

3.13 Aesthetics

This section is based on the *City Heights Visual Analysis* prepared by GCH Planning and Landscape Architecture (2009). “Aesthetics” is basically the interaction between a person and particular landscape features, from the standpoint of how one experiences his/her surroundings. Aesthetics can be both enhanced (e.g., through improved views and/or elimination of unsightliness), or it can be degraded (e.g., through unnatural intrusions, unsightliness, scale incompatibility, restriction of views, or long-term irreversible effects). The interpretation of what constitutes an enhancement and what constitutes degradation is a matter of individual interpretation.

AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

The City Heights property is a linear-shaped assemblage of parcels, approximately 358 acres in size. It extends east to west for nearly the full length of the existing incorporated area of the City of Cle Elum (see Figure 3.13-1). Average dimensions are approximately 12,500 x 1,500 linear feet. The site is located above the City of Cle Elum by an average of 100 to 300 vertical feet on the rising terrain of Cle Elum Ridge to the north. The property is within the City of Cle Elum Urban Growth Area, designated for Planned Mixed-Use development.

The subject property is currently undeveloped. Topography is generally rolling in nature, with some steeper slopes in stream corridors and at the location of coal slag and waste rock piles on the property. Several site features limit the potential developable area to approximately 170 acres: steep topography (25 to 60 percent slopes) in the ravines that dissect the site; steep slopes along the south edge of the property; wetlands, streams and their buffers; and two power line easements: Puget Sound Energy (PSE) and Bonneville Power Administration (BPA).

Vegetative habitats on the property include mature coniferous forests with a mix of native evergreen trees (Ponderosa pine and Douglas fir) and deciduous understory (\pm 215 acres); native grassland and shrub meadows that include the electrical power transmission lines (\pm 125 acres), wetlands and associated buffers (\pm 5 acres), and patchy native and invasive shrubs on coal tailings piles (\pm 20 acres). The combined width of the PSE and BPA easements is approximately 285 feet (\pm 68 acres). Compacted dirt maintenance roads in these easements are used for tower maintenance and service, as well as informal recreation.

Existing roads that run through the City Heights property include Summit View, Montgomery Avenue, and Columbia Avenue, serving neighboring properties to the north. (These City streets presently terminate at the City limits and become private roads through the property.) Adjacent land uses include: 1) rural residential properties to the north; 2) existing City of Cle Elum residential, commercial, and industrial properties to the south; 3) the City of Cle Elum “Bullfrog” Subarea to the southwest; and 4) former City of Roslyn sewage lagoons and stormwater detention ponds to the west (see Figure 3.13-1).

Existing Views From the Site. Viewing opportunities or viewsheds, are all surface areas visible from an observer’s viewpoint, taking into account the screening effects of intermediate vegetation and structures. Viewing opportunities from the majority of the City Heights property are currently limited by topography and forest vegetation. The majority of the front (south) edge of the site at the top of the bluff has filtered views across the valley and to the City below through stands of large Ponderosa pine and Douglas fir trees on the steeper slopes.

Figure 3.13-1. Aerial View of the City Heights Site in Relation to Existing Study Area Features.



Source: GCH Planning & Landscape Architecture (2009).

Existing views from the site can be characterized as follows: 1) Open or unfiltered distant views (views not blocked by any substantial environmental feature); 2) filtered valley views (views partially blocked by a specific feature); 3) interior views (views looking into ravines or back into the topography of the site).

Existing Views Of the Site. The steepness of the rise from town to the site, the relative flatness of the upper plateau, and the forested nature of the slope and front (south) edge currently obscures views of the western three-quarters of the City Heights site from much of town. The eastern one-quarter of the site has predominantly shrub vegetative cover as a result of a past forest fire, and therefore is visible from town.

POTENTIAL IMPACTS DURING CONSTRUCTION

Significant vegetation removal and grading alterations would occur within proposed development areas to create the project road system and building sites. These temporary conditions may be unsightly to some observers.

