



Standard Operating Procedure for Historic Properties Visual Impacts Assessment

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Effective Date: October 2012
Version: 1

Purpose of this SOP

A Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) is a set of written instructions that document a routine or repetitive activity followed by an organization. The development and use of SOPs are an integral part of a successful quality system as it provides individuals with the information to perform a job properly, and facilitates consistency in the quality and integrity of a product or end-result.

Therefore, TxDOT-ENV Historical Studies has developed an agency-wide procedure for visual impact assessment for historic properties. TxDOT requires documentation and technical activities to complete this process. This procedure document provides a standard working tool that can be used to document and analyze visual impacts to historic properties within project APEs.

It's important to keep in mind the courts have asked that VIA (Visual Impact Assessments) procedures be clear in their process, consistent in their outcomes, and easy to apply.

Defining What Constitutes Visual Impact

What is visual impact?

Something that is produced by an agency, cause, result, or consequence that is perceivable by the sense of sight.

Visual impact:

- Is subjective to the viewer or viewers
- Can be beneficial to a historic property
- Can be adverse to a historic property

Sensitive Properties

TxDOT determined that historic properties can be sensitive properties that are evaluated for the potential for adverse visual impact. The sensitivity of the historic property is the degree to which a particular historic property can accommodate change.

An example of a sensitive historic property would be when **scenic quality was influential in its being listed** on the NHRP.

In other words, a historic property is not sensitive to visual impact if visual aspects of its feeling and setting are not part of what makes it eligible.

When does TxDOT perceive adverse visual impact to a historic property?

“When the proximity of the proposed project impairs aesthetic features or attributes of a historic property in a **substantially** visual way such that features or attributes are considered important **contributing elements** to the value (historic integrity) of the resource.”



Examples of substantial impairment to visual or aesthetic qualities:

- Location of a proposed transportation facility in such proximity that it obstructs or eliminates the primary building views of an architecturally significant historical building, or
- Location of a proposed transportation facility such that it substantially detracts from the setting of a historic site **which derives its significance in substantial part due to its setting.**

5-Step Methodology for Performing a Visual Impact Assessment for Historic Properties

The 5-Step Methodology focuses on questions that should be answered and documentation prepared to perform a reliable assessment.

Step 1: Identify affected historic properties

Step 2: Define the existing visual quality

Step 3: Assess impacts to visual quality & determine effect

Step 4: Determine the visual advantages & disadvantages among alternatives

Step 5: Mitigate adverse visual impacts

Step 1: Identify affected historic properties

Which historic properties should be analyzed for visual impacts?

- Those within the visual impact APE (area of potential effect). The APE is the area that contains either a “view from” or a “view to” the road, regardless of ownership. This is also called the *viewshed*.
- Examples of historic properties to be considered:
 - Public, commercial and residential architecture
 - Farm and Ranches
 - Historic Districts

How can you identify/document impacted properties?

- Windshield, Reconnaissance, and/or Intensive Survey
- List the properties
- Map the properties, showing the relationship between the property and the proposed roadway
- Photograph the properties and their relationship to the roadway, including views to the property from the roadway and views to the proposed roadway from the property.

Step 2: Define the existing visual quality

What are the primary characteristics of the viewshed/APE?

Rural – Are there:

- Open fields?



- Tree lines?
- Thick vegetation?
- Mining/timber operations?
- Other notable visual characteristics?

Urban/Suburban – Are there:

- Clusters of buildings?
- Utility corridors?
- Commercial signage?
- Other notable visual characteristics?

Has the landscape changed from the historic period of significance for the property?

- Substantial new residential/commercial/industrial development?
- Change in land use?
- What elements were parts of the original landscape?

When possible use visualizations to define the existing visual quality using photographs, maps, and aeriels.

Step 3: Analyze effects to visual quality and determine impact

Analyze and determine the degree of impact by asking the following questions:

- Scale of the project?
- Extent of the project?
- Value of the overall project?
- Is the impact minor or major?
- How many resources are impacted?
- How will interested parties view the impact?

When you determine the impact you should provide a descriptive narrative of the project and impacts and provide visual aids. Visual aids may include drawings or computer renderings that show the relationship of the roadway to the historic property.

Step 4: Determine the visual advantages and disadvantages among alternatives

Identify conflicts between the different alternatives. Are there alternatives that would avoid visual impacts?

Have complete disclosure of all aspects of each alternative. Transparency of all alternatives aids public involvement with the community and can provide real feedback about visual perceptions.

Recognize opportunities to benefit historic properties. Example: Would the project provide better visual access of the significant, architectural features of a historic property to the public?

Remember transportation projects can have a positive visual impact, not just an adverse visual impact.

Step 5: Mitigate adverse visual impacts

Avoid, Minimize, or Mitigate - Just like other aspects of the environmental process, a visual impact assessment must to the extent possible use all practicable means to restore and enhance the quality of the human environment and avoid or minimize possible adverse impacts.

- Avoiding the impact altogether by not taking a certain action or parts of an action.
- Minimizing impacts by limiting the degree or magnitude of the action and its implementation.
- Rectifying the impact by repairing, rehabilitating, or restoring the affected environment.
- Reducing or eliminating the impact over time by preservation and maintenance operations during the life of the action.
- Compensating for the impact by replacing or providing substitute resources or environments.

