4.3 AESTHETICS

This chapter describes the visual resources on the Project site and in the surrounding area, and evaluates the effects that the proposed Project would have on these resources, including effects on visual character, scenic views and vistas, and scenic resources.

While this chapter analyzes the aesthetic effects of the proposed Project, pursuant to Senate Bill 743 (SB 743) adopted in 2013, the aesthetic impacts of residential or mixed use projects located on an infill site in a “transit priority area” “shall not be considered significant impacts on the environment.” Public Resources Code section 21099(d)(1). “Infill site” is defined as a lot in an urban area that has been previously developed and “transit priority area” means an area within a half mile of a major transit stop, both of which apply to the proposed Project. Public Resources Code section 21071 defines “urbanized area” as an incorporated city with a population over 100,000, or, if the city’s population is less than 100,000, where the population of the city and no more than two adjoining cities exceeds 100,000. While Walnut Creek’s population is less than 100,000 people, the combined population of Walnut Creek and Concord, an adjacent city exceeds 100,000. Thus, under this recent amendment to CEQA, any aesthetic impacts of the proposed Project, including impacts to visual character, scenic views and vistas and scenic resources, is not considered an impact on the environment. SB 743 does confirm that the City retains full design review discretion and may address aesthetic issues, but they are considered outside of the CEQA context. For that reason, the information provided in this chapter is for informational purposes.

4.3.1 ENVIRONMENTAL SETTING

4.3.1.1 REGULATORY FRAMEWORK

This section summarizes key City regulations as well as programs related to aesthetics at the Project site. There are no federal or State regulations pertaining to aesthetics that apply to the Project.

Local Policies and Regulations

Walnut Creek General Plan 2025

Goals and Policies

The City of Walnut Creek General Plan 2025, adopted in April 2006, provides guidance to help new development achieve the qualities desired by the community. Chapter 1, Quality of Life, and Chapter 4, Built Environment, include goals and policies aimed at protecting and enhancing the city’s physical and visual character. Under the Urban Design section of the Built Environment chapter, the General Plan 2025 specifically includes policies for compatibility of infill development that focus on both the design of buildings and the design of spaces between buildings. The Urban Design section includes a comprehensive set of policies and actions to preserve the scenic qualities and views from scenic corridors, including regulating development intensity, building height, building
setback, and building stepbacks. Table 4.3-1, enumerates the goals and policies pertaining to urban form and visual character from the Walnut Creek General Plan 2025.

| Table 4.3-1 Goals and Policies of the Walnut Creek General Plan 2025 |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| **Goal/Policy Number**     | **Goal/Policy Text**                             |
| Chapter 1 Quality of Life   |                                                 |
| **Goal 1**                  | Protect and enhance the quality of life in the city’s residential neighborhoods. |
| Policy 1.4                  | Require that development is compatible with surrounding uses. |
| Policy 1.5                  | Support neighborhood efforts that strengthen identity and protect or enhance neighborhood character. |
| Chapter 4 Built Environment |                                                 |
| **Goal 5**                  | Require that infill development is compatible with its surroundings. |
| Policy 5.1                  | Require infill development to be compatible with adjacent and nearby uses. |
| **Goal 13**                 | Maintain and enhance high quality building design and urban design. |
| Policy 13.1                 | Maintain urban design and architectural standards for evaluating the scale, appearance, and compatibility of new development proposals. |
| Policy 13.2                 | Regulate building placement and upper-floor stepbacks along important streets in the Core Area. |
| Policy 13.3                 | Coordinate the building heights allowed under the General Plan, zoning ordinance, and Measure A. |
| **Goal 16**                 | Maintain and enhance Walnut Creek’s identity and sense of place. |
| Policy 16.2                 | Use public art to enliven and beautify the public realm. |
| **Goal 18**                 | Preserve and enhance the visual amenity provided by the open space, hills, and creeks. |
| Policy 18.1                 | Preserve and enhance the urban connections to scenic views that are so important to residents and visitors. |
| **Goal 19**                 | Enhance the urban design quality of the Core Area and its subareas. |
| Policy 19.2                 | Improve directional signage for pedestrians and vehicles in the Core Area. |
| **Goal 26**                 | Develop a comprehensive, integrated plan to preserve the natural environment in the built environment. |
| Policy 26.3                 | Preserve and add to the City’s tree canopy. |