Existing coniferous tree stands would be protected in open space zones during City Heights construction to maintain community character and minimize negative construction impacts for the City of Cle Elum. The proposal under Alternative 1, 2 or 3A includes retaining a 20- to 80-foot wide existing natural buffer along most of the south edge of the property, between the front row of proposed homes and the existing City boundary. This buffer would minimize the visual impact of areas and buildings under construction that might otherwise be viewed from town and the existing neighborhoods below.

Under Alternative 3B, it is less likely that the individual owners/developers of 17 parcels would retain a natural buffer of existing vegetation to screen site development from established neighborhoods and downtown Cle Elum.

Under Alternative 4 (No Action), there would be no construction alteration of the appearance of the site at this time.

POTENTIAL DEVELOPED-CONDITION IMPACTS

One goal of the City Heights development is to integrate with existing development within the City of Cle Elum. This will result in some homes being visible from established neighborhoods and the town below. With Alternative 1, 2, or 3A, the majority of housing proposed near the front (south) edge would be of low- and/or moderate-density design. The proposed 20- to 80-foot wide existing natural buffer would screen the front row of proposed homes and minimize the noise and light impacts from the developed condition of the property. Neighborhood commercial areas, surrounded by higher-density residential development, are proposed on the upper plateau of the site, not visible from the lower elevations in town. Landscape plantings that will be introduced to restore cleared areas of the site will, at maturity, augment retained vegetation to provide additional screening of the City Heights development.

Figure 3.13-2 depicts a conceptual aerial view of the developed condition of the City Heights community, with the existing pond in the foreground. Multiple housing types, neighborhood commercial centers, open space, trails, parks and public amenities would be found throughout with development under Alternative 1, 2 or 3A.

Figure 3.13-2. Conceptual Aerial Perspective of the Developed Condition of the City Heights Site.



Source: GCH Planning & Landscape Architecture (2009).

Figure 3.13-3 depicts conceptual single-family detached home development within the project. This view shows a typical open space trail connection through the neighborhood that could be implemented as a component of Alternative 1, 2, or 3A.

Figure 3.13-3. Conceptual Detached Dwelling Unit Neighborhood.



Source: GCH Planning & Landscape Architecture (2009).

Figure 3.13-4 depicts a conceptual attached dwelling unit streetscape that could be implemented as a component of Alternative 1, 2, or 3A.

Figure 3.13-4. Conceptual Attached Dwelling Unit Neighborhood.



Source: GCH Planning & Landscape Architecture (2009).

Figure 3.13-5 depicts a conceptual cottage neighborhood with direct pedestrian trail access that could be implemented as a component of Alternative 1, 2, or 3A.

Figure 3.13-5. Conceptual Cluster Cottage Neighborhood.



Source: GCH Planning & Landscape Architecture (2009).

Figure 3.13-6 depicts a neighborhood conceptual commercial center, public plaza, and direct park access that could be implemented as a component of Alternative 1, 2, or 3A.

Figure 3.13-6. Conceptual Neighborhood Commercial Center.

