

THERMAL/OASIS ACTIVE TRANSPORTATION PROJECT

Visual Impact Assessment Memorandum

FROM: Zach Liptak, Dokken Engineering

TO: Aaron Burton, Caltrans District 8

DATE: March 19, 2021

RE: Thermal/Oasis Active Transportation Project Visual Impact Assessment Memorandum

INTRODUCTION

The County of Riverside, in cooperation with the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans), proposes to construct approximately 14 miles of multi-function trail and sidewalk infrastructure in the communities of Thermal and Oasis in Riverside County. The project site is located approximately 1 mile west of State Route 86, with the proposed multi-modal trail along Harrison Street, 74th Avenue, Pierce Street, and 66th Avenue; and sidewalks along Middleton Street and portions of 66th Avenue (Appendix A - Figure 1: Project Vicinity and Figure 2: Project Location).

A Caltrans format Questionnaire to Determine Visual Impact Assessment Level has been completed (Appendix B: VIA Questionnaire) which resulted in a preliminary score of 10, indicating a brief visual impact assessment memorandum is the appropriate level of documentation for the project. This memorandum describes the site characteristics and confirms minimal changes to the visual setting.

1.1 PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The County of Riverside, in cooperation with the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans), proposes to construct approximately 14 miles of multi-function trail and sidewalk infrastructure in the communities of Thermal and Oasis in the eastern Coachella Valley, Riverside County. The general route is a multi-function trail loop that runs along 66th Avenue, Pierce Street, 74th Avenue and Harrison Street, with an additional segment extending north along Harrison Street to Echols Road and a sidewalk along Middleton Street between Harrison Street and 66th Avenue (Appendix A - Figure 3: Project Features). An additional sidewalk would supplement the multi-function trail on the portion of 66th Avenue between Harrison Street and Tyler Street. Along a portion of 66th Avenue the trail alignment is anticipated to occupy a raised access path along an existing US Bureau of Reclamation (USBR) irrigation channel, operated by the Coachella Valley Water District (CVWD) outside of the road right of way. The trail may also be placed along a CVWD canal on top of the adjacent levee at the intersection of Fillmore Street and 66th Avenue to its connection on Pierce Street, pending approval from CVWD to utilize this access road for the trail alignment. The project area encompasses both the potential trail alignment along the CVWD levee access road and the area along 66th Avenue and Pierce Street in the event that the trail cannot be placed adjacent to the canal. Similarly, the project area extends along Middleton Street, south of Harrison Street in the event the sidewalk is extended along this area to provide additional access to this commercial and residential area.

The proposed multi-function trail is a paved asphalt 10-foot-wide path situated primarily within road right of way with a minimum 5-foot buffer from the adjacent travel lanes. The proposed concrete sidewalk will be 5-foot-wide with adjacent street-side curb constructed at the edge of the existing

travel lane.

Several crossings will be required at intersecting streets and driveways along the multi-function trail route. All crossings will be at-grade and controlled in accordance with existing traffic control measures, unless specific safety concerns dictate otherwise. Although the preferred multi-function trail route is planned along the inside of the overall street loop to minimize arterial street crossings, it is anticipated that the alignment may shift outside the loop in places. Any street crossings will be at-grade and appropriate traffic control will be installed.

Multiple channel or stream crossings will be required for the multi-function trail to traverse existing irrigation channels and drainage paths. Whether by bridge, culvert extensions or low water crossings, hydraulic impact to the existing facilities will be minimized. Bridges and other elevated crossings will be light-duty and will avoid the use of piers within waterways.

Drainage improvements will be designed to maintain current drainage schemes. The current drainage is typically comprised of half-street cross fall runoff which will be collected between the roadway and the trail and conveyed past the trail via culverts or at-grade crossings. No regional drainage facilities are anticipated to be impacted and no significant new drainage facilities are expected to be constructed.

Most of the multi-function trail alignment along Harrison Street, Pierce Street, and 74th Avenue will require earth fill to raise the trails to elevations appropriate for public use. The alignment along 66th Avenue likely will require less fill material but is not anticipated to require significant soil removal. It is expected that the project will require a net import of soil material.

Relocation and/or modification of existing utilities may be required at various locations throughout the project, including Imperial Irrigation District (IID) electric facilities, Coachella Valley Water District (CVWD) water and sanitary sewer facilities, CVWD/United States Bureau of Reclamation (USBR) irrigation facilities, CVWD/Caltrans drainage facilities, Frontier Communications telephone facilities and Charter Communications cable facilities. In areas where existing pole line alignments are in close proximity to street rights of way, minor street alignment shifts may be necessary to avoid major pole line relocations.

1.2 REGULATORY SETTING

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969, as amended, establishes that the federal government use all practicable means to ensure all Americans safe, healthful, productive, and aesthetically and culturally pleasing surroundings (42 United States Code [USC] 4331[b][2]). To further emphasize this point, the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), in its implementation of NEPA (23 USC 109[h]), directs that final decisions on projects are to be made in the best overall public interest taking into account adverse environmental impacts, including among others, the destruction or disruption of aesthetic values.

1.3 VISUAL SETTING

The visual setting is typically defined by the viewsheds which are currently observable by the public, and is used to identify any particular views that could be affected, modified, or obstructed by the project. The project's visual setting is a mixture of undeveloped open land, agricultural lands, and rural residential and commercial lands; the site may be described as "rural agricultural" in character. The overall topography is flat, except for the occasional irrigation canal and associated infrastructure.

Natural land cover consists of large undeveloped lands and agricultural fields predominately consisting of date farms. Water features include a multitude of irrigation canals that run perpendicular to the existing roadways. Man-made features are prevalent including roadways, buildings, canals, utility lines, and other infrastructure utilized by the community. Residential development largely consistent of multi and single-family homes which are scattered around the project area with commercial development along the roadways as well. There are also multiple public schools in the vicinity of the project. Roadways in the viewshed are Harrison Street, 74th Avenue, Pierce Street, 66th Avenue, and Middleton Street which have utility lines running adjacent to the roadway. Representative photographs of the project site taken during March 2020 are shown in Appendix C.

Officially designated scenic resources are also used to evaluate the project's visual setting. Federal, state, and local scenic resources are described below:

Federal/National Scenic Resources

No federally-designated scenic resources are at or near the project site. The nearest National Scenic Byway is Arroyo Seco Historic Parkway - Route 110, approximately 115 miles to the northwest of the project. The nearest Wild and Scenic River is Sespe Creek, approximately 160 miles northwest of the project (National Parks Service 2020).

State Scenic Resources

The nearest eligible State Scenic Highway is Route 74 near Palm Desert/I-10 near Whitewater, located approximately 30 miles northwest of the project area (Caltrans 2017).

County Scenic Resources

The nearest County eligible scenic corridor is along I-10 from Palm Springs to the California border with Arizona, and it is located approximately ten miles north of the project (County of Riverside, 2020).

Other Potential Scenic Resources

The County of Riverside does not have any officially designated scenic vistas; however, the County has identified low-lying valleys, mountain ranges, rock formations, rivers, and lakes as part of their abundant natural visual resources as identified in the Land Use Element of the County General Plan (County of Riverside 2015). There are no rock outcroppings, mature native trees, historic buildings, or other unusual or unique features at the project site.

1.4 RESOURCE CHANGE (VISUAL CHARACTER + VISUAL QUALITY)

The visual character of the proposed project would be compatible with the existing character of the corridor. Proposed vertical elements would be minor, consisting of new signs indicating pedestrians are in the area and any crosswalk locations would also have new signs. The proposed sidewalks would provide continuous low-lying form, straight edges, light-grey color, and relatively smooth texture along the shoulders of existing roadways, which are currently being used for pedestrian travel. The proposed multi-modal trail would introduce a new man-made feature consisting of a fairly flat form at ground-level and long lines from the trail edges; asphalt would be light in color with high reflectance to minimize heat radiation, if feasible, and the trail surface would be smooth in texture. The Neighborhood Mobility Plan for the Communities of Thermal and Oasis recommends that trails should utilize colored asphalt that minimize heat radiation and provides visual distinction for the community. The character would be substantially compatible with the existing corridor, as visual encroachments from residences, commercial buildings, schools, utility lines and agricultural fields are still the dominant features in the background.

Proposed improvements have been designed to formalize trail alignments in areas where existing informal use occurs. The visual quality of the existing corridor would therefore be slightly changed by the proposed project. The proposed project may have to remove some existing vegetation and construct new sidewalks and multi-modal trails along the existing roadways. Visual quality would change only slightly, as the trail would follow existing informal foot paths currently utilized by people in the area. While the trail would result in a new man-made feature, it again, follows informal foot paths currently utilized by people in the area and is adjacent to existing roadways.

Proposed improvements would have no change on vividness.

Resource change would be moderate to low. New sidewalks and multi-modal trails would be consistent with the character of the area and would improve the visual quality due to increased intactness and unity along the road. Sidewalks near school and trails along residential and commercial corridors would be subject to a moderate to low change and trails along agricultural fields would be a moderate change due to the rural character of project surroundings; however, there still would be visual encroachment of rural community development in the background.

1.5 VIEWER SENSITIVITY (VIEWER EXPOSURE + VIEWER SENSITIVITY)

Viewers of the proposed trail and sidewalks would consist of residences, recreational users, pedestrians, agricultural workers, and automobile drivers and passengers. Sidewalks would be viewable by

TERMINOLOGY*

Form: Visual mass or shape

Line: Edges or linear definition

Color: Reflective brightness (light, dark) and hue (red, green)

Texture: Surface coarseness

Vividness is the extent to which the landscape is memorable and is associated with distinctive, contrasting, and diverse visual elements.

Intactness is the integrity of visual features in the landscape and the extent to which the existing landscape is free from non-typical visual intrusions.

Unity is the extent to which all visual elements combine to form a coherent, harmonious visual pattern.

