

Foothill-De Anza Community College District

FOOTHILL COLLEGE DECARBONIZATION
UTILITY PLANT PROJECT

January 2026 | CEQA Exemption Memorandum



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for Foothill-De Anza Community College District

Foothill-De Anza Community College District

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SOURCES

All documents cited in this report and used in its preparation are hereby incorporated by reference into this document. Copies of documents referenced herein are available for review at the Foothill-De Anza Community College District, 12345 El Monte Road, Los Altos Hills, California 94022.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Foothill-De Anza Community College District (District) is proposing the Foothill College Decarbonization Utility Plant Project (proposed project). This memorandum evaluates the appropriateness of a Categorical Exemption for the proposed project pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) Guidelines Section 15303 (New Construction or Conversion of Small Structures) and Section 15314 (Minor Addition to Schools). The District is the lead agency for the proposed project in accordance with the CEQA Statute and Guidelines.

Once it is determined that an activity is a project subject to CEQA, it is then determined whether the project is exempt from CEQA. Pursuant to State CEQA Guidelines Section 15061(b), a project is exempt from CEQA if:

1. The project is exempt by statute (see, e.g., Article 18, commencing with Section 15260).
2. The project is exempt pursuant to a categorical exemption (see Article 19, commencing with Section 15300) and the application of that categorical exemption is not barred by one of the exceptions set forth in Section 15300.2.
3. The activity is covered by the common-sense exemption that CEQA applies only to projects which have the potential for causing a significant effect on the environment. Where it can be seen with certainty that there is no possibility that the activity in question may have a significant effect on the environment, the activity is not subject to CEQA.
4. The project will be rejected or disapproved by a public agency (see Section 15270(b)).
5. The project is exempt pursuant to the provisions of Article 12.5 of Chapter 3.

Article 19, *Categorical Exemptions*, of the State CEQA Guidelines includes a list of classes of projects that have been determined not to have a significant effect on the environment and are, as a result, exempt from review under CEQA, consistent with State CEQA Guidelines Section 15061(b)(2). These categorical exemptions are established through the formal regulatory rulemaking process administered by the California Secretary for Natural Resources, pursuant to statutory authority granted under CEQA (Public Resources Code Sections 21000–21189). Through this process, the Secretary evaluates categories of projects that, based on past experience and environmental analysis, do not ordinarily result in significant environmental impacts, and therefore may be exempted from further CEQA review.

This document describes how the proposed project qualifies for a Class 3 Categorical Exemption, as defined in Section 15303 (*New Construction or Conversion of Small Structures*) of the State CEQA Guidelines, and a Class 14 Categorical Exemption, as defined in Section 15314

1. INTRODUCTION

(Minor Addition to Schools). A Class 3 Categorical Exemption consists of the construction and location of limited numbers of new, small facilities or structures; installation of small new equipment and facilities in small structures; and the conversion of existing small structures from one use to another where only minor modifications are made in the exterior of the structure. A Class 14 Categorical Exemption consists of minor additions to existing schools within existing school grounds where the addition does not increase original student capacity by more than 25 percent or 10 classrooms, whichever is less.

In addition, this document demonstrates that none of the exceptions to categorical exemptions in the State CEQA Guidelines Section 15300.2 (*Exceptions*) apply to the proposed project. The exceptions are further discussed in this memorandum in Section 4, *Exceptions*, and include the following:

- (a) The project is not within a sensitive environment;
- (b) There would be no cumulative impacts;
- (c) There would be no significant effects on the environment due to an unusual circumstance;
- (d) There would be no impacts to a scenic highway;
- (e) The project site is not located on a hazardous waste site; and
- (f) There would be no impacts to historical resources.

2. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Foothill-De Anza Community College District (District) is proposing to construct a decarbonization utility plant (proposed project). A detailed description of the improvements is provided in Section 2.6, *Proposed Project*.