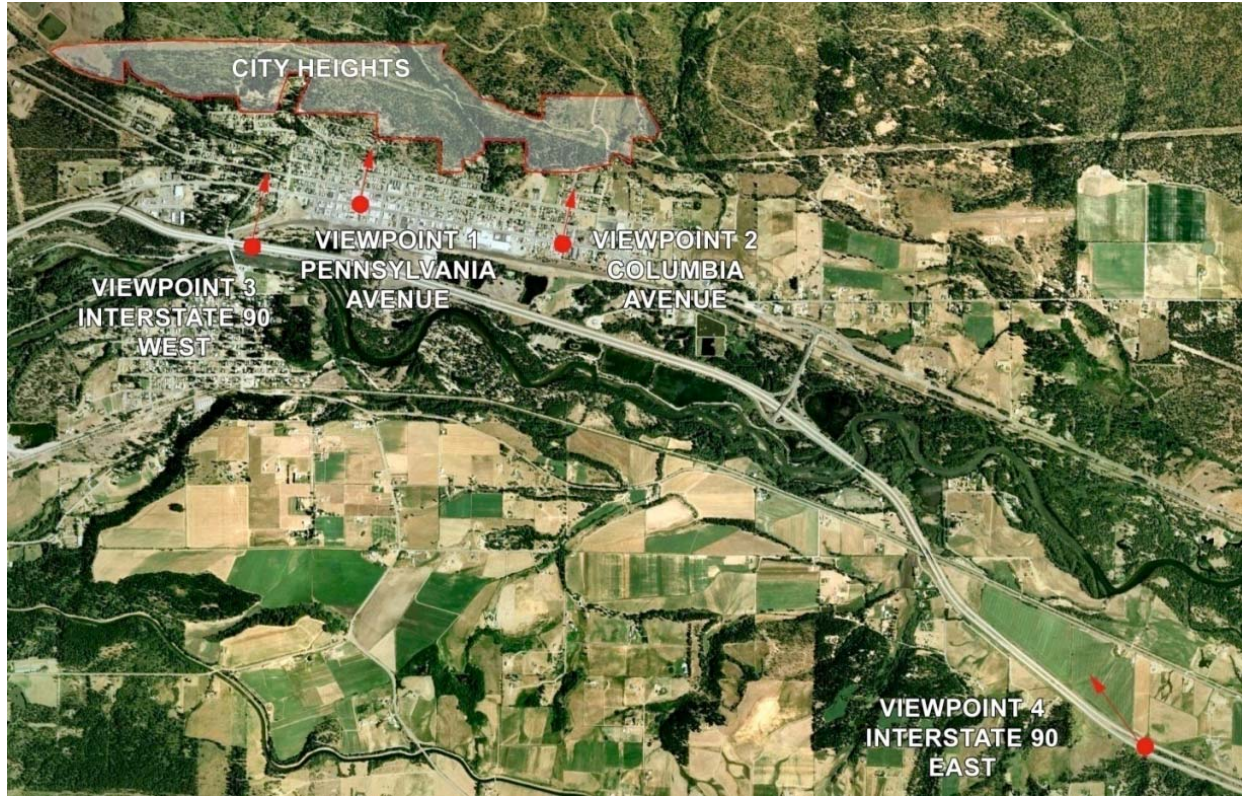


Source: GCH Planning & Landscape Architecture (2009).

The majority of proposed development interior to the project site would have little visual impact on existing City of Cle Elum residents or the downtown area due to a combination of topographical changes,

intervening structures, and stands of coniferous trees to be preserved. Changes in the appearance of the site would be most distinctly experienced by rural residential properties to the north and east, and by residents across the valley to the south. Figure 3.13-7 shows four viewpoint locations used for the visual analysis looking towards the City Heights site.

Figure 3.13-7. Visual Impact Study Points.



Source: GCH Planning & Landscape Architecture (2009).

Schematic “built views” of the project as seen from these locations are provided in Figures 3.13-8 through 3.13-11 that follow.

Viewpoint 1 from Pennsylvania Avenue

Pennsylvania Avenue is a good example of the typical amount of potential visual impact that may occur due to construction along the front row (i.e, south boundary) of the City Heights development. Looking up to the City Heights site from town, a linear residential arrangement would be visible along the top of the bluff, filtered with stands of coniferous trees and built structures in the foreground (Figure 3.13-8). This particular street is aligned with the “Slick Rock” public open space feature within the City Heights development that would provide additional buffering for the development above.

Figure 3.13-8. Built View of the City Heights Site from Pennsylvania Avenue and E First Street.



Note: Covenants, Conditions and Restrictions (CC&Rs) for the project, and standards to be enforced through the Development Agreement with the City (if Alternative 1 or 2 is selected for implementation), will require that building exteriors be earth-tone colors along the southern edge of the City Heights property. The lighter colored houses shown in this schematic image of the developed condition of the site are purposely shown to contrast with the background so that the location of the structures can be identified.

(Source: GCH Planning & Landscape Architecture 2009).

Viewpoint 2 from Columbia Avenue

The eastern portion of the City Heights site has the potential to be the most visible from the City of Cle Elum downtown core due to a topographically consistent slope between town and the back of the property. The topography of this portion of the site provides buildable slopes at lower elevations that may have greater visual impact to existing residences along Third and Fourth Streets. Looking up to the eastern portion of the City Heights site from First Street, multiple linear residential arrangements would be visible along the consistent slope, filtered with stands of coniferous trees, existing homes within the City, and foreground plant material (Figure 3.13-9). Proposed homes in this area would not exceed the 35-foot height limit of the City of Cle Elum Municipal Code.