Source: Walnut Creek General Plan 2025.
Land Use Designation

Upon Project approval the Project site would be within the Multifamily Special High (MFSH) land use designation. The primary intent of the MFSH land use designation is to expand the potential for downtown living. As discussed above, the Urban Design section of Chapter 4, Built Environment, includes regulations for overall development intensity, building setback, and building stepbacks. Under the MFSH a density range of 50.1-100.0 dwelling units per acre would be permitted. Given its frontage on Ygnacio Valley Road, Lacassie Avenue, and Oakland Boulevard, a Moderate setback requirement of between 10 to 20 feet is required for the portion of the Project site fronting these thoroughfares. A Moderate setback requirement of between 10 to 15 feet is also required along the Project’s eastern perimeter.¹

Building Height

The City regulates building height in the Built Environment chapter of General Plan 2025, as well as in the Zoning Ordinance. The height limits contained in the General Plan are the same as those stipulated by the Zoning Ordinance (discussed below). Building height affects the city’s appearance and identity, particularly in the pedestrian-scaled areas that comprise the Core Area and the Traditional Downtown. By regulating building heights, the City can protect view corridors, regulate building scale, and ensure consistency and compatibility within an area or along a street.

Scenic Resources

The General Plan 2025 identifies scenic views and corridors, landmarks, and gateways to be preserved and protected. As described in Chapter 4, Built Environment, the views from Walnut Creek to surrounding open spaces, hills, and Mount Diablo are integral to the city’s identity, sense of place, and character. The General Plan 2025 also identifies landmarks and nodes² as reference points that help people orient themselves in the community. The scenic gateways to City are landmarks, nodes, or views that define an arrival point. They promote community identity by providing unique reference points and orientation. Figures 4.3-1 and 4.3-2 illustrate the key scenic viewpoints, corridors, landmarks and gateways recognized by the 2025 General Plan. As shown on Figure 4.3-1, the Project site is bound by two identified scenic corridors: 1) Ygnacio Valley Road, which runs parallel to the Project site to the north, and 2) the BART line, which runs parallel to the Project site on the west. Additionally, as shown on Figure 4.3-2 there are two General Plan designated scenic viewpoints and one panoramic viewpoint of the Mt. Diablo hills just south of the Project site. As shown on Figure 4.3.2, there are no landmarks or nodes on the Project site; however, the Walnut Creek BART Station, the north of the Project site is identified as a Scenic Landmark.

¹ General Plan 2025, Chapter 4, Built Environment, Figure 11, Building Setbacks, page 4-26.
² Landmarks are prominent physical objects that serve as visual focal points. Nodes are gathering places and significant points of activity.
Figure 4.3-1
General Plan 2025 Scenic Viewpoints and Corridors

Source: Walnut Creek General Plan 2025.
Selected Landmarks

1. Pleasant Hill BART station
2. Lindsay Wildlife Museum in Larkey Park
3. Golden Triangle office buildings
4. Walnut Creek BART station
5. Target
6. Dean Lesher Regional Center for the Arts
7. Civic Park
8. Traditional Downtown at Main/Locust Streets
9. Liberty Bell Plaza
10. Saint Mary’s Church
11. Office buildings at NW corner of Mt. Diablo and California Boulevards
12. The Corners with Oak Tree
13. Fountains at Broadway Plaza
14. Nordstrom
15. Saranap Filling Station
16. Kaiser Permanente Medical Center
17. John Muir Medical Center
18. Heather Farm Park
19. Shadelands Ranch Historical Museum
20. Four Open Space Areas