*Source: Caltrans 2013

pedestrians and motorists; pedestrians and motorists would have low exposure due to the transitory nature of use surrounding proposed improvements. Adjacent residents would have the greatest exposure to project features and have a moderate-high sensitivity to visual changes. Recreational users would be exposed to project features while using the trail and, as they would have to utilize the proposed project-related features for recreation, would therefore have a moderate-low viewer sensitivity.

1.6 VISUAL IMPACT (RESOURCES CHANGE + VIEWER SENSITIVITY)

Visual impacts are determined by assessing changes to the visual resources and predicting viewer response to those changes. Visual ratings for each viewer group and discussion of each follow.

As discussed under Resource Change, visual quality would improve for the pedestrians and motorists viewer groups as the resource change would be low and low viewer response by pedestrians and motorists, the visual impact would be low.

Similarly, visual quality would slightly decrease for the recreational users, agricultural workers, and adjacent residents as the resource change would be moderate-low and moderate-low sensitivity of recreational users, the impact would be moderate-low on recreational users. Based on a moderate-low resource change and moderate-high viewer sensitivity, the visual impact would be moderate-low on residents adjacent to proposed improvements due to the minimal but permanent change.

1.7 SUMMARY

Proposed project features would result in minor changes to the visual setting. Officially-designated federal, state, or county scenic resources are miles away from the project site and would not be affected by the project. While the County of Riverside does not have officially-designated scenic vistas, the trail's viewshed includes nearby mountains and open space, which are generally considered scenic resources. The trail is intended to generally follow existing roadways and provide residents a connection to schools and commercial businesses within the region. The trail would largely follow existing informal foot paths currently utilized regularly by people in the area. The trail would not require substantial fill and would be constructed at ground level. The proposed project does not include major vertical features or other visual intrusions that would block views of the surrounding suburban setting or natural features. Proposed vertical elements would be minor, consisting of pedestrian signage and indications of pedestrian crossings adjacent to the existing roadways.

During construction, motorists and neighboring residents may observe heavy construction equipment, exposed soils during grading activities, temporary traffic control features (such as signage and orange cones), lighting, and construction workers. Visual effects due to project construction would be short-term and would cease to persist upon project completion.

The project would not create a new source of substantial light or glare that would adversely affect day or nighttime views in the area. The proposed sidewalks and trails are designated for use between dawn and dusk, negating the need for trail lighting. However, recreational users may access the trail at night and use headlamps or flashlights while on the trail. These irregular light sources would not be expected to adversely affect nighttime views.

1.8 AVOIDANCE, MINIMIZATION, AND/OR MITIGATION MEASURES

The following measures would be evaluated for feasibility to be implemented as part of the project during final design.

VIS-1: The project should evaluate the use of light-colored asphalt with high reflectance for feasibility to minimize visual impact and heat radiation.

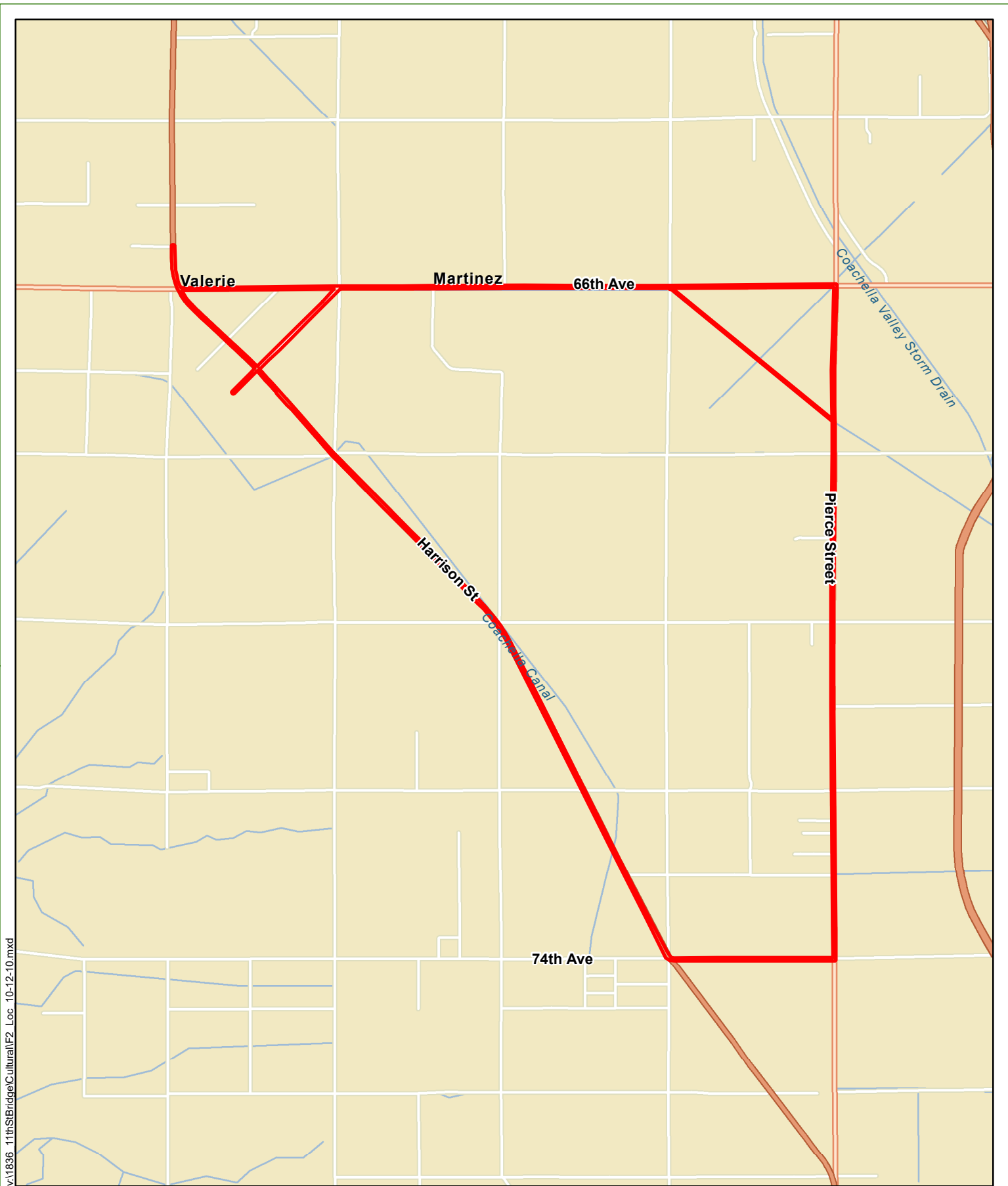
VIS-2: At the location of existing bus stops, the project should evaluate the feasibility of extending concrete paving to facilitate installation of bus stop seating and shade canopy after completion of this project.

VIS-3: At locations where, existing infrastructure would allow for the creation of a drinking fountain, the project should evaluate the feasibility of adding drinking fountains on the trail or near bus stops.

1.9 REFERENCES

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Appendix A
Figures



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Source: ESRI World Street Maps Online; Dokken Engineering 12/14/2020; Created By: ahale

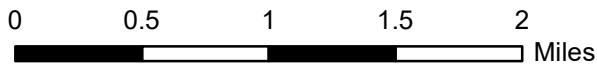
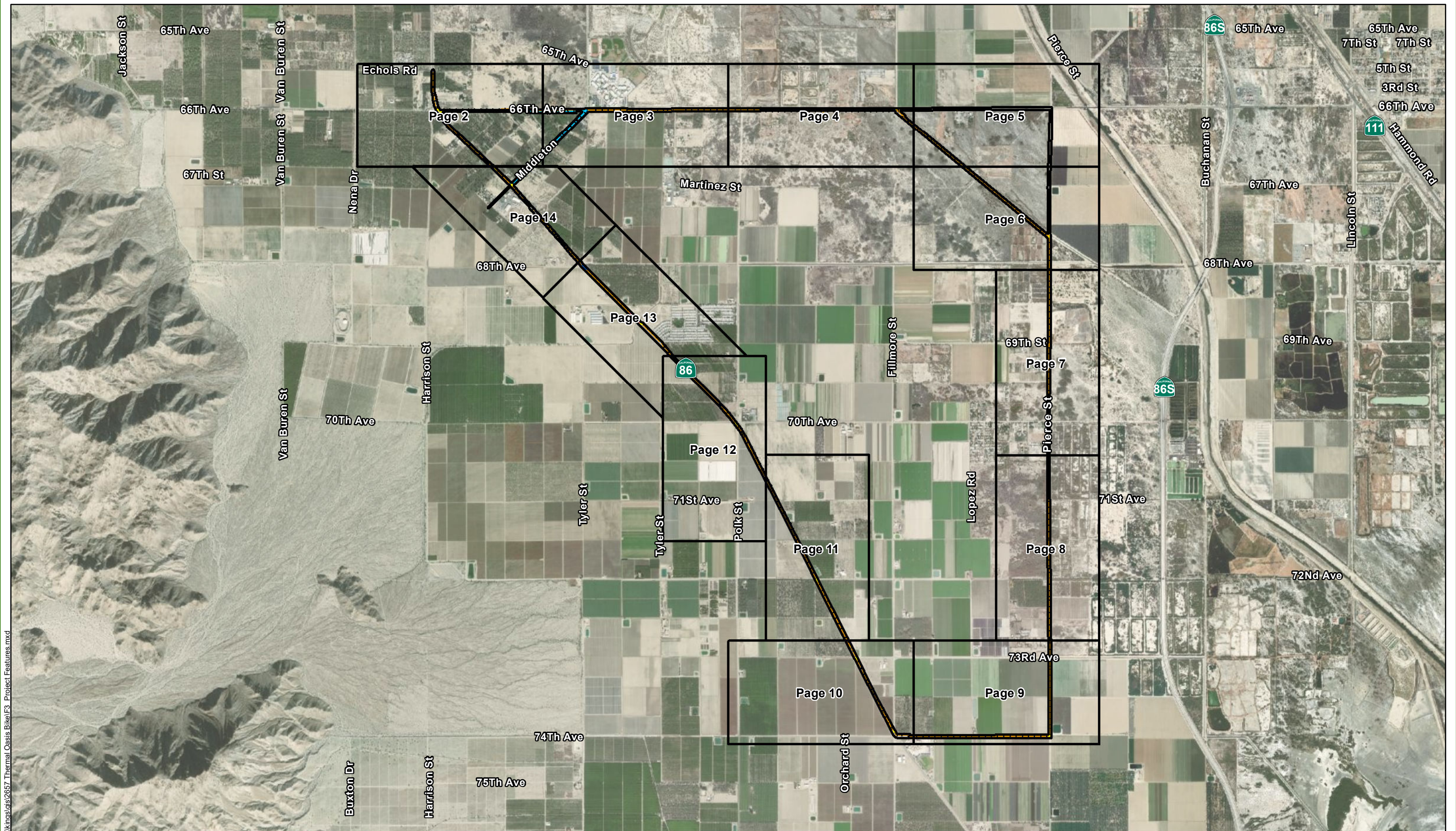