Figure 3.13-9. Built View of the City Heights Site from Columbia Avenue and E First Street.



Note: Covenants, Conditions and Restrictions (CC&Rs) for the project, and standards to be enforced through the Development Agreement with the City (if Alternative 1 or 2 is selected for implementation), will require that building exteriors be earth-tone colors along the southern edge of the City Heights property. The lighter colored houses shown in this schematic image of the developed condition of the site are purposely shown to contrast with the background so that the location of the structures can be identified.

(Source: GCH Planning & Landscape Architecture 2009).

Viewpoint 3 from Interstate 90 West, Eastbound from the South Cle Elum Way Area

The Interstate 90 corridor has multiple windowed opportunities to view the City of Cle Elum, as well as the City Heights property. Portions of the City Heights property are screened from view by a combination of rolling topography, large stands of coniferous trees, and existing built structures. The City Heights property would have potentially greater visual development impacts from the I-90 corridor where no immediate foreground obstructions occur due to the climbing elevation of the site. Figure 3.13-10 depicts the developed condition of the City Heights property where existing coniferous tree stands in open space areas to be retained work in combination with the mature community landscape to be planted to screen the homes on top of the bluff.

Figure 3.13-10. Built View of the City Heights Site from Interstate 90 West, Eastbound from the South Cle Elum Way Area.



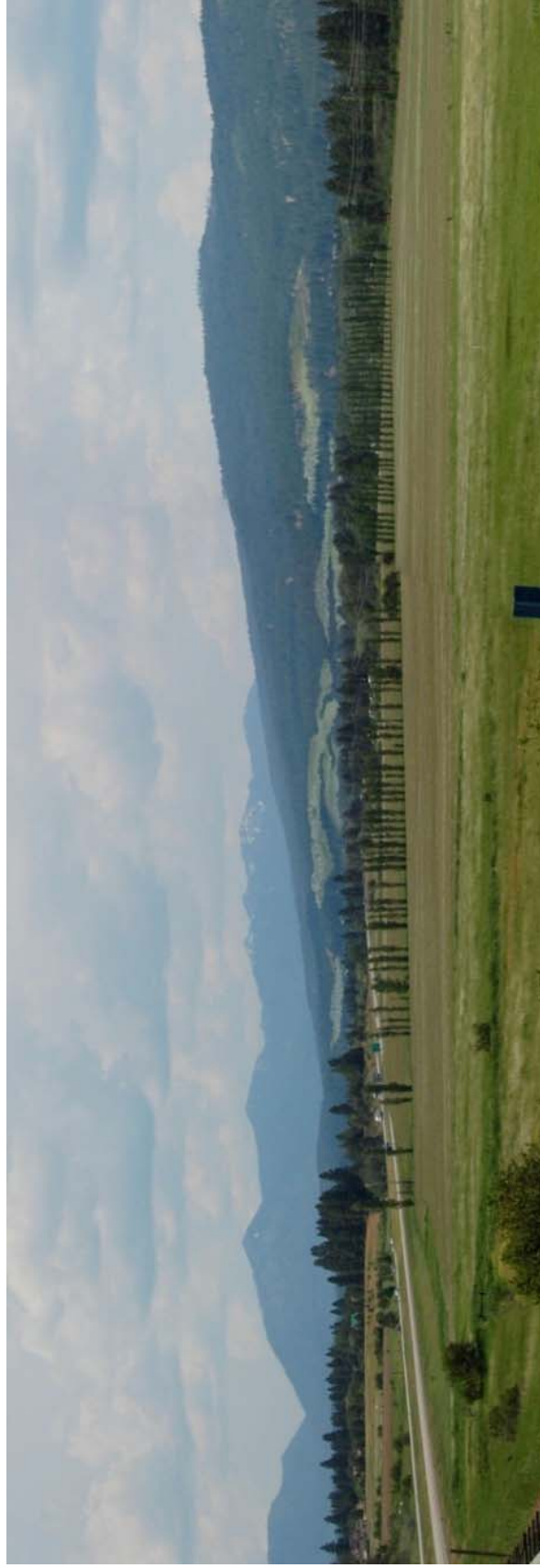
Note: Covenants, Conditions and Restrictions (CC&Rs) for the project, and standards to be enforced through the Development Agreement with the City (if Alternative 1 or 2 is selected for implementation), will require that building exteriors be earth-tone colors along the southern edge of the City Heights property. The lighter colored houses shown in this schematic image of the developed condition of the site are purposely shown to contrast with the background so that the location of the structures can be identified.

