Visual Impact Assessment

PURPOSE:

This document provides guidance for the preparation of Visual Impact Assessments which may be required for the submission of a complete application under the *Planning Act*. All Visual Impact Assessments shall follow the guidelines contained in this document.

A Visual Impact Assessment provides information required in support of a development application to demonstrate that the location, massing, and height of a proposed building will not have a significant impact on important public views and vistas of urban and natural landscapes.

The Urban Hamilton Official Plan (Volume 1, Chapter B, Policy B.3.3.5) notes that "Public views and vistas are significant visual compositions of important public and historic buildings, natural heritage and open space features, landmarks, and skylines which enhance the overall physical character of an area when viewed from the public realm. Examples of existing significant vistas include the panorama of the Niagara Escarpment, Hamilton Harbour, and the Downtown skyline, as viewed from various vantage points throughout the City. Examples of views include significant historic and public buildings, established streetscapes, natural heritage features or landscapes, and monuments."

New development proposals should identify, preserve, enhance, and/or create such significant public views and vistas. Depending on the details of the proposal, the assessment may need to evaluate impacts on:

- The character of adjacent or contextual streetscapes (in terms of street edge alignment, massing, continuity of public realm elements), as viewed by the public at eye level;
- Views to significant buildings, natural heritage areas, open spaces, or special landmarks; and
- The existing skyline and potential loss of sky views.

Downtown Hamilton

A Visual Impact Assessment evaluating impacts to views of the Niagara Escarpment will be required for development proposals on properties identified as Locations Where There Are Impacts to Views, as shown on Appendix “C” – Downtown Hamilton Secondary Plan – Viewshed Analysis, and may be required for development proposals located on streets identified as View Corridors to the Niagara Escarpment, and properties identified as Locations Where There May Be Impacts to Views, as shown on Appendix C – Downtown Hamilton Secondary Plan – Viewshed Analysis.

Areas Near the Niagara Escarpment

A Visual Impact Assessment may be required by the Niagara Escarpment Commission (NEC) where there are potential impacts to views of the Niagara Escarpment.

PREPARED BY:

A Visual Impact Assessment must be prepared by a Registered Architect (OAA), a Registered Professional Planner (RPP), Landscape Architect (OALA), or a qualified consultant with experience in this field.

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Visual Impact Assessment Requested by Niagara Escarpment Commission

Where a Visual Impact Assessment is requested by the Niagara Escarpment Commission, the contents of the Visual Impact Study must follow the *Niagara Escarpment Commission Visual Impact Assessment Technical Criteria, 2020*, which provides standards for the preparation of a Visual Impact Assessment. Prior to undertaking a Visual Impact Assessment it is recommended that applicants prepare a

Terms of Reference for Niagara Escarpment Commission approval. Should you have any questions, please contact the Niagara Escarpment Commission.

Visual Impact Assessment Requested by City of Hamilton

The requirement for, and scope, of a Visual Impact Assessment will be identified at the Formal Consultation stage of an application. The terms of reference for a Visual Impact Assessment requested by the City are to be confirmed through a pre-study consultation with Urban Design staff. A Visual Impact Assessment shall include a written analysis and visual simulations/modelling.

1. Written Analysis

A Visual Impact Assessment written analysis shall include a description of the project, the existing visual landscape, and important scenic resources, in addition to the following:

- Methodology: the methodology used for the impact analysis;
- Regulatory and Planning Documents: a review of regulatory and planning documents and any applicable visual impact policies. The review shall include but not be limited to the Urban Hamilton Official Plan, site-specific Secondary Plan policies, and the Niagara Escarpment Plan. Where a site is located in the Downtown, relevant guidelines from the Tall Building Design Guidelines should be referenced;
- Local Context: the Visual Impact Assessment should include a description of the surrounding area including land use, built form, and any scenic landscapes or landmarks. The information should include a short description of the physical environment, scenic characteristics, and the nature and extent of human presence;
- Viewshed Map: A viewshed map should be included in the Visual Impact Assessment showing which areas have views of the development and helping to identify sensitive visual resource areas and other sensitive viewpoints which may be subject to visual impacts from the development;
- Viewshed and Key Observation Points: An important step in the VIA process is to determine the geographic scope of the impact assessment in order to limit the area of detailed investigation. Visual impacts should be assessed from lands with relevant views of the development. The Visual Impact Assessment should include a viewshed analysis using the elevation and land cover data to determine which

parts of the development are likely to be visible from a designated point or points. Consider those points of view which are meaningful to the larger community: different locations along adjacent streets with significant pedestrian traffic, or viewing platforms from nearby parks, trails, or special urban landmarks; and,
- Visual Characteristics: The Visual Impact Assessment should identify and describe the sources of visual contrast associated with the project. Visual contrast is change to what is seen by the viewer. Visual impact is both the change to the visual qualities of the landscape resulting from the introduction of visual contrasts, and the human response to the change.

2. Simulation and Model

Visual simulations are visualizations of the proposed project and the surrounding landscape that are used to depict the overall appearance of a proposed project after it is operational. The visual simulations must show what the project will look like, demonstrate the potential project impacts on scenic landscapes, and identify mitigation measures to reduce the visual impacts created by the project. Visual simulations should demonstrate the actual or expected appearance of the landscape and development as closely as possible, from the chosen observation points, illustrating:

- Potential visibility of the project through viewshed analysis;
- Impact on the existing street conditions and pedestrian-level sky-views;
- Impacts of the development to the existing views to the Niagara Escarpment or the Harbour by providing before and after illustrations of the views;
- Potential impacts to sensitive adjoining uses (single detached residential, heritage, open space);
- Alternative designs and mitigation measures to preserve important views and scenic landscapes; and,
- Existing and proposed streetscape treatment to enhance both the quality and extent of views.

OTHER INFORMATION:

Niagara Escarpment Commission Visual Impact Assessment Technical Criteria

Niagara Escarpment Commission Policy Interpretation, Guidance and Technical Criteria – Niagara Escarpment Commission (NEC)

Urban Design Guidelines with Downtown Hamilton Tall Building Study and Guidelines:

Urban Design Guidelines | City of Hamilton

REVIEWED AND APPROVED BY:

Urban Design, Planning and Economic Development Department (If Visual Impact Assessment is requested by the City of Hamilton)

Niagara Escarpment Commission (If Visual Impact Assessment is requested by the NEC)

CONTACT:

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