Effects on a Scenic Vista, or Damage to a Scenic Resource. *The project site would be located in an area planned for industrial development and with existing industrial uses in the vicinity. The site is not a scenic vista or in a notable viewshed, and does not contain scenic resources. Therefore, implementation of the project would result in a* ***less-than-significant*** *impact.*

The City has nine areas throughout its planning area designated as Scenic Corridors. None of these corridors includes the project site. The project site is not visible from State Route 99, located approximately 2 miles west of the site, nor is this highway considered scenic. Therefore, the project site is not readily visible from a designated State Scenic Highway and the project would not have an adverse visual impact on a scenic vista or substantially degrade a scenic resource. The project site is similar to other agricultural land in the Merced area and does not contain any notable visual resources. Moreover, proposed development would not block any scenic vista. The project would result in a ***less-than-significant*** impact.

Mitigation Measure

No mitigation is required.

IMPACT 4.13-2 **Substantial Degradation of the Visual Character or Quality of the Site and Surroundings.** *The project would alter the visual character of the proposed site itself and significantly impact the visual character of the surrounding area, resulting in a* ***potentially significant*** *impact.*

The site contains agricultural fields, fallow agricultural lands, and orchard trees that cover much of the 230 acres of the project site. Various aspects of project development, discussed below, have the potential to alter views of the project site. Grading activities and construction of buildings and appurtenant structures have the greatest potential for creating such impacts. While the existing project vicinity is predominately agricultural uses, two existing manufacturing warehouses are located directly north of the project site, and continuing progressively northward is the urbanized area of Merced. Extending southward from the project site are existing, primarily agricultural uses and scattered agricultural and residential units. The project site is not readily visible from State Route 99, which is approximately 2 miles west of the site.

### Buildings and Operations

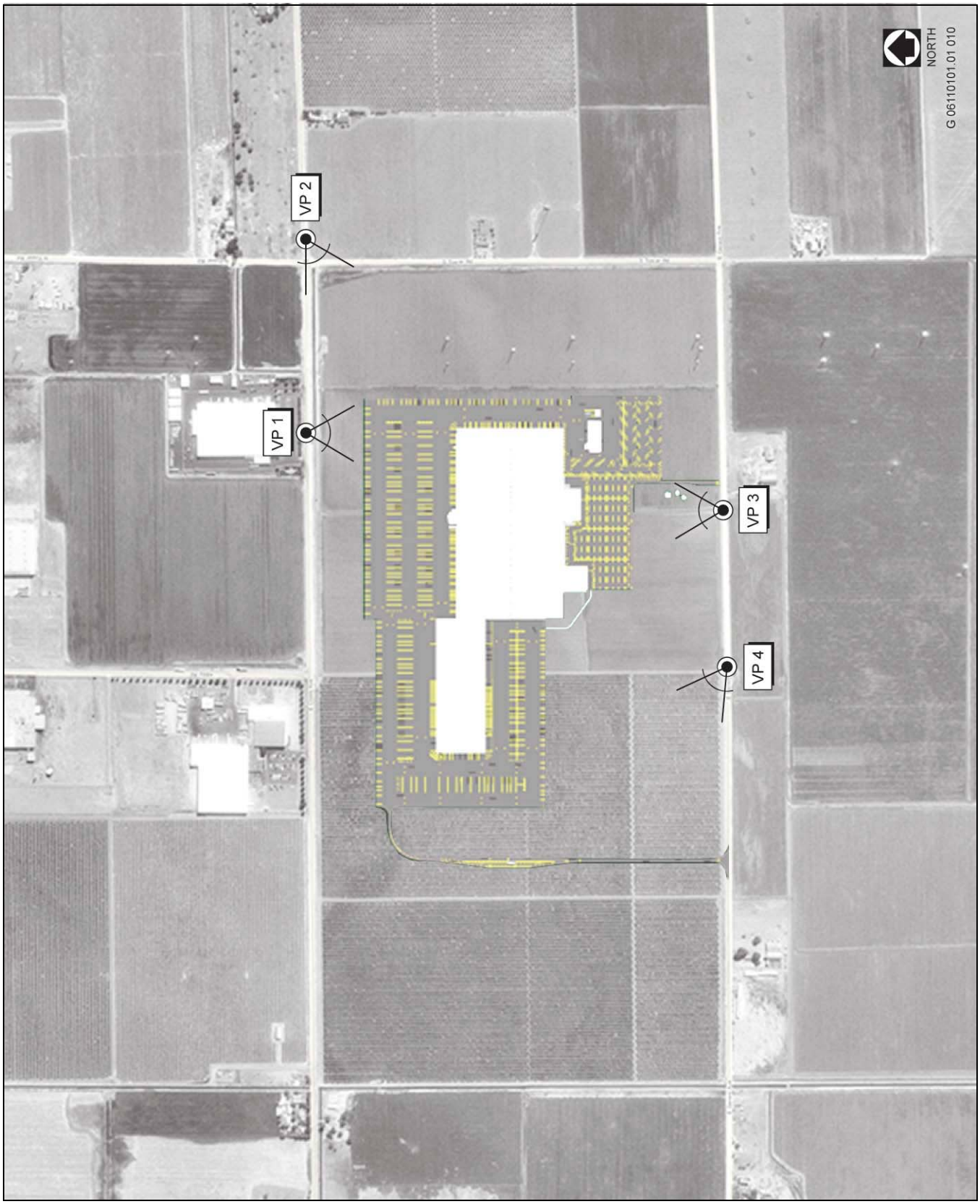
The proposed project includes the construction of a warehouse building with related administrative and support functions, truck maintenance, fueling, fire pump house, truck gate and aerosol storage, and parking areas, all of which would be built on sections of the site west of the existing overhead power lines. The power lines would remain on site, protected by an easement. All buildings would be single story and constructed of pre-engineered steel components with metal panels. Maximum building height would be 40 feet above finish floor.

