

CDOT Visual Impact Assessment Memorandum

<Insert Project Name>

<Insert Draft or Final Report and Date>

<Insert Project Number and Subaccount Number/Project Code>

August 30, 2019



COLORADO
Department of Transportation

(Delete this entire box, all red text, and all gray highlighted placeholder text before submitting the first draft VIA Memorandum to CDOT)

Background for Visual Impact Assessment (VIA) Memorandum Template

The VIA Memorandum Template is organized to facilitate the preparation of reader-friendly and graphically informative VIAs for any level of National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) documentation, while reducing unnecessary detail. The formatting of this template tracks with the direction and examples included in the Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT) *2019 VIA Guidelines* (hereinafter referred to as CDOT's Guidelines, available on CDOT's Landscape Architecture (LA) [website](#)).

A VIA Memorandum is reserved for projects that would have only minor visual impacts. The VIA Questionnaire is an effective scoping tool to evaluate the visual compatibility of the Proposed Action. Projects rated at low to moderate levels of visual contrast, viewer sensitivity, or potential controversy, with total scoping scores in the range of 10 to 19 points, are unlikely to result in adverse visual impacts. The level of documentation for a VIA Memorandum should be adapted to the scope of individual projects based on findings from the scoping process.

The template includes preparation tips, along with standardized text, table, and graphic formats that are scalable and adaptable to the scope of individual projects.

INFORMATION ON USING THIS REPORT TEMPLATE

1. Color-coding throughout this template:
 - a. Red text: Review background information, optional choices, and suggestions/tips provided in red text, and delete any red text before submitting the first draft of the VIA to CDOT.
 - b. **<gray content placeholders>**: Insert the content requested in text highlighted in gray, and delete gray highlighted text before submitting the first draft of the VIA to CDOT.
2. Complete CDOT's Visual Resource Scoping Documentation and Questionnaire (available on CDOT's LA [website](#)) to establish which, if any, template is appropriate (Standard or Memorandum).
3. If the project has a Preferred Alternative, replace "Proposed Action" with "Preferred Alternative" as appropriate throughout this template. Also incorporate evaluations of Build Alternative(s), if appropriate.
4. Table and/or figure numbers provided in this template may require revisions to adapt to the author's presentation of materials.
5. This file is CDOT's VIA Memorandum Template for use on projects. If prior approval from the CDOT Region Environmental Project Manager, Landscape Architect, and/or FHWA is obtained, this template does not have to be used.



Table of Contents

- 1. INTRODUCTION..... 1
- 2. VIA SCOPING..... 1
- 3. INVENTORY AND IMPACT EVALUATION 3
- 4. MITIGATION..... 4
- 5. REFERENCES..... 4

Appendices

Appendix A. Visual Resource Scoping Documentation

List of Figures <to be adapted to the scope of individual reports>

- Figure __. Proposed Action.....2

List of Tables <to be adapted to the scope of individual reports>

- Table 1. Visual Resource Impacts3
- Table 2. Visual Resources Impact Mitigation4

List of Acronyms and Abbreviations <Update as appropriate>

Bg	background
CDOT	Colorado Department of Transportation
Fg	foreground
FHWA	Federal Highway Administration
HED	Highway Easement Deed
Mg	middleground
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
NEPA	National Environmental Policy Act
VIA	visual impact assessment

1. INTRODUCTION

Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT), in coordination with the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), is preparing a/an **<insert class of action>** **Categorical Exclusion, Environmental Assessment, Environmental Impact Statement**; may include reevaluation of these classes [see Section 1.1 of CDOT's Guidelines] for the **<insert name of project>** project. CDOT's 2019 VIA Guidelines (hereinafter referred to as CDOT's Guidelines) apply because the project involves **<insert justification for CDOT involvement>** **CDOT sponsorship, local agency sponsorship, or third-party use of CDOT right-of-way** [see Section 1.2 of CDOT's Guidelines].

This visual impact assessment (VIA) evaluates effects of the Proposed Action on visual resources, following criteria set out in CDOT's Guidelines (available on CDOT's Landscape Architecture (LA) [website](#)).

<Include a brief summary describing project location and Proposed Action/project description>

Figure _ identifies the location and extent of the Proposed Action.

2. VIA SCOPING

Reference Section 2.1 of CDOT's Guidelines (available on CDOT's LA [website](#)) for additional information.