2.1 REGIONAL LOCATION

The project site is at Foothill College in the town of Los Altos Hills, approximately 35 miles southeast of San Francisco and 20 miles northwest of downtown San José, within Santa Clara County. Los Altos Hills is surrounded by the city of Palo Alto to the north, the cities of Los Altos and Mountain View to the east, the city of Cupertino to the south, and open space to the west, as seen on Figure 2-1, *Regional and Vicinity Map*.

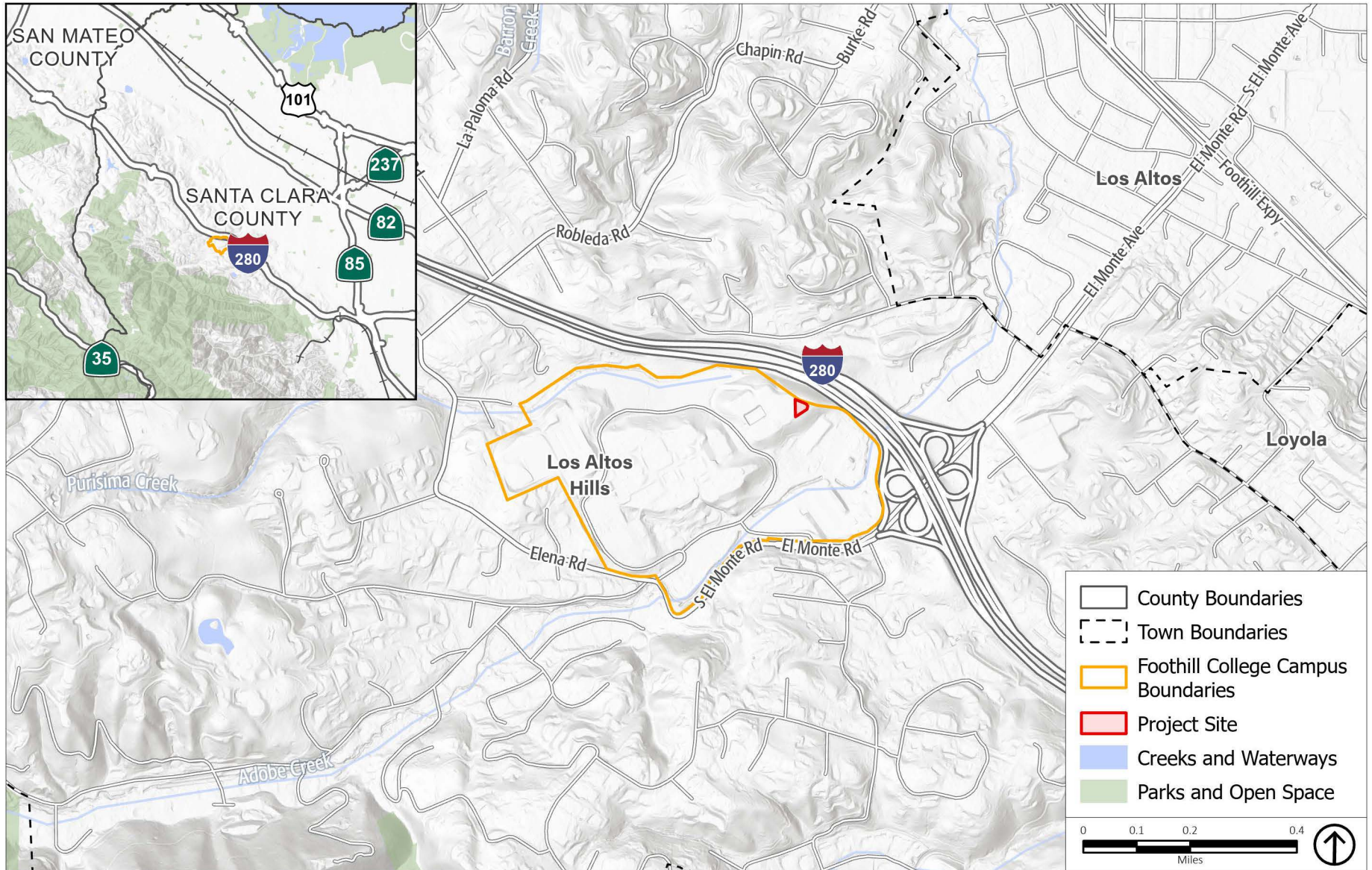
2.2 PROJECT LOCATION

The 2,912-square-foot project site is at the southeast corner of Parking Lot 2A (project site) on the eastern side of the Foothill College campus (campus). The campus is at 12345 El Monte Road in Los Altos Hills. The project site is approximately 200 feet southwest of Interstate 280 (I-280), along the outer perimeter of the campus. Open space and I-280 are north and east, the Foothill College Tennis Courts are to the south, and the Foothill Community College Main Gymnasium and Pool are to the west of the project site. The campus is bounded by Josefa Lane and I-280 to the north, El Monte Road to the south, and Elena Road to the west. Perimeter Road runs through campus, west of the project site, and connects to El Monte Road. Purissima Creek, a seasonal drainage, is along the northwestern boundary of the campus and Adobe Creek runs through the southern part of the campus, approximately 0.17 miles south of the project site.

2.3 EXISTING SITE CONDITIONS

The project site is an existing, paved parking lot used by those with campus visitor parking permits. The project site is within the Physical Education complex, east of Perimeter Road and the main campus complex, which contains most of the campus's athletic buildings, fields, and associated parking. Most of the other campus buildings are west of Perimeter Road. The majority of the 122-acre campus is almost entirely developed with buildings, parking lots, roadways, pedestrian and bicycle facilities, athletic fields, public plazas, and landscaping. The campus is divided into zones that reflect the campus's hillside location with dramatic changes in elevation.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION



Source: Foothill College, 2022; City of Los Altos Hills, 2024.

Figure 2-1
Regional and Vicinity Map