FIGURE 2
Project Location

Thermal/Oasis Active Transportation Project
ATPL-5956 (273)
Riverside County, California



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Source: ESRI Maps Online; Dokken Engineering 3/19/2021; Created By: zachl

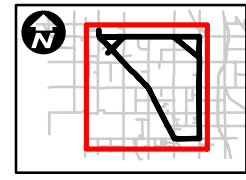
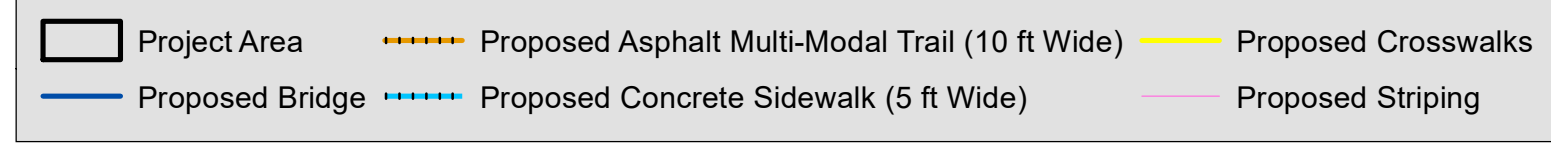
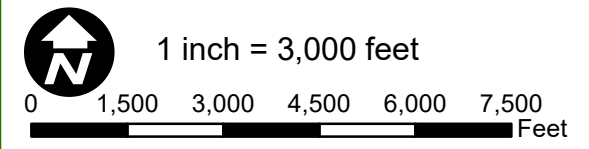
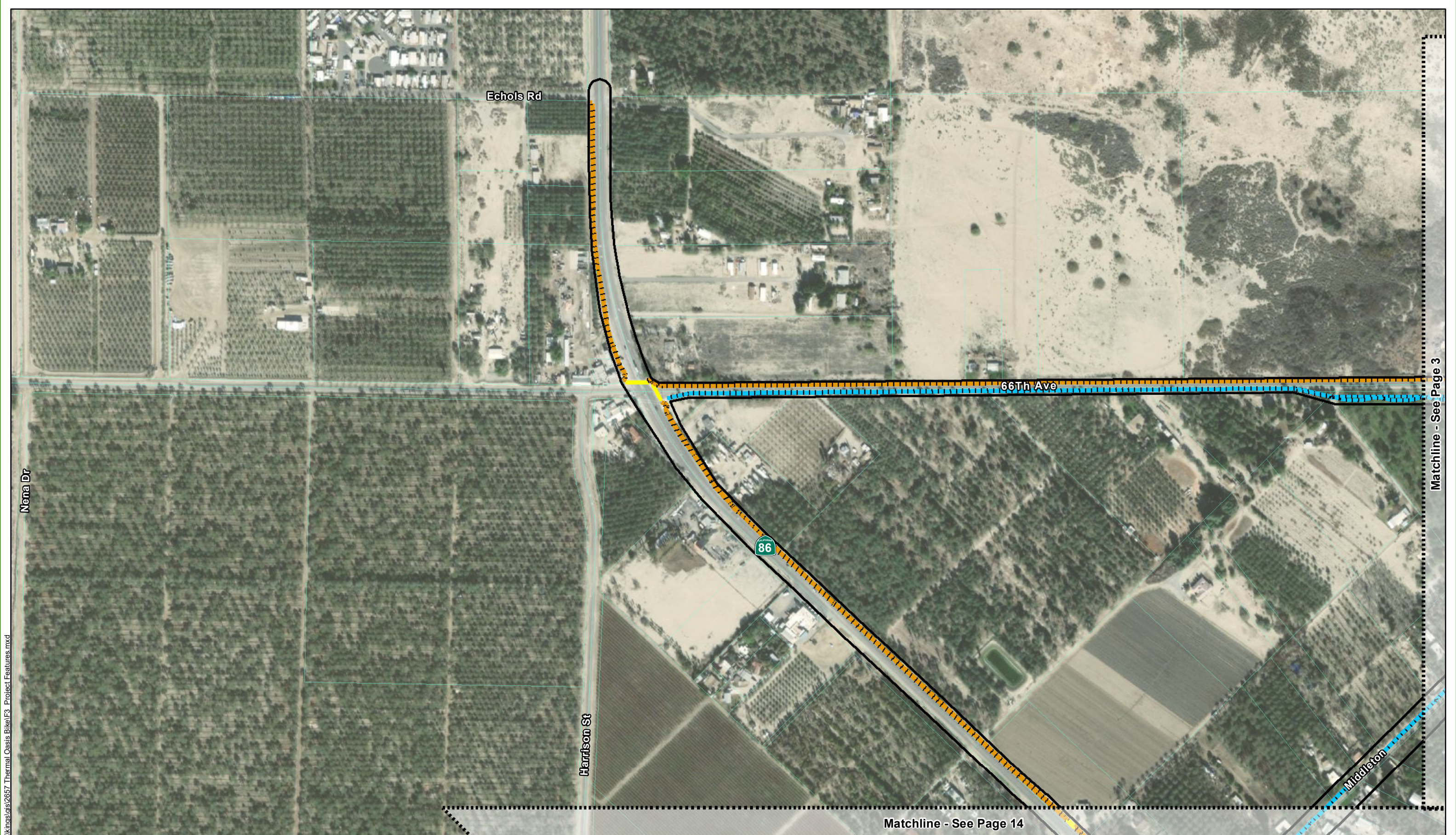
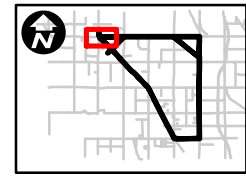
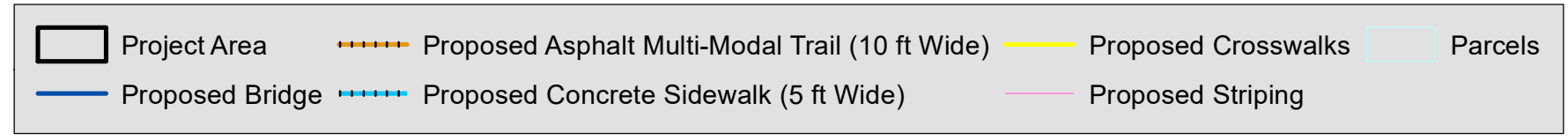
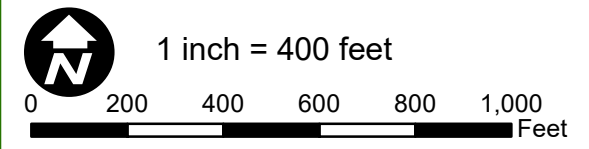


Figure 3
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Project Features
 Thermal/Oasis Active Transportation Project
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 Riverside County, California



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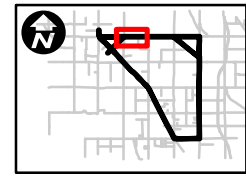
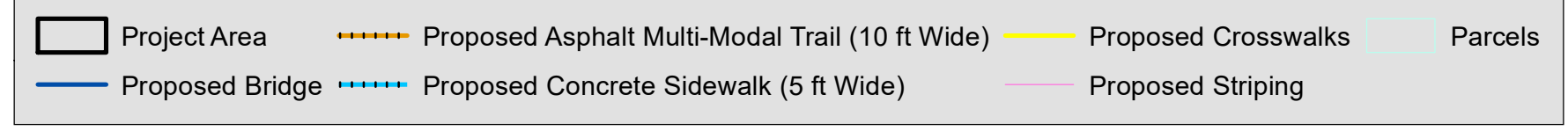
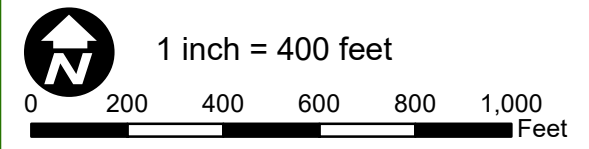


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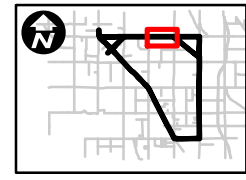
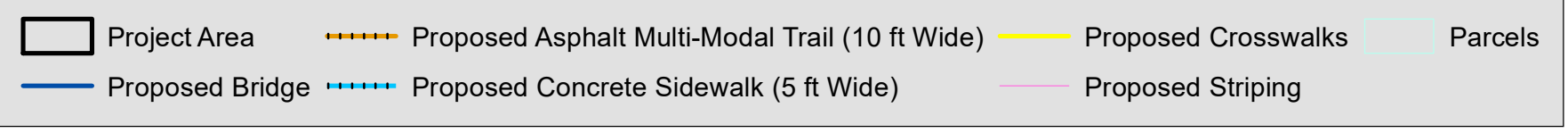
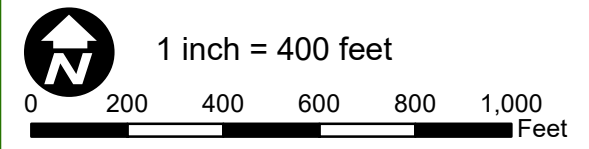