(Source: GCH Planning & Landscape Architecture 2009).

Viewpoint 4 from Interstate 90 East, Westbound from the Elk Heights Area

Traveling westbound on I-90, there are multiple viewing locations of the City Heights property. Figure 3.13-11 below shows the proposed development zones during the construction phase of the project. This view is approximately 3.5 miles east, from which travelers on I-90 and the Mountains-to-Sound Greenway, as well as local home owners in this area, would have a more comprehensive view of site clearing and grading before any introduced plant material (i.e., landscaping) could mature. Further west, travelers on I-90 and the Mountains-to-Sound Greenway would observe less of the City Heights site due to existing screening by a combination of rolling topography, large stands of coniferous trees, and existing built structures (see Viewpoint 3, Figure 3.13-10).

Figure 3.13-11. Built View of the City Heights Site from Interstate 90 East, Westbound from the Elk Heights Area.

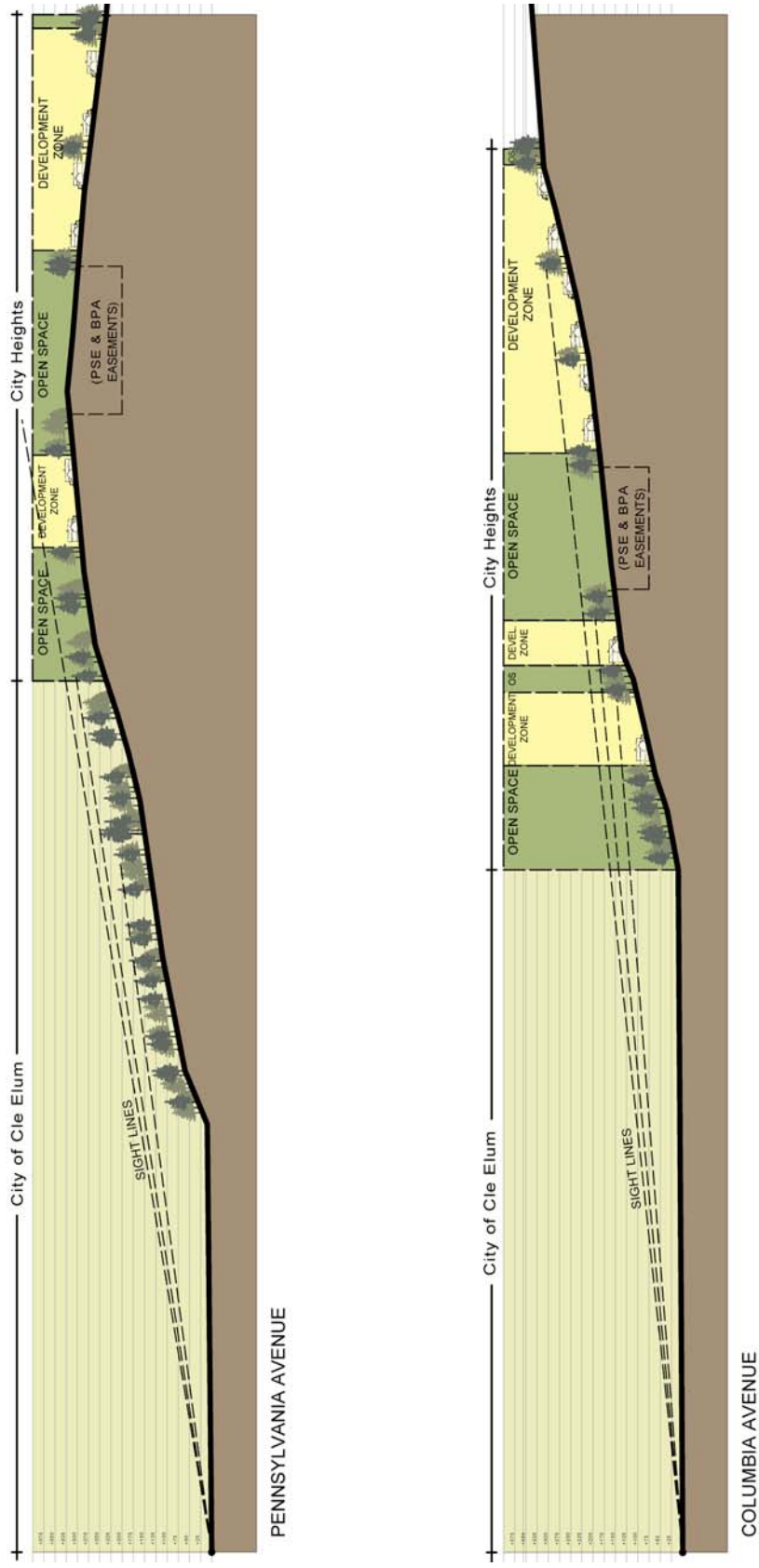


Note: Covenants, Conditions and Restrictions (CC&Rs) for the project, and standards to be enforced through the Development Agreement with the City (if Alternative 1 or 2 is selected for implementation), will require that building exteriors be earth-tone colors along the southern edge of the City Heights property. The lighter colored houses shown in this schematic image of the developed condition of the site are purposely shown to contrast with the background so that the location of the structures can be identified.

(Source: GCH Planning & Landscape Architecture 2009).

Figure 3.13-12 depicts two typical cross-sections through the City of Cle Elum and City Heights property at Pennsylvania Avenue and Columbia Avenue. Sight lines are shown from First Street toward the City Heights property. As shown, direct sight lines to proposed homes within the City Heights property would, in most cases, be partially or fully blocked by a combination of rolling topography and coniferous tree stands.

Figure 3.13-12. Sample Cross-Sections from Downtown Cle Elum through the Proposed City Heights Development.



Source: GCH Planning & Landscape Architecture (2009).