VIA scoping findings are documented through CDOT's Visual Resource Scoping Documentation (Appendix A), which includes a detailed summary of:

- ▶ Visual attributes of the Proposed Action **<delete or modify as needed>** and Build Alternative(s)
- ▶ Landscape context (see Figure 3 of CDOT's Guidelines)
- ▶ Issues and regulatory framework
- ▶ Level of VIA documentation (and the related scoping questionnaire)

<Briefly describe scoping findings that are meaningful to decision-making.> This VIA is being documented as a Memorandum because **<insert brief justification based on Scoping Questionnaire>**.

Figure __. *Proposed Action*

<insert map here>

Insert Proposed Action/Build Alternative(s) map(s) appropriate for the project and consistent with other NEPA technical memoranda and technical reports. Create readable graphics with readable sized text labels, arrows, and contrasting colors.



3. INVENTORY AND IMPACT EVALUATION

Reference Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 of CDOT’s Guidelines (available on CDOT’s LA [website](#)) for additional information. For brevity, documentation of the inventory and impacts are consolidated in a table format. The inventory and impact columns should focus on key landscape features, views, and visual quality and can be documented in a summary/bullet list format.

This section documents the extent of visual resources being considered as part of this project and anticipated impacts. **Table 1** provides an overview of these VIA considerations in a format compatible with the accompanying NEPA document.

Table 1. Visual Resource Impacts

Delete or add columns as appropriate depending on the number of alternatives being considered and whether a No Action Alternative is being evaluated.

Context/Visual Inventory	No Action Alternative Impacts (Delete if not applicable)	Proposed Action Alternative Impacts	Add Build Alternative Impact(s) as applicable
<p><Provide a brief overview of the project area that is meaningful to decision-making. Document landscape character, viewers, and visual quality in succinct statements or sentences.></p>	<p><Document visual resource impacts of the No Action Alternative.></p>	<p><Document visual resource impacts of the Proposed Action. Provide a qualitative description of potential permanent and temporary impacts to visual resources that are based on the potential for visual contrast and that are meaningful to decision-making.> CDOT’s expectation is that these descriptions can be one or two sentences.</p> <p>Permanent Impacts</p> <p>Temporary Impacts</p>	<p><Document visual resource impacts of Build Alternative(s). Provide a qualitative description of potential permanent and temporary impacts to visual resources that are based on the potential for visual contrast and that are meaningful to decision-making.> CDOT’s expectation is that these descriptions can be one or two sentences.</p> <p>Permanent Impacts</p> <p>Temporary Impacts</p>

4. MITIGATION

Refer to Chapter 5 of CDOT’s Guidelines (available on CDOT’s LA [website](#)) for additional information.

Throughout this project, interdisciplinary coordination has occurred as the potential for adverse visual impacts has been considered. In accordance with CDOT’s Guidelines, the team has considered options to **<select appropriate descriptors> avoid, minimize, and/or compensate for visual impacts. Include a brief narrative covering how the team has attempted to avoid/minimize, and/or compensate for visual impacts.**

<Modify text depending on whether mitigation is necessary.>

Visual mitigation measures may not be required. If so, provide a brief explanation, with the following statement: Specific mitigation measures for visual impacts are not required.

OR

Revise the following statement and complete the table if mitigation is required:

As an overview, CDOT applies “SMART” criteria to develop effective NEPA mitigation commitments for visual impacts that are financially feasible and can be included in CDOT’s project delivery process. **Table 2** summarizes visual impacts and mitigation measures for inclusion in the accompanying NEPA document.

Table 2. Visual Resources Impact Mitigation

Visual Impact	Mitigation Commitment for <Project Name>	Responsible Branch	Timing/Phase That Mitigation Will Be Implemented
<Succinctly describe visual impact>	<Succinctly describe mitigation commitment>	<Identify CDOT branch responsible for implementing mitigation>	<Identify timing/phase of implementation>

5. REFERENCES

<Insert references used in this Visual Impact Assessment Memorandum>



Appendix A. Visual Resource Scoping Documentation

Overview

Visual resource scoping is conducted early in the visual impact assessment (VIA) process to identify issues, determine if a VIA is necessary, and identify the appropriate level of VIA evaluation.

This appendix includes formatted documentation of the following steps to be conducted in the scoping process:

- ▶ **Step 1: Project information and Visual Attributes**
- ▶ **Step 2: Visual Context**
- ▶ **Step 3: Policies, Guidelines, and Feedback**
- ▶ **Step 4: VIA Scoping Questionnaire – Issues and VIA requirements** (*Not Required, Memorandum, or Standard*)

This step-by-step approach should be conducted in coordination with the CDOT environmental team and visual resource specialist assigned to the project. **Chapter 2** of CDOT’s Guidelines (available on CDOT’s LA [website](#)) includes further information about the Establishment/Scoping Phase.