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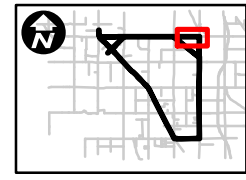
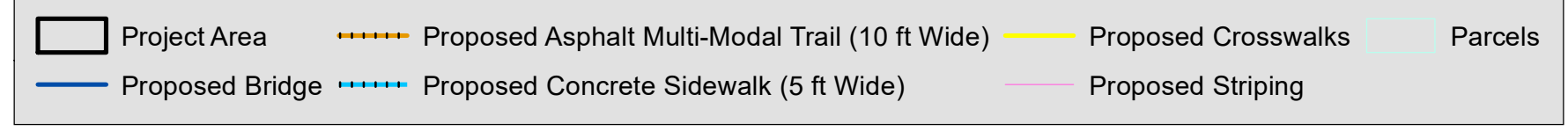
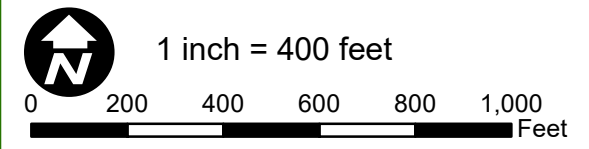
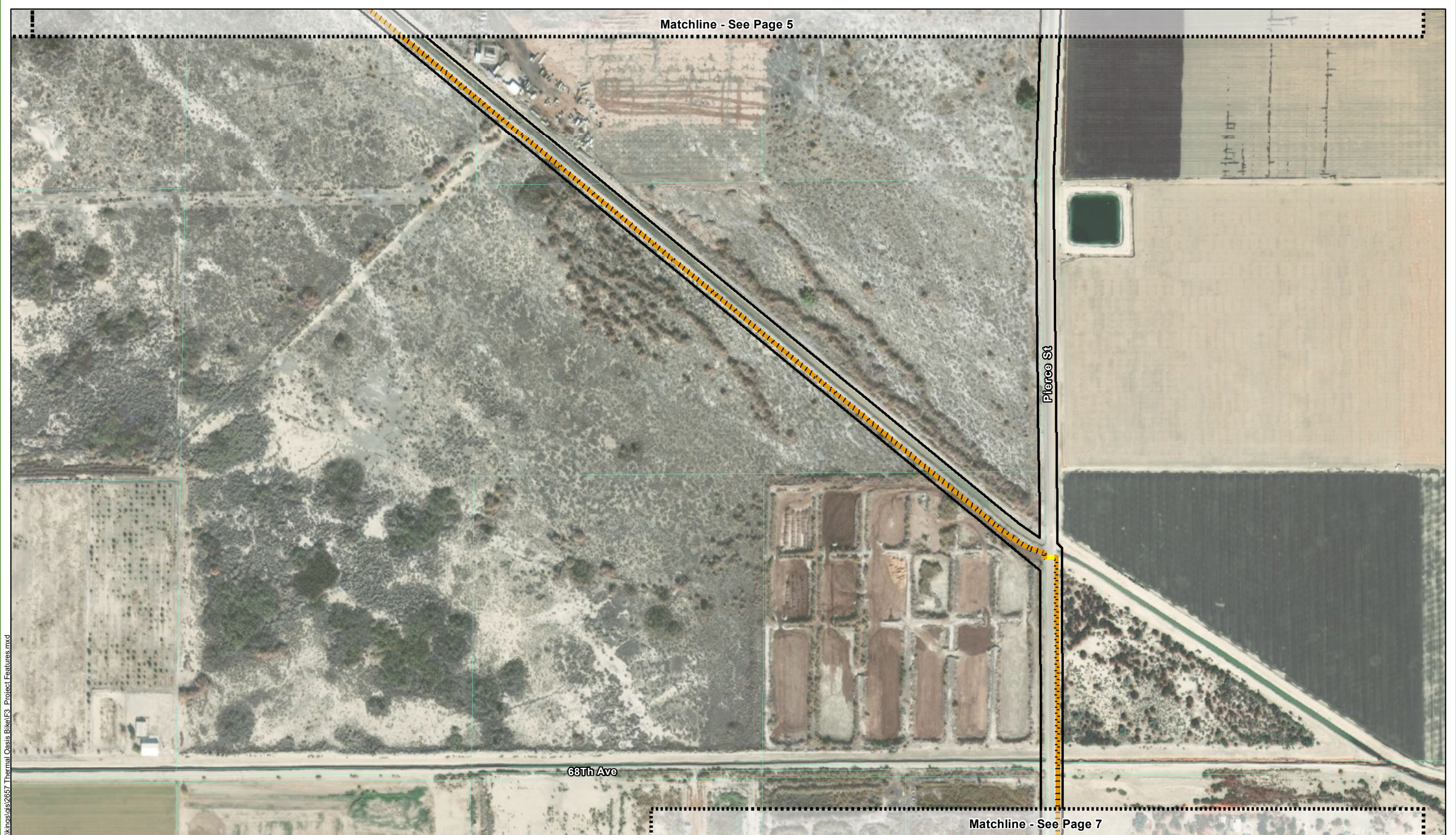
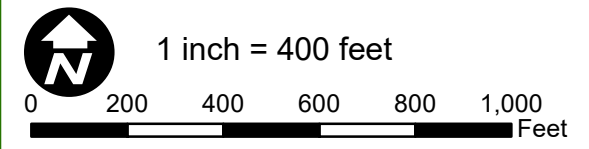


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Project Features
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Project Area	Proposed Asphalt Multi-Modal Trail (10 ft Wide)	Proposed Crosswalks	Parcels
Proposed Bridge	Proposed Concrete Sidewalk (5 ft Wide)	Proposed Striping	

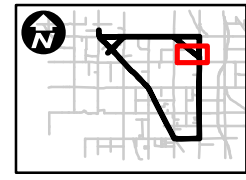
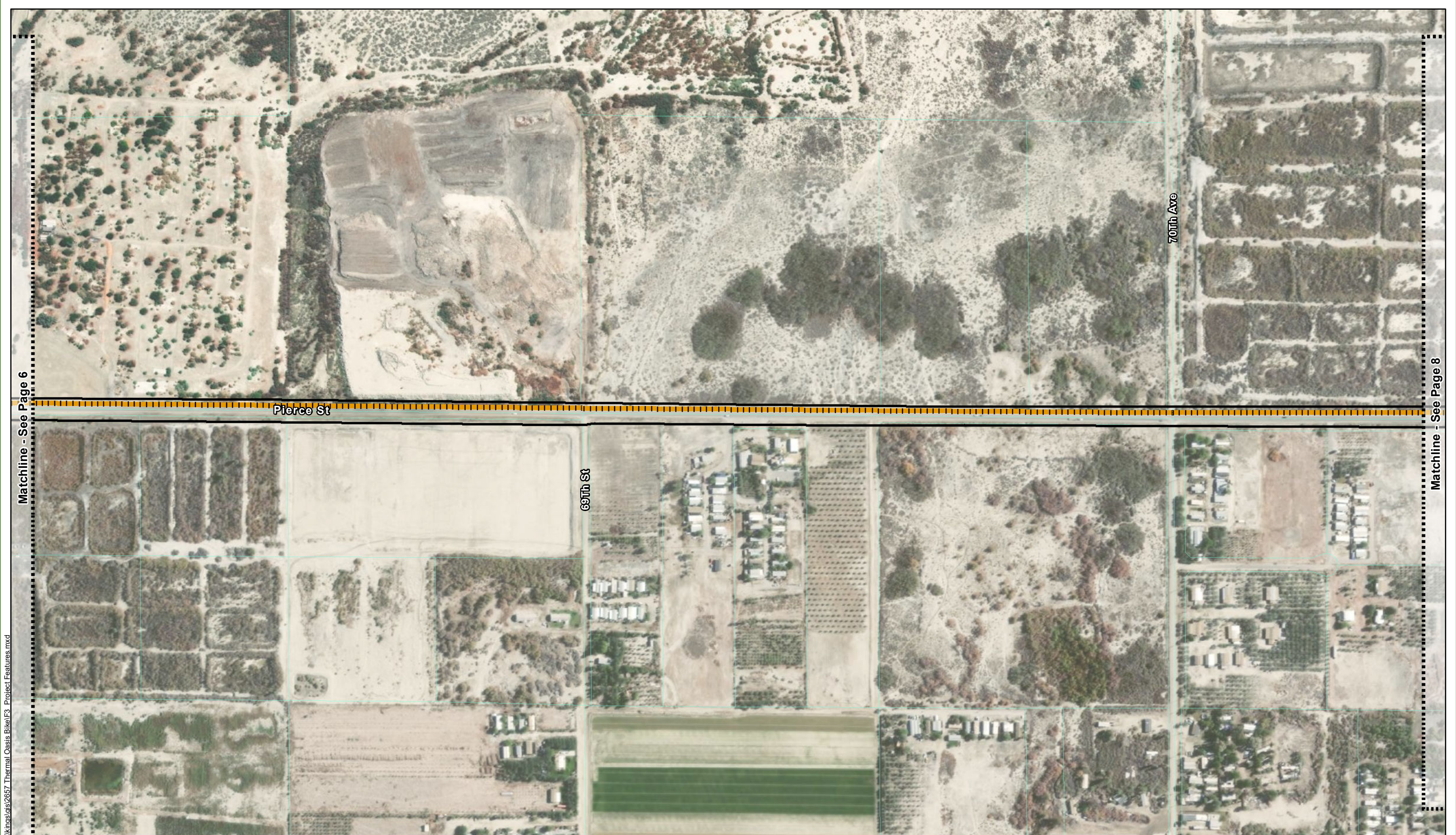


Figure 3
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Project Features
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 Riverside County, California