The largest structure to be built as part of the project would be an approximately 1.1-million-square-foot warehouse and distribution building, which would be centrally located on the site. This building's footprint would consist of a large rectangular main section with a narrower rectangular section jutting out to the west at the main section's northwest corner. Semitractor and trailer parking would surround this building to the west, north, east, southeast, and to the south of the smaller section of the building. The employee parking area would be located adjacent to the south side of the larger main section of the building; this parking area would be connected to Gerard Avenue via a driveway. Security fencing encircles the entire complex except for the employee entrance, fire pump house and storage tanks, employee parking lot, and the front of the main section of the warehouse and distribution building.

The employee entrance would be located at the front area of the main warehouse section. Near the southeast corner of the main warehouse section would be the 17,000-square-foot truck maintenance building and adjacent fuel island. A fire pump house and two storage tanks would be located along the employee parking lot driveway, and west of the entire complex would be a long driveway used for the truck entrance. A truck gate and security fencing would be located on both sides. The truck gate would include approximately 500 square feet of building space. The security fencing would consist of 6-foot high chain-link fencing with three strands of barbed wire on top.

The most prominent visual aspects of the project, when operational, would be the main warehouse and distribution building, the security fencing, and the parking areas with their accompanying cars and semitrucks.

Exhibit 4.13-7 is an aerial photo that indicates the key observation points, or vantage points, for each computer-generated photosimulation shown on the following pages in Exhibits 4.13-8 through 4.12-11. In Exhibits 4.13-8 through 4.12-11 both existing and post-development views are shown on a single page to facilitate comparison. The photosimulations were created by digitally superimposing a computer-generated rendering of the proposed project provided by the project applicant's architect onto photos taken by EDAW staff of the undeveloped site from the identified vantage points on roads abutting the site. The vantage points selected are all located on roadways abutting the project site and are considered representative of views of and through the site. The photosimulations are, therefore, composites that provide an appropriate, scaled visual representation of what the proposed project would look like from each identified vantage point. Any landscaping that may be planted is not depicted.