2.4 LAND USE AND ZONING DESIGNATIONS

The College is designated as Institutional in the Los Altos Hill General Plan and is zoned as Residential-Agricultural (R-A). The Division of the State Architect has jurisdiction over building development on campus.

2.5 SURROUNDING LAND USES

As shown on Figure 2-2, *Aerial View of the Project Site and Surroundings*, the project site is surrounded by the existing Parking Lot 2A and open space. The closest residences are across I-280, approximately 0.15 miles to the northeast. The project site is approximately 175 feet from the existing Foothill Community College Main Gymnasium and Pool and approximately 200 feet from I-280. Most of Los Altos Hills consists of low-density, large-lot residential neighborhoods. The campus is surrounded by these residential land uses and across I-280 is an area designated as Open Space Preserve. Additionally, the campus is two miles south of downtown Los Altos.

2.6 PROPOSED PROJECT

The District proposes to construct a decarbonization utility plant on Parking Lot 2A. The proposed project includes removing 11 existing parking spaces from Parking Lot 2A. There would be no tree removal or landscaping included as part of the proposed project. The proposed project does not include changes to student enrollment or campus capacity.

2.6.1 Decarbonization Utility Plant

The proposed decarbonization utility plant would be approximately 2,550 square feet in area and include an open-air enclosure with seven concrete pads for electrical equipment, air source heat pumps, and chilled water pumps. The maximum height of the structure would be nine feet. Two-inch aluminum acoustic panels would be placed along the interior walls to minimize noise levels in the surrounding areas. The proposed project would serve the Foothill Community College Main Gymnasium and Pool and other campus buildings.

2.6.2 Construction Schedule

The proposed project's construction is expected to occur over a 12-month period. Construction work would be conducted between 7:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. on weekdays, with noise-generating activities limited to 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION



Source: Foothill College, 2022; City of Los Altos Hills, 2024; Google Maps, 2025.