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Pierce St

70th Ave

69th St

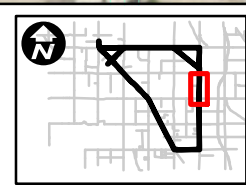
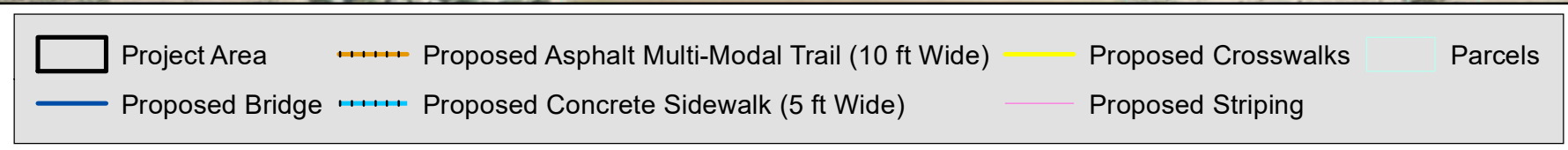
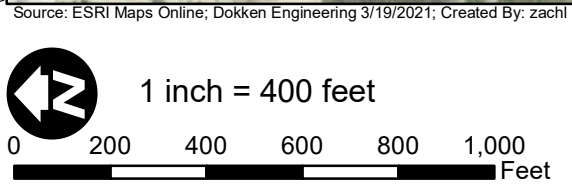
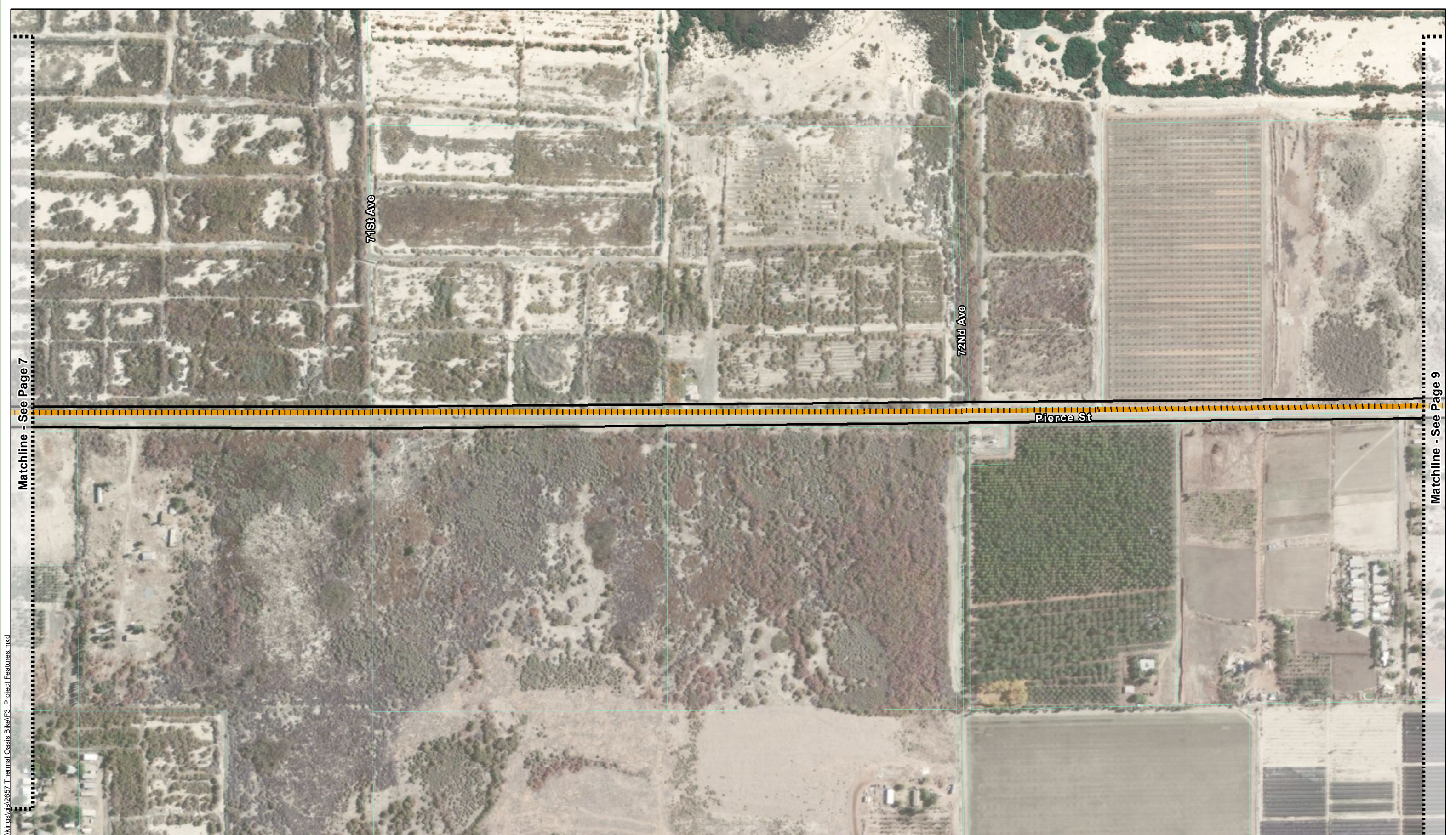


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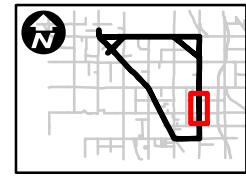
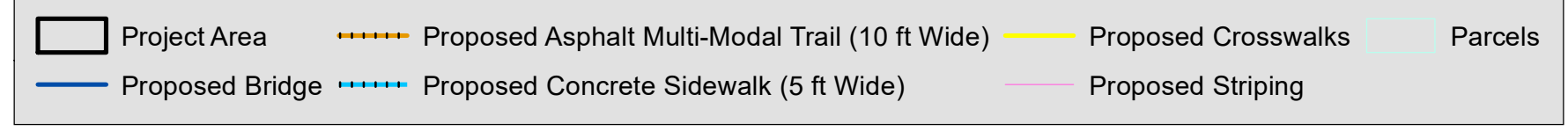
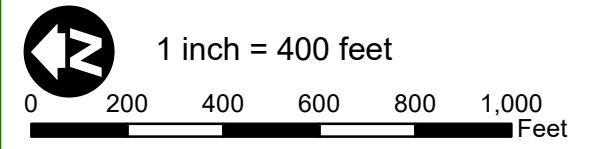
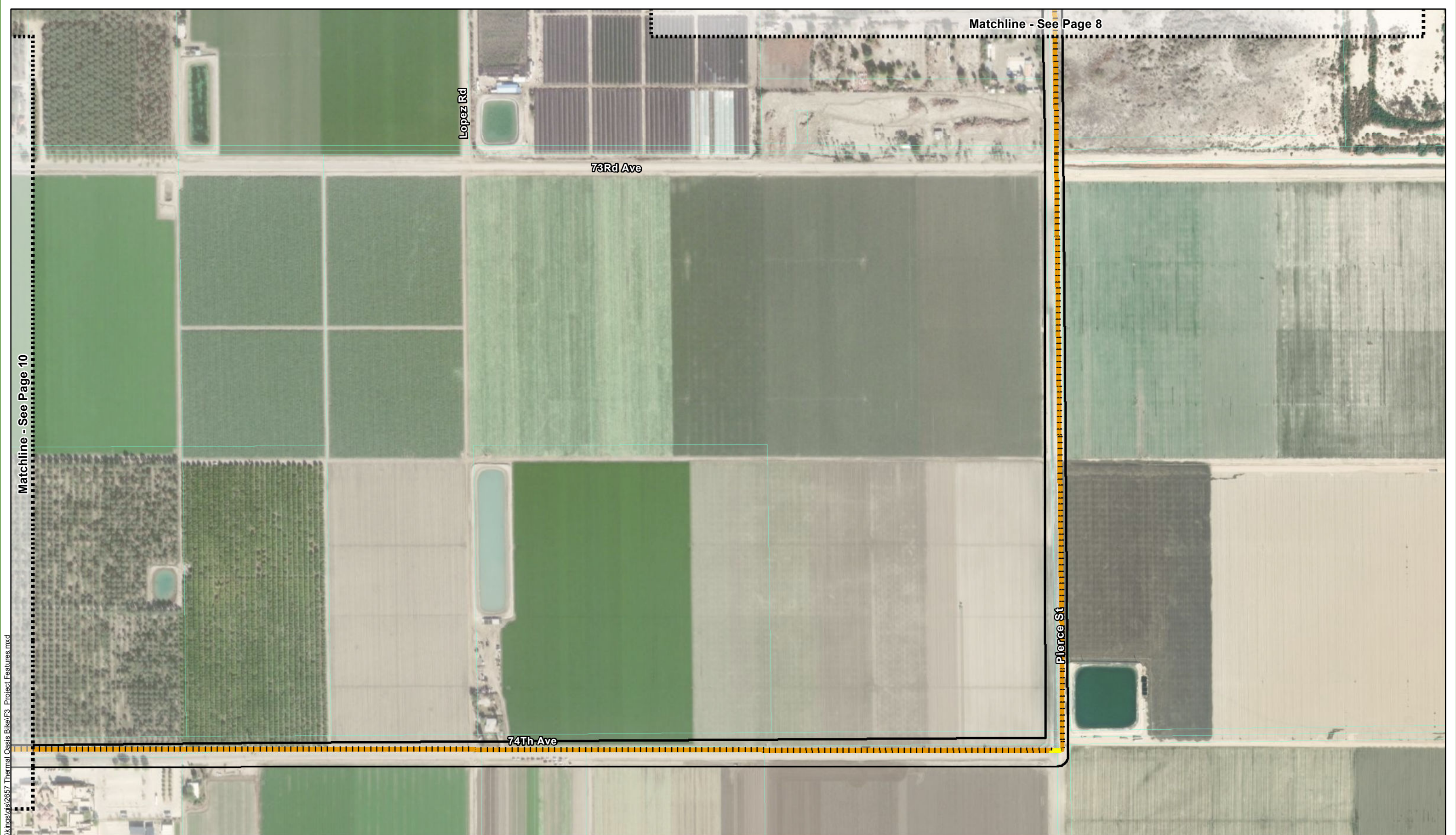