Source: Adapted by EDAW 2007

**Site Plan Diagram with Key Observation Points (KOPs)** **Exhibit 4.13-7**

View Point 3 - North View from Gerard Avenue - Existing

View Point 3 - North View from Gerard Avenue - Simulation

**Representative Photographs** **Exhibit 4.13-8**

View Point 4 - Southwest View from Childs/Tower - Existing

View Point 4 - Southwest View from Childs/Tower - Simulation

**Representative Photographs** **Exhibit 4.13-9**

View Point 2 - Northwest View from Gerard Avenue - Existing

View Point 2 - Northwest View from Gerard Avenue - Simulation

**Representative Photographs** **Exhibit 4.13-10**

View Point 1 - View from Tower Road - Existing

View Point 1 - View from Tower Road - Simulation

**Representative Photographs** **Exhibit 4.13-11**

## Landscaping and Lighting

Site lighting would consist of pole-mounted metal halide lamps located approximately 45 feet above the ground surface. The lighting is designed so that light does not cross the property boundaries, except possibly at roadway intersections. The lighting is designed for an average lighting level of 0.5 foot-candle and has not been designed based on a uniformity ratio. To design based on a uniformity ratio would require more lamps than would be provided for the site. Landscaping would be provided for the public road improvements, as required by local ordinance, and the City would require to be submitted as a condition of approval that would include tree planting in parking lot areas and along the site perimeter. (Note that this landscaping is not included in the photosimulations above as no landscaping plan is currently available.) There would also be security fencing surrounding the buildings, parking areas, and driveways.

Because the project site is flat and is covered by low crops vegetation and orchard trees, views through and across it are unrestricted.

Project development would result in a noticeable alteration of the appearance of the site. The proposed project would involve grading of most of the site, thus removing the existing crops and orchard trees. Buildings up to 40 feet in height with wide horizontal surfaces would be constructed, along with storage tanks. Numerous vehicles, including large tractor trailers, would be visible on the site at any given time, and large portions of the site would be paved to accommodate vehicle and pedestrian movement. However, as a condition of approval landscaping would be required, which would soften and obscure buildings Therefore, although implementation of the proposed project would alter the existing character of the project site, replacing undeveloped orchards and agricultural fields with industrial development, resulting in a ***potentially significant*** impact, the following mitigation, which may be echoed by a condition of approval to be recommended by City staff, is recommended herein to reduce this impact.

Mitigation Measure 4.13-2. **Prepare and Submit a Landscaping Plan.** The applicant shall prepare and submit a landscaping plan to the satisfaction of the City that includes the following features and accomplishes the following objectives on the site

- The developer shall plant trees (minimum 15 gallon) no further than 30 feet apart, on site along the perimeter roads surrounding the project site, including Childs Avenue, Gerard Avenue, and Tower Road. These trees are in addition to the street trees required every 40 feet per City Standards. Shrubs and turf shall be combined with the trees in a minimum 15-foot wide landscape strip along the entire project perimeter which abut public streets. Irrigation shall be provided to all landscape areas. A detailed landscape and irrigation plan per MMC 17.60 shall be approved by City staff at the building permit stage.

- Parking lot trees at a minimum of one for each six spaces (per MMC 20.58.385) shall be required in all employee and visitor parking areas on site. Parking lot trees, however, shall not be required in truck or trailer parking areas.

- Existing almond trees shall be preserved in any areas of the site that are to be left undeveloped by buildings, parking areas, driveways, drainage basins, etc. The developer shall submit a plan showing the location of existing trees and the proposed development and the City shall approve a plan at the building permit stage for preserving as many trees as feasible.

- All vegetation shall be maintained by an automatic irrigation system. The landscaping and irrigation plans and details shall be subject to review and approval by the City. The City shall create and adopt a mechanism that will ensure that Wal-Mart Stores East, LP maintains the landscaping in accordance with the adopted plan.

With implementation of Mitigation Measure 4.13-2, the potentially significant impact would be ***less than significant***.

IMPACT 4.13-3 Create Substantial Light or Glare That Would Affect Nighttime Views. *The illumination level upon and from the site would change noticeably as a result of the proposed project, resulting in a* ***potentially significant*** *impact on light or glare.*

The site presently contains no sources of illumination, and sources of illumination in the immediate surrounding area are limited in number and intensity. The proposed project would result in a very noticeable increase in illumination on and from the site that would be readily visible from all of the public streets abutting the site and form vantage points beyond.