Figure 2-2
Aerial View of the Project Site and Surroundings

2.7 REQUIRED PERMITS AND APPROVALS

Following approval of the CEQA Notice of Exemption and the project by the Foothill-De Anza Community College District Board, the project would go out to bid for construction. The proposed project would also require demolition and building permits.

2. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

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3. EXEMPTIONS

As stated in Section 1, *Introduction*, Article 19 of the State CEQA Guidelines includes a list of classes of projects that have been determined not to have a significant effect on the environment and, as a result, are exempt from review under CEQA. This document has been prepared to serve as the basis for compliance with CEQA as it pertains to the proposed project, and to demonstrate that the project qualifies for Class 3 and Class 14 Categorical Exemptions, consistent with the provisions of State CEQA Guidelines Sections 15303 and 15314.

3.1 SECTION 15303: NEW CONSTRUCTION OR CONVERSION OF SMALL STRUCTURES

The proposed project is consistent with a Class 3, *New Construction or Conversion of Small Structures*, CEQA Exemption, as it would fit into the scope of the Class 3 exemption as a single, small structure. The proposed project would construct a 2,550-square-foot decarbonization utility plant in a 2,912-square-foot corner of a parking lot.

3.2 SECTION 15314: MINOR ADDITION TO SCHOOLS CONSISTENCY

The proposed project is consistent with a Class 14, *Minor Addition to Schools CEQA Exemption*, as it would occur within the existing campus grounds and would not increase the student capacity of the campus. The entire proposed project would be at the Foothill College campus on Parking Lot 2A. The proposed project would improve campus utilities and does not include the addition of classrooms. Thus, the proposed project would have no effect on the student capacity at Foothill College or the District.

3. EXEMPTIONS

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4. EXCEPTIONS

In addition to analyzing the applicability of State CEQA Guidelines Sections 15303 (Class 3) and 15314 (Class 14), this document assesses whether any of the exceptions to categorical exemptions identified in State CEQA Guidelines Section 15300.2 (*Exceptions*) apply to the proposed project. The following analysis compares the criteria in State CEQA Guidelines Section 15300.2 (*Exceptions*) to the project, and concludes, based on substantial evidence, that none of the exceptions are applicable to the project.

4.1 SECTION 15300.2(A): LOCATION

Classes 3, 4, 5, 6, and 11 are qualified by consideration of where the project is to be located – a project that is ordinarily insignificant in its impact on the environment may in a particularly sensitive environment be significant. Therefore, these classes are considered to apply to all instances, except where the project may impact an environmental resource of hazardous or critical concern where designated, precisely mapped, and officially adopted pursuant to law by federal, state, or local agencies.

Consideration of this exception is necessary because the proposed project qualifies for a Class 3 Categorical Exemption. The project site is on an existing college campus in an urban area near I-280, adjacent to open space, and surrounded by residential neighborhoods. The adjacent open space is not considered an open space preserve nor a critically important wildlife habitat, based on the Los Altos Hill General Plan (Los Altos Hills 2007). Additionally, the project site is 150 feet southwest of the nearest creek, Purissima Creek, a seasonal drainage. Thus, the project site is not in a sensitive environment. In addition, the proposed project would not require tree removal or otherwise disturb any natural environmental resource of hazardous or critical concern. Therefore, the exception under State CEQA Guidelines Section 15300.2(a) does not apply to the proposed project.

4.2 SECTION 15300.2(B): CUMULATIVE IMPACT

All exemptions for these classes are inapplicable when the cumulative impact of successive projects of the same type in the same place, over time is significant.

The proposed project would construct a decarbonization utility plant on a parking lot at an existing college campus. There would be no changes in student enrollment or visitors, and the rest of the parking lot would remain open. Any construction effects will be temporary, confined to the project vicinity, and reduced to the extent feasible through compliance with applicable

4. EXCEPTIONS

regulations. As described in Section 4.3 regarding State CEQA Guidelines Section 15300.2(c) (*Significant Effect*), the construction activities would not result in a significant effect, and the operational effects of the proposed project would be environmentally beneficial. Therefore, the proposed project would not contribute to potential cumulative effects, and the exception under State CEQA Guidelines Section 15300.2(b) does not apply to the proposed project.