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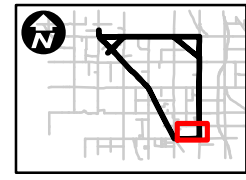
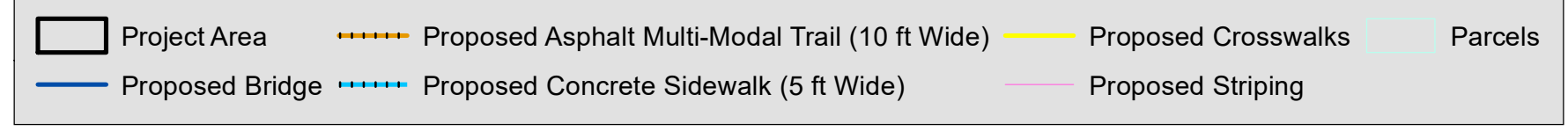
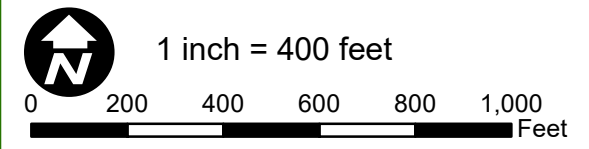
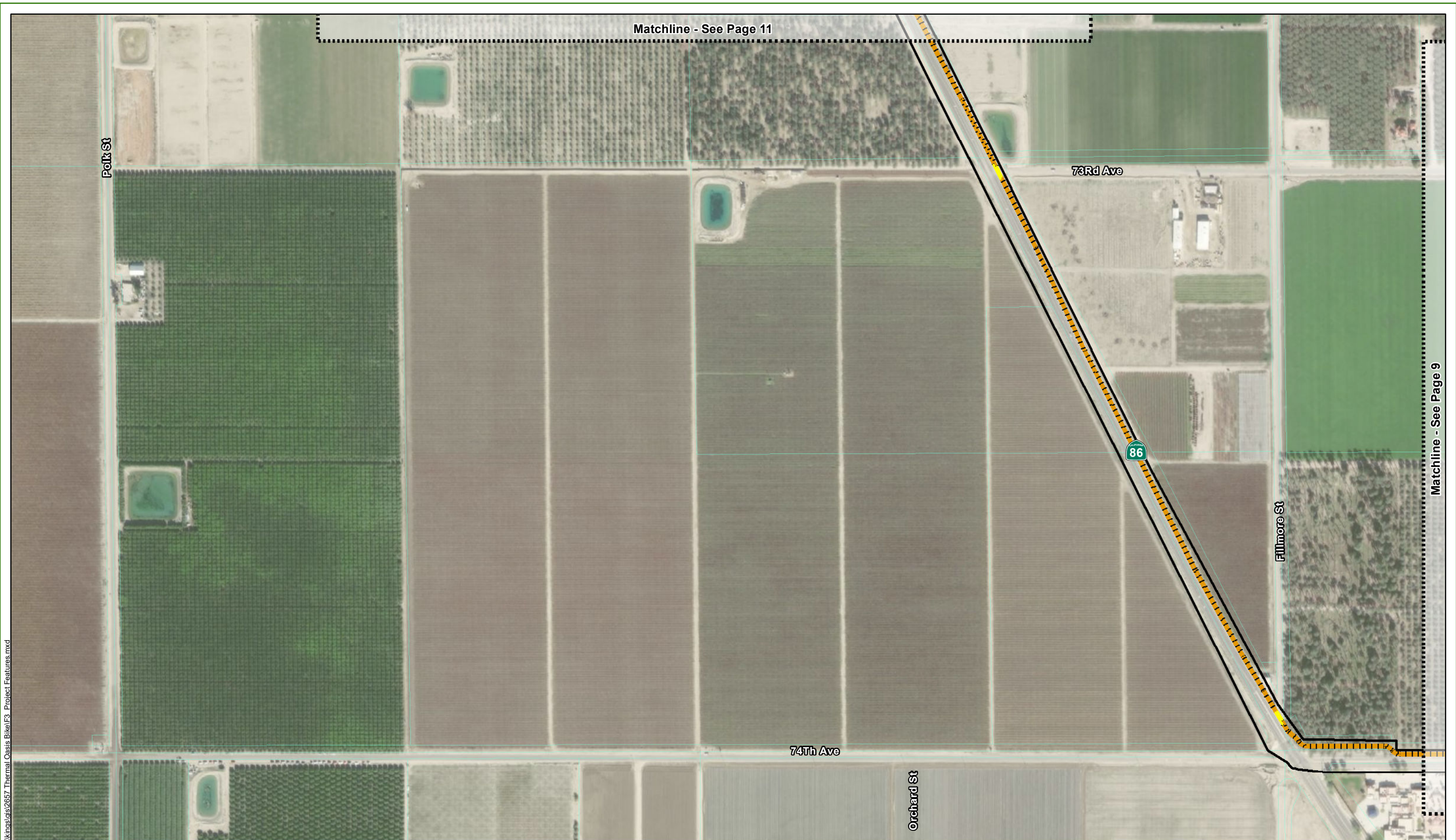


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Project Features
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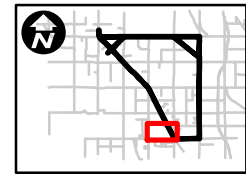
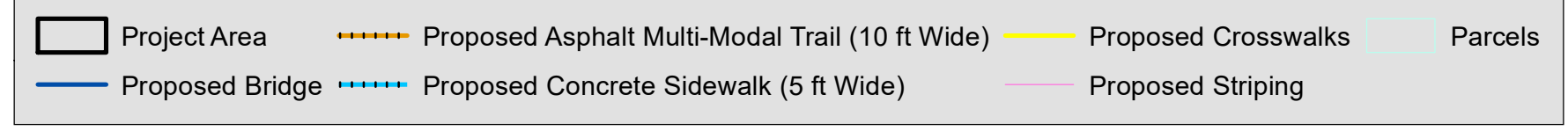
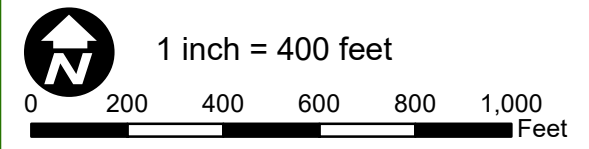
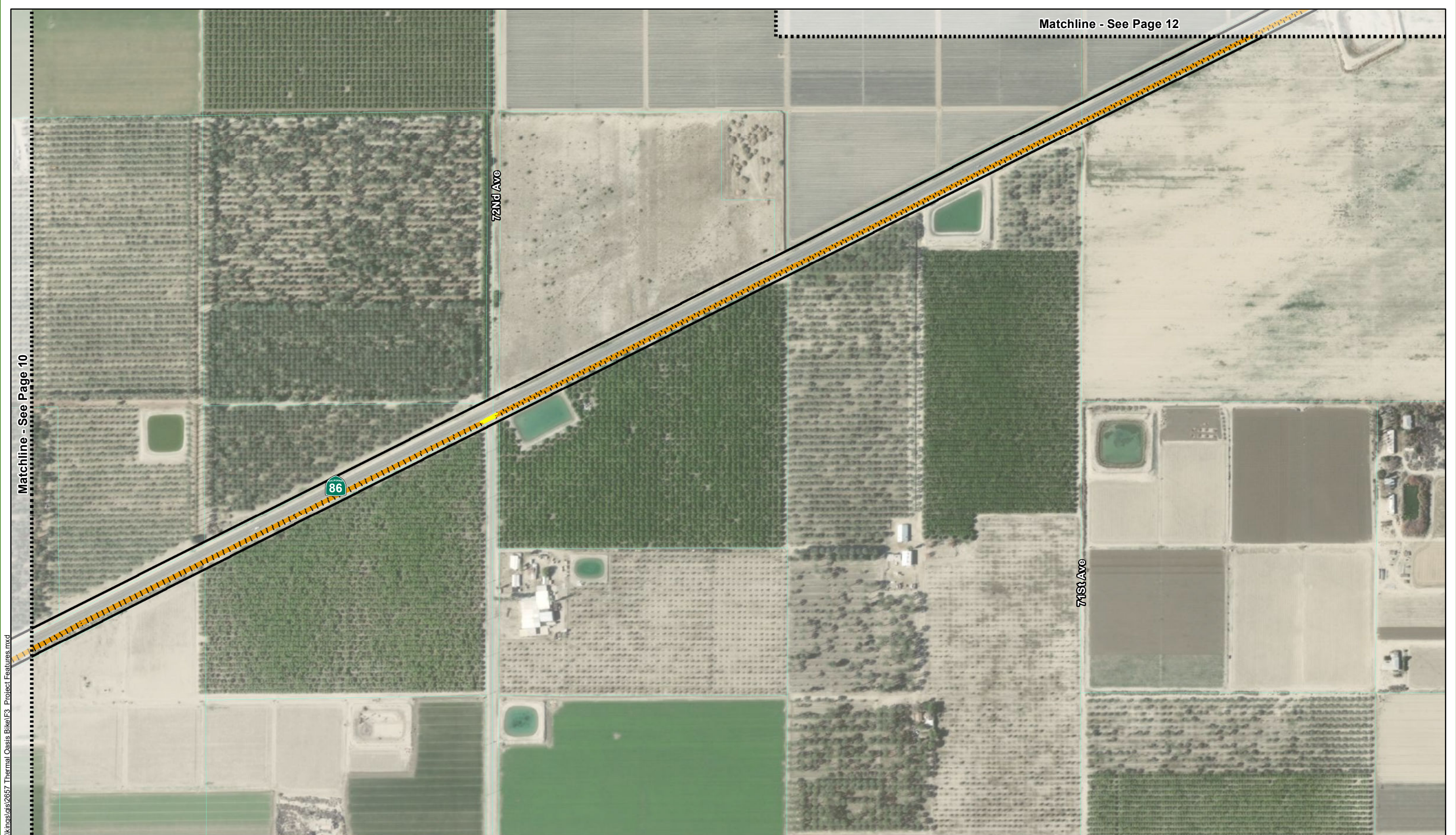


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Project Features
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 Riverside County, California