As indicated in Chapter 3, "Project Description," the proposed distribution center would operate 24 hours per day. In order to provide for safe pedestrian and vehicle movement it would be necessary for much of site to be continuously illuminated. The proposed project would include security lighting in the parking areas, along pedestrian pathways, and on building walls, which has the potential to create light spillage and glare impacts in the vicinity of the project site. The flatness of the topography and lack of intervening vegetation and structures would contribute to this effect.

According to the project description, site lighting would consist of metal halide lamps atop 45-foot high poles. The lighting would be designed so that light would not shine beyond the property line, except at road intersections. The primary target of illumination would be horizontal ground surfaces, including pathways, driveways, and parking lots. However, vertical wall surfaces could also be illuminated. An average illumination level of 0.5 footcandle is anticipated. (One footcandle is the amount of light caused by a single candle a distance of 1 foot from a flat surface). The lighting plan has not been designed based on a uniformity ratio. That is, the level of illumination is not proposed to be consistent throughout the project site. Accordingly, areas with high activity would likely be more highly illuminated than low activity areas.

A detailed lighting plan that would show the locations and design of light fixtures has not been provided by the applicant; therefore, it is difficult to anticipate what visual impact could result from the proposed nighttime lighting. Accordingly, there is a potential for light spillage impacts on vehicles traveling on adjacent roads and on adjoining properties. Light spillage is illumination that travels beyond the surface it is intended to illuminate. In addition to direct illumination of unintended targets, light spillage could result in glare impacts on persons at vantage points beyond the site boundary.

Light shields, lighting design, lighting fixture orientation, and landscaping are commonly used to reduce light spillage by blocking the conveyance of light upwards and horizontally. However, except as noted above, the project applicant has not provided any specific information that addresses potential lighting issues. Therefore, proposed outdoor lighting would result in a ***potentially significant*** impact.

The City of Merced zoning ordinance (Section 24.58.450 includes the following language relative to outdoor lighting: "Any lights provided to illuminate any public parking area, semipublic parking area or vehicle sale area permitted by this chapter shall be arranged so as to reflect the light away from any premises upon which a dwelling unit is located." Given the amount of lighting proposed and the fact that it would be used on a continuous basis, the following mitigation measure is recommended to further reduce potential lighting impacts, beyond what would be accomplished through the zoning ordinance.

Mitigation Measure 4.13-3. Prepare and Submit a Lighting Plan. The applicant shall prepare a lighting plan for review and approval by the City of Merced. The lighting plan shall identify the design and placement, orientation, and illumination level (in watts) of all light fixtures. The lighting plan shall be designed so that illumination is focused downward upon targeted horizontal surfaces. Illumination of vertical surfaces shall be minimized. The lighting plan shall specify that no illumination source (including light bulb and reflector) shall be visible beyond the property line. The exception to this performance standard is at driveway intersections with public streets.

With implementation of Mitigation Measure 4.13-3, the potentially significant impact would be ***less than significant***.

IMPACT 4.13-4 Substantially Conflict with Goals and Policies in the Merced Vision 2015 General Plan. *The project would be located in an area planned for industrial development. The project is consistent with the City's General Plan goals, policies, and land use designation and would result in a* ***less-than-significant*** *impact.*

The City General Plan includes multiple goals and policies adopted to protect visual resources within the City of Merced and in the area of the project. Applicable City General Plan policies are listed previously under Section 4.13.2 "Regulatory Setting".

The proposed project location is within industrial zoned and designated property, which is a planned future buildout area for Merced. Furthermore, the site is adjacent to existing manufacturing- and industrial-type development, and is visually compatible to these existing and future uses. The City General Plan states that due to the historical location of the Valley's urban centers, any growth or population expansion can be expected to impact productive agricultural land. The project would minimize future impacts on scenic resources in planned open space areas and corridors by locating in a planned development area. Therefore, the proposed project would have a ***less-than-significant*** impact.

Mitigation Measure

No mitigation is required.