Think creatively - While recognizing the limitations of the mitigation options discussed below, the assessment should consider alternative solutions to original designs that meet the purpose and need of the project and meet required safety requirements. Many times creative thinking comes out of the community-based public involvement.

What are your mitigation options?

- “Mitigation encompasses the enhancement of positive effects as well as the reduction or elimination of negative effects. To be relevant, **visual mitigation measures MUST address the specific visual impacts or problems caused by the project alternatives.**”

Mitigation would be limited to options like changing the paint color of an overpass, adding or eliminating vegetative screening, etc. as they directly address visual components of the project.

- Naturalness should be an option for mitigating adverse visual impacts only within a particular land use context associated with particular landscape attributes, and not as a uniform standard applied across different setting.

For example, the mitigation option of adding trees to reduce visual impacts of an overpass in an urban setting is not appropriate. **The current setting should be taken into consideration when you are assessing your impacts and when you are proposing mitigation.**

- Also keep in mind that the courts also favor a community-based process for cultural landscapes. Therefore, your mitigation should be a reflection of community-based public involvement.

Adverse Visual Impacts to Historic Properties and the 7 Aspects of Integrity

The 7 Aspects of Integrity for historic properties should be discussed as they relate to the adverse visual impact.

The first question that should be answered is, “What aspects of integrity are directly related to the property’s eligibility for the NRHP and could be impacted in a visual way?”

Remember TxDOT considers adverse visual impact to occur only when the proximity of the proposed project impairs aesthetic features or attributes of a historic property in a substantially visual way, where such features or attributes are considered character-defining to the integrity of the resource.

The 7 Aspects of Integrity

Setting and Feeling are the aspects of integrity that can be impacted visually and therefore are **associated with adverse visual impact**.

“**Setting** is the physical environment of a historic property...setting refers to the *character* of the place in which the property played its historical role. It involves *how*, not just *where*, the property is situated and its relationship to surrounding features and open space.”

- Setting often reflects the basic physical conditions under which a property was built and the functions it was intended to serve. In addition, the way in which a property is positioned in its environment can reflect the designer's concept of nature and aesthetic preferences.
- The physical features that constitute the setting of a historic property can be either natural or manmade, including such elements as:
 - Topographic features (a gorge or the crest of a hill);
 - Vegetation;
 - Simple manmade features (paths or fences);
 - Complex manmade features (transportation networks or city grids); and
 - Relationships between buildings and other features or open space.
- These features and their relationships should be examined not only within the exact boundaries of the property, but also between the property and its *surroundings*. This is particularly important for districts.”
- A historic setting could have been compromised previously by the introduction of modern elements or development prior to the proposed transportation project. Therefore, it's important to thoroughly analyze the existing setting and whether it is a contributing element to the historic resource and if enough original elements are still extant.
- Adverse visual effect to the **setting** only occurs when there is a substantial change such that the property is no longer able to convey its historic significance as it relates to **its intended historic surrounding**.

“**Feeling** is the quality that a historic property has in evoking the aesthetic or historic sense of a past period of time. Although it is itself intangible, feeling is dependent upon the aid's significant physical characteristics that convey its historic qualities.”

- Adverse visual effect to the **feeling** only occurs when there is enough of a substantial change to the property so that it can no longer be able to convey its historic significance.
- The **feeling** of a historic resource can be compromised by the overall physical integrity of the resource and its surroundings. Other aspects of integrity, like workmanship, materials, design, and setting **must** still be in place in order for a resource to retain its **feeling**.
- Like the setting, it's important to thoroughly analyze the existing conditions and whether feeling is a contributing element to the historic resource.

Design, Materials, Workmanship, and Association are all aspects that can't be impacted visually and therefore are **not associated with adverse visual impact**.



- “**Design** is the composition of elements that constitute the form, plan, space, structure, and style of a property.”
- “**Materials** are the physical elements combined in a particular pattern or configuration to form the aid during a period in the past.”
- “**Workmanship** is the physical evidence of the crafts of a particular culture or people during any given period of history.”
- “**Association** is the direct link between a property and the event or person for which the property is significant.”
- “**Location** is the place where the historic property was constructed or the place where the historic event took place. Integrity of location refers to whether the property has been moved or relocated since its construction. A property is considered to have integrity of location if it was moved before or during its period of significance. Relocation of an aid during its active career if the move enhanced or continued its function is not a significant loss of integrity.”

Design, Materials, Workmanship, Association, and Location are all aspects that relate to the physical elements of a historic resource or links historically to an element outside the property.

Design, Materials, Workmanship, Association, and Location are all aspects that are generally the significant elements of historic resources nominated for their association with architecture or a significant person or event.

Conclusion

- In order to determine and analyze the visual impact, you must thoroughly document the resource, its present condition and integrity, and its relationship to the project area.
- Visual effect can be beneficial or adverse.
- Understand how interested parties will view impacts.
- If you have an adverse visual impact be prepared to avoid, minimize, or mitigate that impact with community-based public involvement.

The procedure is complete.



Appendix A

The following table shows the revision history for this document.

Revision History	
Effective Date Month, Year	Reason for and Description of Change
October 2012	Version 1 was released.