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Matchline - See Page 10

Matchline - See Page 12

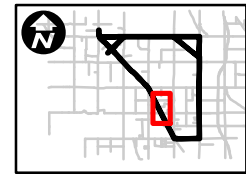
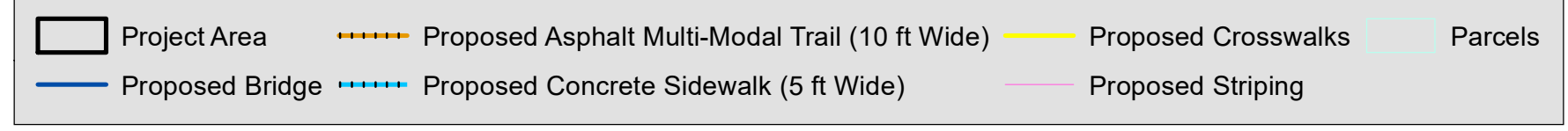
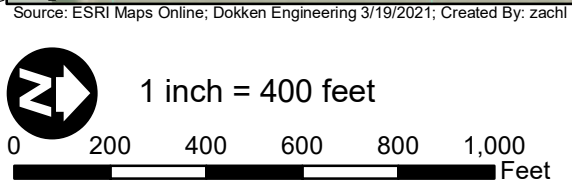


Figure 3
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Project Features
 Thermal/Oasis Active Transportation Project
 ATPL-5956 (273)
 Riverside County, California



\\kingsluis\2657_Thermal_Oasis Bike\F3_Protect Features.mxd

Source: ESRI Maps Online; Dokken Engineering 3/19/2021; Created By: zachl

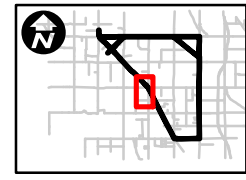
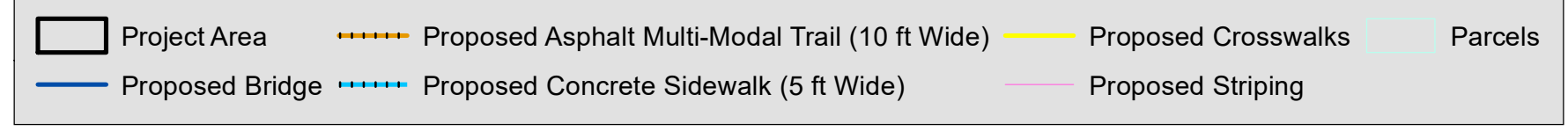
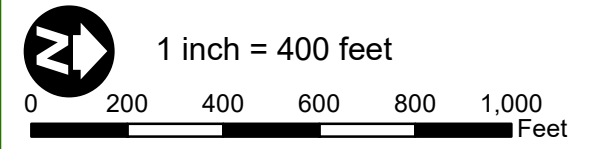
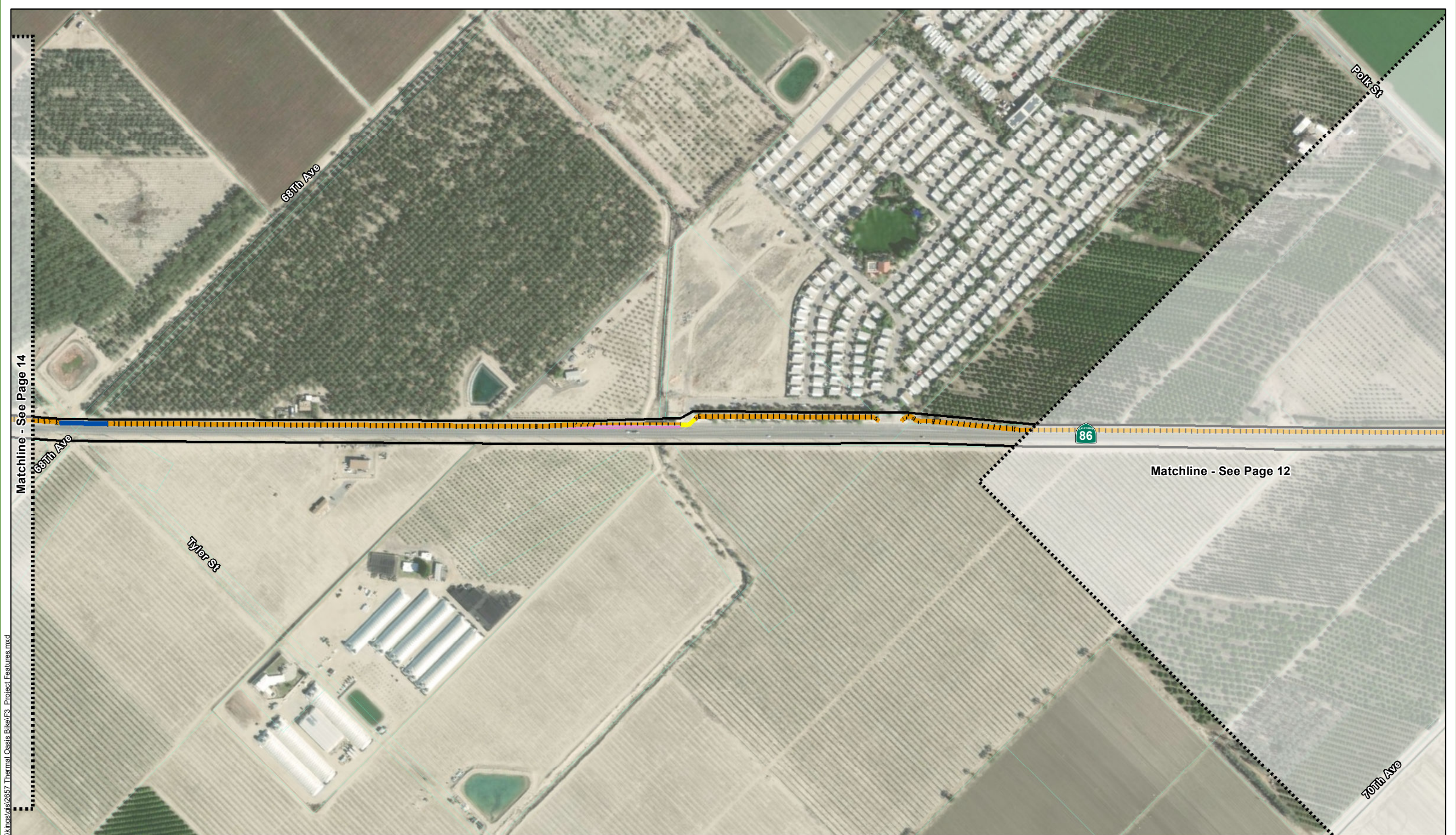


Figure 3
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Project Features
 Thermal/Oasis Active Transportation Project
 ATPL-5956 (273)
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Matchline - See Page 14

Matchline - See Page 12

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Source: ESRI Maps Online; Dokken Engineering 3/19/2021; Created By: zachl

1 inch = 400 feet

Project Area	Proposed Asphalt Multi-Modal Trail (10 ft Wide)	Proposed Crosswalks	Parcels
Proposed Bridge	Proposed Concrete Sidewalk (5 ft Wide)	Proposed Striping	

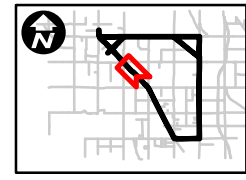
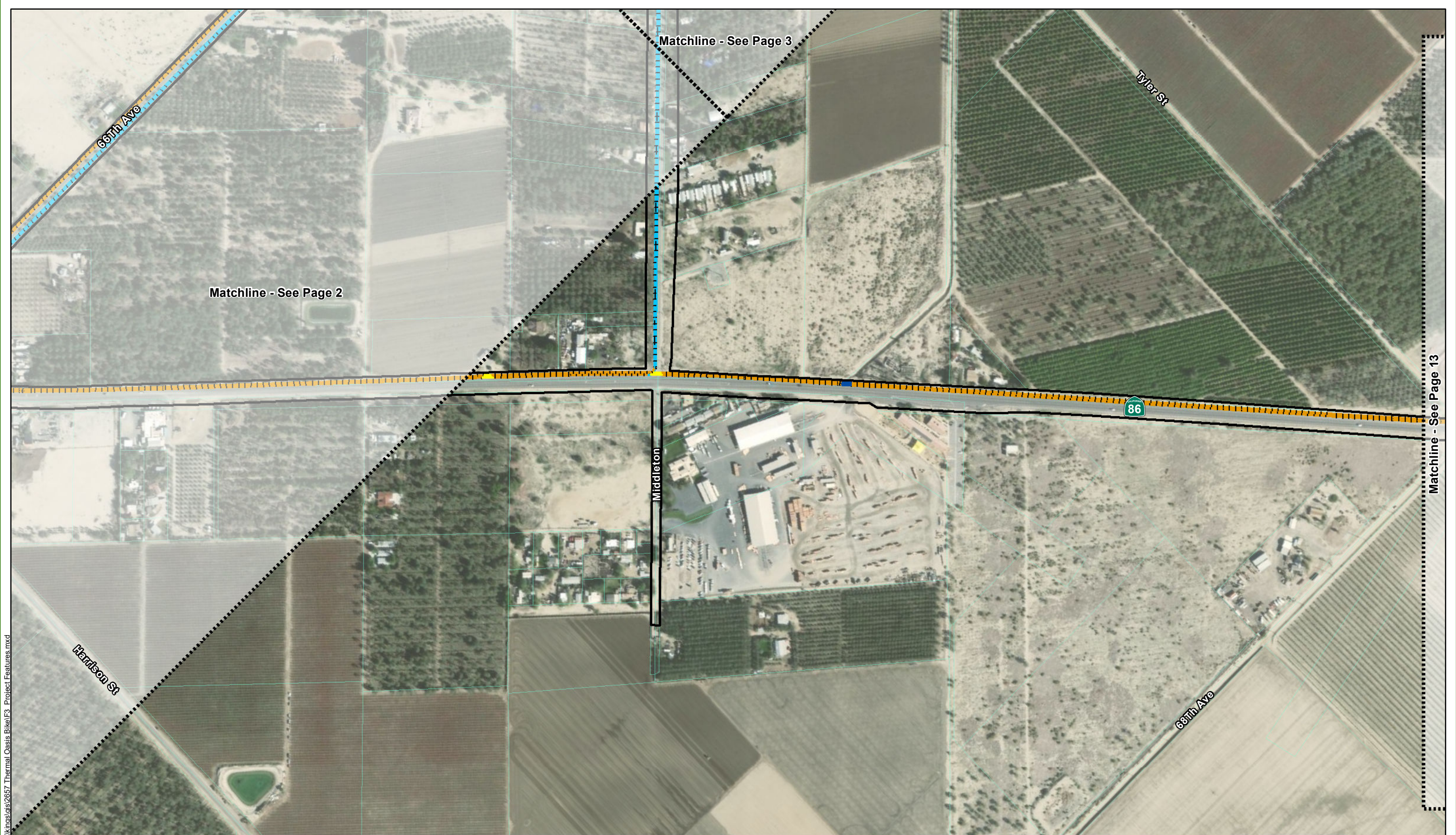