Completion of the visual resource scoping steps and documentation may be accomplished through desktop research and reconnaissance, collaboration with CDOT, and/or field observations.

Project Information and Visual Attributes

Project Name:	<Insert project name>
Project Location:	<Insert project location>
Author:	<Insert author name>
Visual Attributes of Proposed Action and (if applicable) Build Alternative(s):	<Describe how the features would look in terms of form, line, color, texture, and scale> [Refer to Step E-1 in Section 2.1 of CDOT’s Guidelines] Consider project elements, such as proposed roadway width, lanes, medians, shoulders; horizontal alignment and vertical profile; anticipated cut-and-fill slopes, rock cut locations, vertical elements (walls, buildings), and tree/forest clearing.

Visual Context

Landscape Observations:	<Describe general visual observations> Including colors, lines, textures, or water features, and dominant landforms; observations about adjacent land uses and ownership patterns; and land use areas that may be visually sensitive
Influence of Roadway on Natural and Cultural Environment Settings:	<Describe the influence of the existing roadway on the environmental and cultural setting > e.g., How well or not does the existing roadway fit the context of the surrounding environment? Does the roadway flow through the topography or contrast with natural surface relief?
Landscape Context(s) and Development Patterns: See Figure 3 of CDOT’s Guidelines	<input type="checkbox"/> Natural/ Undeveloped <input type="checkbox"/> Rural <input type="checkbox"/> Suburban <input type="checkbox"/> Urban Are development patterns in sync or contrasting with the environment?



Policies, Guidelines, and Feedback

Needs for Federal, State, or Local Agency Consultation:	<Document whether the project is influenced by adjacent land ownership, land uses, easements, deeds, or management plans that would require agency consultation during the VIA> (e.g., US Forest Service or BLM visually sensitive areas, community parks, or local agency protected viewsheds)
Involvement with Federal Lands MOU:	<Document whether the project involves a HED and requirements of the Federal Lands MOU>
Involvement with Scenic, Historic District, or Historic Byways:	<Document whether the project involves a scenic or historic byway>
Associated Regulations, Policies, or Guidelines:	<Describe applicable local, state, regional, tribal, and federal agency regulations, policies, plans, and guidelines that pertain to managing or protecting visual resources>
Influence of Agency & Public Feedback:	<Document input from public meetings and interviews regarding visual preferences and identify visually sensitive views, scenic places within communities, and special or valued landscape settings>
Additional Details:	<Document other noteworthy scoping findings>



VIA Scoping Questionnaire

Environmental Compatibility

1. Will the project result in a noticeable visual change in the physical characteristics of the existing or future project setting? *(Consider all project components and construction impacts—both permanent and temporary, including landform changes, structures, noise barriers, vegetation removal, railing, signage, and construction activities.)* **<describe this in the assumptions/issues below>**

- High level of permanent change (3) Low level of permanent or temporary change (1)
 Moderate level of permanent change (2) No noticeable change (0)

Assumptions/issues: **<insert assumptions/issues>**

2. Will the project complement or contrast with the community visual character? *(Evaluate the scale and extent of project features compared to the surrounding scale of the community. Is the project likely to give an urban appearance to an existing rural or suburban community? Do you anticipate that the public will view the change as positive or negative? Research planning documents or talk with local planner/community representatives to understand the type of visual character local residents envision for their community.)* **<describe this in the assumptions/issues below>**

- Low compatibility (3) High compatibility (1)
 Moderate compatibility (2)

Assumptions/issues: **<insert assumptions/issues>**

3. What level of local concern is there for the types of proposed project features (e.g., bridge structures, large excavations, noise barriers, or median planting removal) and construction footprint? *(Certain project improvements can be of special interest to local citizens, causing a heightened level of public concern and requiring a more focused visual analysis.)* **<describe this in the assumptions/issues below>**

- High concern (3) Low concern (1)
 Moderate concern (2) Negligible project features (0)

Assumptions/issues: **<insert assumptions/issues>**

4. Do design changes that could minimize impacts (e.g., landscaping, architectural treatment, color choices) appear to be: **<describe this in the assumptions/issues below>**

- Extensive changes or redesign (3) Few, minimal design options (1)
 Some redesign or minimization measures (2) No minimization likely (0)

