

## Chapter 24: Visual Impacts

As shown in the property value chapter of this book, the view from a home can be a significant source of satisfaction for the owner and a crucial factor in resale value. The study of homes with a view of Lake Erie showed a doubling of value when compared to similar homes without a lake view.<sup>196</sup> A development project which intruded upon the lake view would degrade quality of life for those residing in the home and lower the value of their property. If the obscuring land use were an objectionable one, such as a landfill or some other LULU, then the impact would be greater.

Visual buffers are frequently used to mitigate the aesthetic impact of incompatible land uses. The buffers are usually created through plantings, such as dense rows of evergreens along a site perimeter, but can also take the form of earthen berms, fencing and walls.

Visual buffering can also be achieved through careful selection of structure location, size, color and shape. On a large tract of land, a new office building might be hidden behind existing forest or tucked down in a valley. The height of smokestacks, towers, or a landfill might be reduced to minimize the number of homes from which the structure can be seen. Buildings can be made with wood siding or painted in earth tones so they are less visible. The normally straight edges of a landfill might be curved to appear more like a natural hill. Or visual impacts might be negated by changing building orientation. For example, development plans might show the rear of proposed houses facing the front of existing homes - a not very pleasant view. Besides visual buffers the new houses might simply be reversed so front of home faces front of home. In addition, a local jurisdiction might require a *residential transition area* between homes and incompatible land uses. The RTA might range from 50- to 150-feet in depth and buffer residences from noise, light and other visual impacts from the incompatible use.

Some jurisdictions require an applicant to conduct a viewshed analysis when the potential exists for affecting a large number of existing homes. The analysis is carried out by determining sightlines from each existing home or other locations, such as historic sites, where the proposed structure might create a visual impact.

The sightline analysis begins by referring to a topographic map to determine the elevation of the home. A line is then drawn on paper from the home to the highest point on the proposed structure to determine if it will be obscured by intervening trees, hills, or other landscape features. If the sightlines show a structure would be visible then the applicant must consider reasonable alternatives for reducing or eliminating the impact.

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<sup>196</sup> Residential Real Estate Prices: A Room with a View, Journal of Real Estate Research, 2 3(1 / 2):129-137.