Figure 3
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Project Features
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Source: ESRI Maps Online; Dokken Engineering 3/19/2021; Created By: zachl

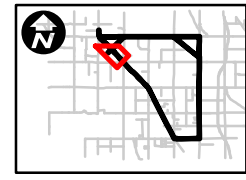
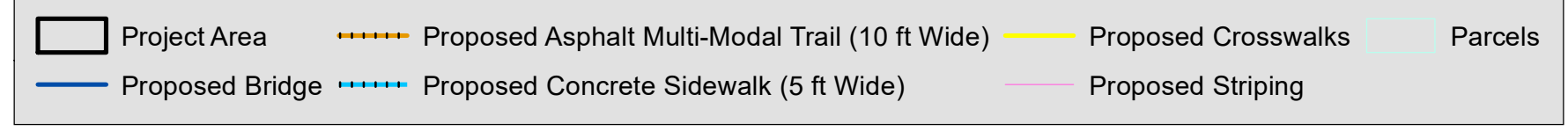
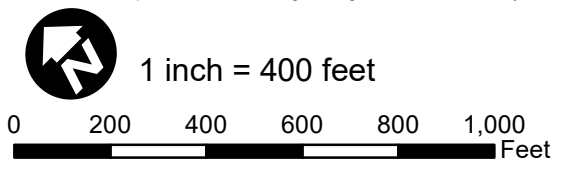


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Project Features
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Appendix B
Caltrans Visual Impact Assessment Questionnaire



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Questionnaire to Determine Visual Impact Assessment (VIA) Level

Use the following questions and subsequent score as a guide to help determine the appropriate level of VIA documentation. This questionnaire assists the VIA preparer (i.e. Landscape Architect) in estimating the probable visual impacts of a proposed project on the environment and in understanding the degree and breadth of the possible visual issues. The goal is to develop a suitable document strategy that is thorough, concise and defensible.

Enter the project name and consider each of the ten questions below. Select the response that most closely applies to the proposed project and corresponding number on the right side of the table. Points are automatically computed at the bottom of the table and the total score should be matched to one of the five groups of scores at the end of the questionnaire that include recommended levels of VIA study and associated annotated outlines (i.e., minor, moderate, advanced/complex).

This scoring system should be used as a preliminary guide and should not be used as a substitute for objective analysis on the part of the preparer. Although the total score may recommend a certain level of VIA document, circumstances associated with any one of the ten question-areas may indicate the need to elevate the VIA to a greater level of detail. For projects done by others on the State Highway System, the District Landscape Architect should be consulted when scoping the VIA level and provide concurrence on the level of analysis used.

[The Standard Environmental Reference, Environmental Handbook, Volume I: Chapter 27-Visual & Aesthetics Review](#) lists preparer qualifications for conducting the visual impact assessment process. Landscape Architects receive formal training in the area of visual resource management and can appropriately determine which VIA level is appropriate.

Preparer Qualifications:

"Scenic Resource Evaluations and VIA's are performed under the direction of licensed Landscape Architects. Landscape Architects receive formal training in the area of visual resource management with a curriculum that emphasizes environmental design, human factors, and context sensitive solutions. When recommending specific visual mitigation measures, Landscape Architects can appropriately weigh the benefits of these different measures and consider construction feasibility and maintainability."

Calculate VIA Level Score

Project Information

Project Name

Thermal Oasis Active Transportation Project

Project Identification #

ATPL-5956 (273)

Preparer Name

Brian Marks

Caltrans District Landscape Architect (DLA)

For projects on State Highway System Only, Name of Caltrans District Landscape Architect (DLA) providing VIA Questionnaire Score Concurrence - if different than above.

For Projects on State Highway System Only, Enter DLA Name

Change to Visual Environment

Will the project result in a noticeable change in the physical

1. characteristics of the existing environment?

Consider all project components and construction impacts - both permanent and temporary, including landform changes, structures, noise barriers, vegetation removal, railing, signage, and contractor activities.

Moderate Level of Change (2 points) ▼

Will the project complement or contrast with the visual character desired

2. by the community?

Evaluate the scale and extent of the 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 change will be viewed by the public as positive or negative? Research planning documents, or talk with local planners and community representatives to understand the type of visual environment local residents envision for their community.

High Compatibility (1 point) ▼

What level of local concern is there for the types of project features (e.g., bridge structures, large excavations, sound barriers, or median planting

3. removal) and construction impacts that are proposed?

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.

Low Concern (1 point) ▼

Will the project require redesign or realignment to minimize adverse change or will mitigation, such as landscape or architectural treatment,

4. likely be necessary?

Consider the type of changes caused by the project, i.e., can undesirable views be screened or will desirable views be permanently obscured so a redesign should be considered?

No Mitigation Likely (0 points) ▼

Will this project, when seen collectively with other projects, result in an aggregate adverse change (cumulative impacts) in overall visual quality

5. or character?

Identify any projects (both Caltrans 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.

Cumulative Impacts Unlikely to Occur (1 point) ▼

Viewer Sensitivity

What is the potential that the project proposal will be controversial within

1. the community, or opposed by any organized group?

This can be researched initially by talking with Caltrans and local agency management and staff familiar with the affected community's sentiments as evidenced by past projects and/or current information.

How sensitive are potential viewer-groups likely to be regarding visible changes proposed by the project?

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 Caltrans staff, local agencies and community representatives familiar with the affected community's sentiments and demonstrated concerns.

To what degree does the project's aesthetic approach appear to be consistent with applicable laws, ordinances, regulations, policies or standards?

Although the State is not always required to comply with local planning ordinances, these documents are critical in understanding the importance that communities place on aesthetic issues. The Caltrans Environmental Planning branch may have copies of the planning documents that pertain to the project. If not, this information can be obtained by contacting the local planning department. Also, many local and state planning documents can be found online at the California Land Use Planning Network.

Are permits going to be required by outside regulatory agencies (i.e., Federal, State, or local)?

Permit requirements can have an unintended consequence on the visual environment. Anticipated permits, as well as specific permit requirements - which are defined by the permitted, may be determined by talking with the project Environmental Planner and Project Engineer. Note: coordinate with the Caltrans representative responsible for obtaining the permit prior to communicating directly with any permitting agency.

Will the project sponsor or public benefit from a more detailed visual analysis in order to help reach consensus on a course of action to address potential visual impacts?

Consider the proposed project features, possible visual impacts, and probable mitigation recommendations.

It is recommended that you print a copy of these calculations for the project file.

Project Score: 10

Select An Outline Based Upon Project Score

The total score will indicate the recommended VIA level for the project. In addition to considering circumstances relating to any one of the ten questions-areas that would justify elevating the VIA level, also consider any other project factors that would have an effect on level selection.

Score 6-9

No noticeable visual changes to the environment are proposed and no further analysis is required. Print out a copy of this completed questionnaire for your project file or Preliminary Environmental Study (PES).

Score 10-14

Negligible visual changes to the environment are proposed. A [brief Memorandum\(see sample\)](#)addressing visual issues providing a rationale why a technical study is not required.

Score 15-19

Noticeable visual changes to the environment are proposed. An abbreviated VIA is appropriate in this case. The assessment would briefly describe project features, impacts and any avoidance and minimization measures. Visual simulations would be optional. Go to the [Directions for using and accessing the Minor VIA Annotated Outline.](#)

Score 20-24

Noticeable visual changes to the environment are proposed. A fully developed VIA is appropriate. This technical study will likely receive public review.Go to the [Directions for using and accessing the Moderate VIA Annotated Outline.](#)

Score 25-30

Noticeable visual changes to the environment are proposed. A fully developed VIA is appropriate that includes photo simulations. It is appropriate to alert the Project Development Team to the potential for highly adverse impacts and to consider project alternatives to avoid those impacts.Go to the [Directions for using and accessing the Advanced/Complex VIA Annotated Outline.](#)

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- ▶ [Arrive Alive](#)
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- ▶ [CAL FIRE](#)
- ▶ [California Census 2020](#)
- ▶ [California Climate Investments](#)
- ▶ [California Transportation Plan 2050](#)

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Appendix C

Site Photographs



Photo 1: Located at the intersection of 66th Avenue and Middleton Street, facing southwest, this view is representative of the pedestrian perspective within residential communities and views of the walking trails along the shoulders of roads utilized by residents adjacent to the project area. (3-25-2020)



Photo 2: Located along 66th Avenue, facing west, this view is representative of the pedestrian perspective who currently utilize the shoulders of existing roads adjacent to open space/undeveloped land and agricultural fields. (3-25-2020)



Photo 3: Located along Pierce St, facing south, this view is representative of the pedestrian perspective who currently utilize the shoulders of existing roads adjacent to agricultural fields. (3-25-2020)



Photo 4: Located along Harrison St, just south of the intersection with Middleton St, facing southeast, this view is representative of the pedestrian perspective who currently utilize the shoulders of existing roads adjacent to rural residential and commercial developments. (3-25-2020)