



2019 CDOT VIA Guidelines Briefing Paper

Background: Why were these guidelines developed and needed? In 2015, FHWA published Visual Impact Assessment (VIA) guidelines noting, “The public nature and visual importance of our highways necessitates that visual impacts—beneficial as well as adverse—be adequately assessed and considered when a highway project is developed.” In Colorado, these FHWA Guidelines were interpreted in inconsistent ways with varying levels of effort and effectiveness; this was confirmed in a conformance review of several Colorado VIAs produced from 2015-2018. With the help of Felsburg Holt & Ullevig and Consensus Building Institute, CDOT’s Environmental Programs Branch and Visual Resources Committee (VRC), plus FHWA, developed these 2019 CDOT VIA Guidelines.

CDOT’s Guidelines build on FHWA’s *Guidelines for the Visual Impact Assessment of Highway Projects* (FHWA, 2105) to establish a statewide standard for assessing visual resources in CDOT’s NEPA documentation and decision-making. These Guidelines are intended to describe CDOT’s comprehensive process for assessing visual impacts and have been incorporated into Chapter 9 of CDOT’s *NEPA Manual*.

Documentation Overview: CDOT organized the Guidelines into the following chapters and appendices:

- **Chapter 1 - Overview** - Provides general background.
- **Chapter 2 - Establishment: Scoping** - Documents CDOT’s process to conduct scoping early (during project planning) and describes how to use CDOT’s visual resource scoping documentation as a scoping tool.
- **Chapter 3 - Inventory: Affected Environment** - Documents CDOT’s process for establishing affected environment.
- **Chapter 4 - Analysis: Impacts Evaluation** - Identifies CDOT’s process for assessing and documenting visual impacts.
- **Chapter 5 - Mitigation** - Identifies how VIAs influence project development and how to be more sensitive to surrounding visual environment during and after construction.
- **Chapter 6 - References**
- **Appendix A** - Includes two templates that follow instructions from the Guidelines and provide a framework for VIA documentation:
 - **VIA Memorandum** (For projects with minor visual impacts)
 - **Standard VIA** (For projects with the potential for adverse visual impacts or controversy)
- **Appendix B** - Includes CDOT’s visual resource scoping documentation for identifying visual resource issues, establishing the appropriate level of VIA documentation, if any, and informing NEPA considerations.
- **Appendix C** - Includes a glossary that defines technical VIA terms.
- **Appendix D** - Identifies 3D visualization software applications for preparing visual simulations.
- **Appendix E** - Includes the strategies behind CDOT’s Guidelines, including connections and refinements to the FHWA 2015 VIA Guidelines, and summarizes the core concepts and methods related to landscape perception and sense of place.



Target Audience and Users: CDOT prepared these Guidelines with the intention of informing a broad interdisciplinary audience of preparers and reviewers, such as FHWA; CDOT staff, including environmental, engineering, landscape architecture, maintenance, management, and scenic byways; NEPA practitioners/consultants; federal land management agencies; other state agencies; local agencies; and public and community stakeholders.

Application to CDOT projects: The Guidelines apply to Colorado actions involving:

- ▶ CDOT sponsorship of projects with state and/or federal funding
- ▶ Local agency sponsorship of projects that involve state highways and/or project development funding sources that prompt CDOT oversight
- ▶ Third-party use of highway right-of-way (ROW), permitted by CDOT
- ▶ CDOT property management

These Guidelines may be applied to VIAs involving the following NEPA classes of action:

- ▶ Environmental Impact Statements
- ▶ Environmental Assessments
- ▶ Categorical Exclusions
- ▶ NEPA Reevaluations
- ▶ Planning and Environmental Linkages (PEL) studies

Overview of CDOT's VIA approach: Figure 2 of CDOT's Guidelines illustrates the overall VIA process.

CDOT's VIA process is rooted in NEPA to inform transportation decision-making. VIAs capture key visual issues, identify adverse and beneficial impacts, and develop effective mitigation for projects along transportation corridors with the goal of achieving visual compatibility with the landscape character, travelers, and viewers.

CDOT's VIA methodology connects with the framework of phases in FHWA's Guidelines. The foundation for CDOT's approach to preparing effective VIAs is rooted in:

- ▶ Encouraging interdisciplinary team participation.
- ▶ Applying context-sensitive approaches for the inventory of natural and cultural/man-made landscape features and viewers and for the evaluation of visual quality.
- ▶ Involving agencies and the public in the VIA process.
- ▶ Communicating graphically through maps, site photographs, cross sections, 3D visualizations, and animation.
- ▶ Identifying adverse and beneficial visual impacts.
- ▶ Establishing effective mitigation measures for project design, construction, and maintenance.