Source: Walnut Creek General Plan 2025.
Zoning Ordinance

Contained in Title 10, Chapter 2 of the Walnut Creek Municipal Code, the City’s Zoning Ordinance identifies specific zoning districts within the city and describes the development standards that apply to each district. The Project site is located in the Core Area and under the proposed Project would be zoned Planned Development (PD). The PD zoning district allows more flexible development standards, including higher density, as long as the development complies with the General Plan land use designation. The development standards for the MFSH land use designation are discussed above. The proposed Project’s compliance with the Zoning Ordinance is discussed in Chapter 4.8, Land Use and Planning, of this Draft EIR.

Design Review

Title 2, Chapter 1, Section 1.501 of the Walnut Creek Municipal Code establishes a Design Review Commission to develop and enforce design standards, policies, and practices that promote aesthetics, encourage economic vitality, and enhance the design of the City’s built environment. Under Title 10, Chapter 2, Section 10-2.4.304 of the Municipal Code, the Design Review Commission is charged with conducting design review of development, including architectural standards and site planning controls. The Design Review process is intended to promote quality architectural design, site planning, and landscape development. The process is aimed at improving and augmenting other development regulations contained in the City of Walnut Creek’s planning and building ordinances.

The City’s 1996 Design Review Guidelines, prepared by the Planning Division and the Public Information Office under direct review by the Walnut Creek Design Review Commission and updated on July 26, 1999, contains guidelines used to evaluate and review projects proposed for the Commission’s approval. The Design Review Guidelines address site relationships, landscape design, off-street parking design, fencing and screening, architecture, signage, and special environmental constraints. The Design Review Guidelines emphasizes building design that addresses the needs of multi-family residential development that respect the scale and character of the adjacent residential neighborhood through attention to views, building scale and orientation, proximity to adjacent uses, location of driveways, noise, lighting and landscape; ensure building facades are articulated by using color, arrangement, or change in materials to emphasize the facade elements; providing functional recreational spaces and/or community site amenities; and having appropriately designed exterior spaces that are designed to enhance the overall appearance and compatibility of such development by providing privacy, buffering and daylight, and to provide a pleasant transition to the street.3

Public Art Master Plan

The Public Art Master Plan provides guidelines for public art in Walnut Creek and encourages the inclusion of public art in development projects. The Master Plan identifies public art zones throughout the city, discusses the roles of the Design Review Commission and Art Commission, identifies criteria and processes to be used in the selection of artwork, and recommends funding sources. The Master Plan envisions artworks such as fountains,

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large-scale sculpture, or landscape elements integrated into plaza areas, building exteriors, or streetscapes in the core area, where the Project site is located. The City of Walnut Creek's Public Art Ordinance (Walnut Creek Municipal Code, Section 10-10.100, et seq.) implements this Master Plan and requires that the Applicant either pay no less than 1 percent of the project's construction cost into the City's In-Lieu Public Art Fund or install public art on-site.

**Tree Preservation Ordinance**

Title 3, Chapter 8, Preservation of Trees on Private Property, of the Municipal Code includes the regulations for the removal and preservation of trees within the City. The City recognizes that preservation of trees enhances the natural scenic beauty, sustains the long-term potential increase in property values that encourages quality development, creates the identity and quality of the City that is necessary for successful business to continue, and improves the attractiveness of the City to visitors. In accordance with the provisions of Chapter 8 under Title 3 of the City's Municipal Code, the proposed Project would be required to obtain a tree removal permit, as well as follow the regulations related to the preservation and maintenance of existing trees during construction and development. Consistency with the Tree Preservation Ordinance is discussed in Chapter 4.5, Biological Resources, of this Draft EIR.

### 4.3.1.2 EXISTING CONDITIONS

This section describes the existing visual character of the Project site and its vicinity as well as the scenic resources present in the surrounding area.