Alternative 1 – Preferred. The preferred conceptual land use plan (Alternative 1) for the City Heights project shows a mix of residential densities ranging from 5 to 9 dwelling units per acre. Medium-density residential development is proposed along the southern portion of the site, set back and screened by the proposed 20- to 80-foot wide buffer of existing natural vegetation. This alternative would be developed under City land use regulations and development standards to be specified in a Development Agreement between the project proponent and the City. One intent of the development standards would be to achieve high-quality architectural design and harmonious development adjacent to the existing City limits. Alternative 1 includes a total of 985 dwelling units, and approximately 20,000 square feet of neighborhood commercial development in two areas on the upper plateau. A significant number of homes would also be built on the upper plateau, with the highest density housing grouped around neighborhood commercial centers. Located at the interior of the site, these areas would not be visible from the south edge of the property, thereby minimizing possible perceptions of visual incompatibility with the existing community.

Alternative 2 – Reduced Residential Density. The Alternative 2 conceptual land use plan would result in a reduced number of dwelling units (875) by lowering the density range to 4 to 9 units per acre. Lower density, single-family detached homes most compatible with the adjacent residential neighborhood would be constructed along the southern portion of the site, set back and screened by a 20- to 80-ft wide existing natural buffer to be retained. While two larger neighborhood commercial areas are contemplated with Alternative 2, these would also be developed on the upper plateau away from the visible south edge of the property. As with Alternative 1, the highest residential densities would be developed around the neighborhood commercial centers. The Alternative 2 vehicular access concept includes improving Alliance Road north and west of the site, Sixth Street in the central portion of the project, and Columbia Avenue to serve the eastern portion of the development. Montgomery Avenue would only be used by emergency vehicles to access the site.

Alternative 3A – No Annexation, Development within the County under Single Ownership. The Alternative 3A conceptual land use plan would be essentially the same as Alternative 2 (875 dwelling units and approximately 40,000 sf of neighborhood commercial development); therefore, the aesthetic impacts of Alternative 3A may be similar to those described for Alternative 2. However, the City would have little or no influence over the development standards for Alternative 3A, as there is no interlocal agreement between the City and County at the time of this writing that would allow the City to influence development within the Urban Growth Area if this area were not annexed to the City.