Assumptions/issues: **<insert assumptions/issues>**



5. Will this project, when seen collectively with other projects, likely result in cumulative impacts to landscape character, views, or visual quality? *(Identify any projects [both state and local] in the area that have been constructed in recent years and those currently planned for future construction. The window of time and the extent of area applicable to possible cumulative impacts should be based on a reasonable anticipation of the viewing public's perception.)* **<describe this in the assumptions/issues below>**

- Cumulative impacts likely: 0-5 years (3)
- Cumulative impacts unlikely (1)
- Cumulative impacts likely: 6-10 years (2)

Assumptions/issues: **<insert assumptions/issues>**

Viewer Sensitivity

6. What is the potential for the project proposal to become controversial within the community or to be opposed by the public or any organized group? *(This can be researched initially by talking with the state DOT and local agency management and local or regional planning staff familiar with the affected community's sentiments as evidenced by past projects and/or current information.)* **<describe this in the assumptions/issues below>**

- High potential (3)
- Low potential (1)
- Moderate potential (2)
- No potential (0)

Assumptions/issues: **<insert assumptions/issues>**

7. How sensitive are viewers likely to be to the scale and character of visible project features? *(Consider among other factors the number of viewers within the group, probable viewer expectations, activities, viewing duration, and orientation. The expected viewer sensitivity level may be scoped by applying professional judgment and by soliciting information from other DOT staff, local agencies, and community representatives familiar with the affected community's sentiments and demonstrated concerns.)* **<describe this in the assumptions/issues below>**

- High sensitivity (3)
- Low sensitivity (1)
- Moderate sensitivity (2)

Assumptions/issues: **<insert assumptions/issues>**

8. Are there applicable laws, ordinances, regulations, policies, or standards that would affect or influence this project? **<describe this in the assumptions/issues below>**

- Yes, in a complex manner (3)
- No (1)
- Yes, not complex (2)

Assumptions/issues: **<insert assumptions/issues>**



9. Will the project change the views or character of visually sensitive public use areas, historic properties, or scenic designations? *(Identify proximity and potential visual influence of the proposed project to parks, open space, trails, vistas and protected viewsheds, historic properties, Colorado Byways, Wild and Scenic Rivers, and other scenic designations.)* **<describe this in the assumptions/issues below>**

- Yes (3) No (1)
 Maybe (2)

Assumptions/issues: **<insert assumptions/issues>**

10. Will a more detailed visual analysis assist in the screening of alternatives or project design? *(Consider the proposed project features, possible visual impacts, and probable mitigation recommendations.)* **<describe this in the assumptions/issues below>**

- Yes (3) No (1)
 Maybe (2)

Assumptions/issues: **<insert assumptions/issues>**

VIA Requirements

Date of Assessment	<Insert date>
VIA Requirements: Based on initial scoping, collaboration with CDOT, and the VIA Scoping Questionnaire score, this level of analysis and documentation is required:	<input type="checkbox"/> VIA not required (Score 1-9) ¹ <input type="checkbox"/> VIA Memorandum (Score 10-19) <input type="checkbox"/> Standard VIA (Score 20-30)
<input type="checkbox"/> VIA not required (Score 1-9)	Consider this as the visual resource clearance for <insert project name>. If the scope of work changes or additional information warrants further review and analysis, a reevaluation may be required.
<input type="checkbox"/> VIA Memorandum (Score 10-19)	<Follow VIA Memorandum Template in Appendix A of CDOT's VIA Guidelines>
<input type="checkbox"/> Standard VIA (Score 20-30)	



The level of the VIA can initially be based on the following ranges of total scores:

Score 6 to 9: VIA Not Required

No noticeable visual or physical changes to the environment are proposed; therefore, no further analysis is required. The VIA questionnaire and a project memo may be used to document that there is no effect and to explain the approach used for the determination.

Score 10 to 19: VIA Memorandum

A *VIA Memorandum* addressing minor visual issues, indicating the nature of the limited impacts and identifying any necessary mitigation strategies that should be implemented, would likely be sufficient, along with an explanation of why no further analysis is required.

Score 20 to 30: Standard VIA

A *Standard VIA* is recommended. This technical study will likely receive extensive local, perhaps statewide, public review. It would typically include several visual simulations. It would also include a thorough examination of public planning and policy documents supplemented with a direct public engagement process (usually part of the overall NEPA public scoping and stakeholder involvement) to determine visual preferences.