**Visual Character**

The Project site is located in a highly urbanized setting near the western edge of the Core Area of Walnut Creek. Prominent visual features of the regional landscape are described below, along with the visual and aesthetic character of the Project site. An aerial of the Project site is shown further below in Figure 4.3-6.

**Visual Features of the Project Site and Surrounding Areas**

Located at the base of the hills to the west, the topography of the site is generally flat at 176 feet above mean sea level (msl) with a gradual downhill slope to the eastern border of the site at 156 feet msl. The Project site is largely developed with small wood-framed residential buildings generally dating back to the mid-20th century including 1 two-story apartment complex with 10 units, 3 one-story duplexes and 4 one-story, single-family homes, for a total of 20 units. The existing residential uses contain modest landscaping and a number of mature trees ranging in height from 10 to 40 feet. The southwest corner of the Project site is a vacant lot. Views of the Project site are shown on Figure 4.3-3.

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4 City of Walnut Creek, 2000, Public Art Master Plan, page 3.
Single family and multi-family homes on the Project site fronting Lacassie Avenue are in the middle-ground. A high-rise commercial building across Ygnacio Valley Road can be seen in the background and the surface parking for Walnut Creek Presbyterian Church across Lacassie Avenue from the Project site is in the foreground.

The downhill sloping topography is noticeable from this view off of Lacassie Avenue. Some single-family and multi-family units on the south side of the Project site, fronting Lacassie Avenue, are in the foreground and the three-story commercial buildings along the eastern perimeter are in the background.

This view shows the vacant lot at the southwest corner of the Project site at the cul-de-sac on Lacassie Avenue. While mostly obstructed by existing trees, the hills of Mt. Diablo are slightly visible in the background.

Residential lots facing Ygnacio Valley Road on north side of Project site.

Source: The Planning Center | DC&E, 2013.
The surrounding area features wide streets, with varying block sizes, and building heights capped at between 35 and 50 feet. The property to the east of the Project site is comprised of a three-story commercial office complex. The properties to the south of the Project site, across LaCassie Avenue, include two-story multi-family residential buildings and one-story single-family homes, as well as the Walnut Creek Presbyterian Church surface parking lot. The buildings associated with these uses tend to be low to medium-intensity, generally no more than two stories tall, and are adjoined by tuck-under or medium-sized surface parking areas. Similar to the properties that make up the proposed Project site, these properties also feature modest landscaping and a number of mature ornamental trees ranging from 10 to 40 feet in height.

Separated by multiple lanes at the Ygnacio Valley Road/Oakland Boulevard intersection, the property to the north and northwest of the Project site is occupied by the Walnut Creek BART Station. As previously discussed under the Regulatory Setting, the BART Station is a designated landmark in the General Plan 2025. Also separated by multiple lanes on Oakland Boulevard as well as the elevated BART tracks, the property to the west of the Project site is comprised of commercial office buildings ranging in height from four to five-stories. These properties are well landscaped and include mature trees ranging in height from 10 to 40 feet. Views surrounding the Project site are shown on Figure 4.3-4.

**Scenic Corridors and Vistas**

Scenic corridors are defined as an enclosed area of landscape, viewed as a single entity that includes the total field of vision visible from a specific point, or series of points along a linear transportation route. Public view corridors are areas in which short-range, medium-range and long-range views are available from publicly accessible viewpoints, such as from city streets. Scenic vistas are generally interpreted as long-range views of a specific scenic feature (e.g. open space lands, mountain ridges, bay, or ocean views). As noted under the Regulatory Setting, due to the views to surrounding open spaces, hills, and Mount Diablo, which are integral to the city’s identity, sense of place, and character, the General Plan 2025 designates Ygnacio Valley Road and the BART line as scenic corridors, and the intersection at North California Boulevard and Ygnacio Valley Road is designated as a gateway to the city.