Alternative 3B – No Annexation, Development within the County under Multiple Ownerships. The Alternative 3B conceptual land use plan for the City Heights property would consist of up to 17 parcels developed under multiple ownerships within Kittitas County. The total estimated number of dwelling units would be 500 single-family detached homes. The potential for visual impacts during construction under Alternative 3B could be high due to a discontinuous development pattern over longer periods of time, and a probable non-cohesive pattern of development. It is unlikely that the 20- to 80-ft wide existing natural buffer to be retained along the south boundary of the site with Alternative 1, 2, or 3A would be retained by individual property owners/developers in Alternative 3B. As with Alternative 3A, the City of Cle Elum would have little or no influence over development standards for site development under Alternative 3B, due to the absence of an interlocal agreement with Kittitas County.

Alternative 4 – No Action. Under Alternative 4, there would be no development on the City Heights property at this time; it would be left in its present condition. The *Cultural Resources Report* (Reiss-Landreau Research 2009), and the *Phase I Environmental Site Assessment* (Aspect Consulting 2009) prepared for the City Heights property describe and illustrate uncontrolled solid waste disposal areas on the property that included household refuse, abandoned vehicles, appliances, and tires that accumulated since approximately the 1970s. These were removed from the site in July 2009 by the current owner

(Northland Resources, LLC). Locked gates have been installed at access points to the property to deter unauthorized dumping.

MITIGATION MEASURES

Mitigation Measures Included in the Development Proposal. The proposal under conceptual land use Alternatives 1, 2, or 3A includes preserving an existing natural buffer 20 to 80 feet wide along much of the south boundary of the site. Only single-family detached homes are proposed along this boundary, for the most compatibility in use and scale with established neighborhoods at the base of the slope. Covenants, Conditions, and Restrictions (CC&Rs) and development standards for the project will include requirements to assure that the proposed development will blend with the natural environment to the extent practicable. These measures will include such things as architectural standards for building character, exterior materials and colors; lighting, restoration plantings and screening requirements; and road standards that include provisions for landscaping and pedestrians.

Project CC&Rs would impose measures for the maintenance and upkeep of parks¹ and common areas, as well as measures that would minimize the visual impacts of construction, upgrades or repairs within the development. The CC&Rs, to be implemented and enforced by the Homeowner's Association, would therefore help to preserve aesthetically-pleasing conditions within the development.

Applicable Regulations. The City's Planned Mixed-Use District includes statements of purpose and objectives for the development of large land areas under these land use provisions. These are listed in Draft EIS Section 3.7, followed by a brief description of the relationship of the proposal to each purpose and objective. Customized development standards for the City Heights project will be formulated in the Development Agreement to be negotiated between the City and the project proponent. If Alternative 3A is selected for implementation, the County's Planned Unit Development or cluster platting provisions would also include conditions that would address the appearance of the project.

Other Recommended Mitigation Measures. No mitigation measures for the aesthetics of the development beyond those proposed or required have been identified.

SIGNIFICANT UNAVOIDABLE ADVERSE IMPACTS

With the exception of an existing 20- to 80-foot wide natural buffer to be retained along the south boundary of the site, development of the City Heights Planned Mixed-Use Development under conceptual land use Alternatives 1, 2, or 3A would substantially remove existing vegetative cover from the site and alter existing topography to more level grades for the construction of roads, infrastructure, and building sites. In place of the coniferous tree stands, shrubs and meadows, an urban residential neighborhood would be created, permanently altering the existing character of the site. The aesthetic impact of this change would likely be interpreted differently by different observers; i.e., it may be pleasing to some and objectionable to others. Site planning includes measures to create the most compatibility and provide the most screening at the boundary between the proposed development and established areas within the City. The City Heights site is within the City of Cle Elum Urban Growth Area, and thus is anticipated to develop as a residential community whether at this time or in the foreseeable future.

¹ To the extent that some parks and public amenities within the development are accepted by the City as public areas, the City would maintain these areas.