**Existing Viewsheds**

Viewsheds refer to the visual qualities of a geographical area that are defined by the horizon, topography, and other natural features that give an area its visual boundary and context, or by development that has become a prominent visual component of the area. Public views are those which can be seen from vantage points that are publicly accessible, such as streets, freeways, parks, and vista points. These views are generally available to a greater number of persons than are private views. Private views are those views that can be seen from vantage points located on private property. Private views are not necessarily considered to be impacted when interrupted by land uses on adjacent properties. As previously shown on Figures 4.3-1 and 4.3-2, there are two General Plan designated scenic viewpoints and one panoramic viewpoint of the Mt. Diablo and surrounding foothills just south of the Project site.
The elevated BART tracks and mid-rise commercial buildings across Oaklan Boulevard to the west of the Project site are visible in the background and the vacant lot on the Project site’s southwest corner is visible in the foreground.

This view shows the Walnut Creek BART Station and elevated BART tracks across the Ygnacio Valley Road/Oakland Boulevard intersection.

This view shows the BART parking lot across Ygnacio Valley Road, screened by landscaping, with mid-rise commercial buildings in the background.

Commercial offices on eastern edge of Project site, taken from Lacassie Avenue.

Source: The Planning Center | DC&E, 2013.
In the area surrounding the Project site, the existing viewshed is defined primarily by views of the surrounding open spaces, hills, and Mount Diablo that are visible from Ygnacio Valley Road and Oakland Boulevard as well as the BART Station. Therefore, the following viewpoint was identified due to the direct views of the Project site from these locations. This viewpoint is discussed in detail below and the locations of the views from this viewpoint are depicted in Figure 4.3-5.

**Ygnacio Valley Road and Oakland Boulevard**

As shown on Figure 4.3-5, this viewpoint is at the location of the Ygnacio Valley Road/Oakland Boulevard intersection generally facing east and southeast. View A represents the view from the Walnut Creek BART Station facing southeast. Views B is taken from a similar location but slightly to the east and View C is taken from the intersection but generally facing due east. Each of these views represent where travelers entering the city and going to and from the BART Station area travel daily. As seen from each of these viewpoints, the scenic resource vistas of the surrounding hills and Mt. Diablo are visible but generally obstructed by the existing landscaping and urban infrastructure (e.g. the BART tracks, fencing, street lights and traffic lights).

The applicant has prepared site line visuals to illustrate the Project’s maximum height as viewed from these scenic viewing locations. These are shown on Figure 4.3-6. In addition, Figure 3-11 in Chapter 3, Project Description, of this Draft EIR also shows the relationship between the elevated BART track and the proposed building.

### 4.3.2 STANDARDS OF SIGNIFICANCE

An Initial Study was prepared for the proposed Project (see Appendix A of this Draft EIR). Based on the analysis contained in the Initial Study it was determined that development of the proposed Project would not result in significant environmental impacts per the following significance standards and therefore, are not discussed in this chapter.

- Substantially damage scenic resources, including, but not limited to, trees, rock outcroppings and historic buildings within a State scenic highway.

- Create a new source of substantial light or glare that would adversely affect day or nighttime views in the area.

Based on the Initial Study it was determined that the proposed Project would result in a significant aesthetics impact if it would:

1. Have a substantial adverse effect on a scenic vista.
2. Substantially degrade the existing visual character or quality of the site and its surroundings.

However, as discussed above pursuant to SB 743, aesthetic issues are considered to be outside the scope of CEQA. For that reason, the information provided below is for informational purposes only.
Source: Google Maps, 2013.

Figure 4.3-5
Views from Ygnacio Valley Road and Oakland Boulevard
Figure 4.3-6
Aerial and Project Site Lines from Ygnacio Valley Road and Oakland Boulevard

Source: BHV CenterStreet Properties, LLC, 2013.
4.3.3 IMPACT DISCUSSION

This section discusses the impacts of the proposed Project on aesthetic resources. This discussion is organized by and responds to each of the potential impacts identified in the Standards of Significance.

AES-1 The proposed Project would not have a substantial adverse effect on a scenic vista.

As previously discussed, in the area surrounding the Project site, the existing viewsheds are defined primarily by open spaces, hills, and Mount Diablo that are visible from the designated scenic corridors and viewpoints in the General Plan 2025. While the natural topography and existing mature trees on the site and adjacent properties limit the open views of these scenic resources, this viewshed could be potentially affected by the Project. As discussed above, one key viewpoint was identified that provides direct views of the Project site from travelers entering the city and consequently could substantially block the view of surrounding scenic resources. As shown on Figure 4.3-5, scenic resource available from this viewpoint are largely obstructed by the existing vegetation on the Project site. As shown in Figure 4.3-6, while the Project would exceed the existing tree canopy and due to the natural down sloping topography the Project would not block the views from the elevated BART track.

The Project would be consistent with the required setbacks designated in the General Plan that are established to preserve and enhance notable view corridors in the city, General Plan 2025 and the Walnut Creek Municipal Code (i.e. a moderate setback of 10 feet to 20 feet, 15 feet average) on the portions of Oakland Boulevard (which parallels the BART line adjacent to the Project site), and Ygnacio Valley Road surrounding the Project site. This setback will be adequate to minimize the impact of the proposed Project on these scenic corridors.

As shown on Figure 4.3-6, the massing of the proposed building will affect the views from the selected view points by replacing the intermittent views of the sky between the mature trees. Since the topography generally slopes away from the designated panoramic view the impact is lessened. Furthermore due to the proposed building height and setback, neither the surrounding scenic corridors nor the adjacent panoramic view would be adversely affected; resulting in a less-than-significant impact.

Significance Without Mitigation: Less than significant.

AES-2 The proposed Project would not substantially degrade the existing visual character or quality of the site and its surroundings.

While development of the project as proposed would represent a change to the existing visual character of the site from the existing one- and two-story wood frame buildings to a four-story structure covering the majority of the site, the proposed Project would be consistent with the overall urban character within the surrounding Core Area. The design of the Project would also be subject to review by the City’s Design Review Commission to ensure consistency with the City’s Design Review Guidelines. Therefore, development of the proposed Project would not substantially degrade the visual quality of the site or its surroundings and associated impacts would be less-than-significant.
Significance Without Mitigation: Less than significant.

### 4.3.4 CUMULATIVE IMPACTS

AES-3  The proposed Project, in combination with past, present and reasonably foreseeable projects, would result in less than significant cumulative impacts with respect to aesthetics.

This section analyzes potential cumulative impacts to aesthetics and visual quality that could occur from a combination of the proposed Project with other past, present and reasonably foreseeable projects in the surrounding area. This analysis considers the specific projects listed in Chapter 4.2, Cumulative Impact Analysis, shown in Figure 4.2-1 of this Draft EIR. A cumulative impact would be considered significant if, taken together with past, present and reasonably foreseeable projects in the identified area, it would result in a substantial adverse effect on a designated scenic vista or if it would result in a substantial degradation of the visual quality or character in the vicinity of the Project.

As described above, General Plan 2025 and the Walnut Creek Municipal Code contain provisions to regulate new development in order to maintain and protect scenic resources. These provisions include regulations pertaining to building height limits, setback requirements for buildings along key roadways, development standards from the Zoning Ordinance, and other architectural standards and site planning controls implemented through the design review process. Continued implementation of these existing regulations throughout the city would ensure that cumulative impacts to designated scenic resources and visual character in the vicinity of the Project site would be less than significant. Therefore, overall cumulative impacts would be less than significant.

Significance Without Mitigation: Less than significant.

### 4.3.5 SUMMARY OF SIGNIFICANT IMPACTS AND MITIGATION MEASURES

The proposed Project would not result in any significant Project-specific or cumulative impacts to aesthetics and, therefore, no mitigation measures are required.