4.3 SECTION 15300.2(C): SIGNIFICANT EFFECT

A categorical exemption shall not be used for an activity where there is a reasonable possibility that the activity will have a significant effect on the environment due to unusual circumstances.

This exception applies only when there is evidence both that the proposed project involves unusual circumstances and that it will result in a significant impact due to those unusual circumstances. There are no known unusual circumstances that are applicable to the proposed project, and which may result in a significant effect on the environment. The proposed project consists of the construction of a decarbonization utility plant on an existing parking lot. The proposed project would support the District's goals of lessening its effect on the environment. Additionally, the proposed project will not result in a change in existing land use or zoning designations or introduce a new activity to the area that could result in a significant effect on the environment. The proposed project would result in a utility improvement that is consistent with the existing uses, size, purpose, and capacity on the campus. Colleges and universities routinely update their campuses with improvements that provide safer, more efficient, and modernized facilities. Such activities are typical and quite common for institutional campuses and do not differ in kind or intensity from other projects commonly falling within CEQA Guidelines Sections 15303 (Class 3) and 15314 (Class 14) Categorical Exemptions. Therefore, the exception under State CEQA Guidelines Section 15003.2(c) does not apply to the proposed project.

4.4 SECTION 15300.2(D): SCENIC HIGHWAYS

A categorical exemption shall not be used for a project which may result in damage to scenic resources, including, but not limited to, trees, historic buildings, rock outcroppings, or similar resources, within a highway officially designated as a state scenic highway. This does not apply to improvements which are required as mitigation by an adopted negative declaration or certified environmental impact report (EIR).

The proposed project would not affect a scenic resource in a designated State scenic highway. The closest officially designated State scenic highways are State Route (SR-) 35, 4.7 miles west of the project site, and I-280 in San Mateo County, 5 miles north of the project site. I-280, 0.04 miles (200 feet) east of the project site, is eligible for listing as a State Scenic Highway (Caltrans

4. EXCEPTIONS

2018). Based on the topography of the area and surrounding mature trees, the project site is not visible from the closest part of I-280 nor the officially designated scenic highways of SR-35 and I-280. Additionally, the project site and surrounding area are already developed, and the proposed project would have a maximum height of nine feet and would therefore not exceed the height of nearby buildings or extend above the existing topography and trees that visually separate the project site from I-280. Therefore, no scenic resources within view of a State scenic highway will be altered as part of the project and the exception under State CEQA Guidelines Section 15003.2(d) does not apply to the proposed project.

4.5 SECTION 15300.2(E): HAZARDOUS WASTE SITES

A categorical exemption shall not be used for a project located on a site which is included on any list compiled pursuant to Section 65962.5 of the Government Code.

California Government Code Section 65962.5 requires the California Environmental Protection Agency (CalEPA) to compile, maintain, and update specified lists of hazardous material release sites. CEQA¹ requires the lead agency to consult the lists compiled pursuant to Government Code Section 65962.5 to determine whether a project and any alternatives are identified. The required lists of hazardous material release sites are commonly referred to as the “Cortese List,” named after the legislator who authored the legislation and are contained on internet websites hosted by the boards or departments referenced in the statute, including California Department of Toxic Substance Control’s (DTSC’s) online EnviroStor database and the State Water Resources Control Board’s (SWRCB’s) online GeoTracker database.

A search of the following online databases that constitute the Cortese List was completed, pursuant to Section 65962.5 of the Government Code:

- List of Hazardous Waste and Substances sites from DTSC EnviroStor database (DTSC 2025)
- List of Leaking Underground Storage Tank (LUST) Sites from SWRCB’s GeoTracker (SWRCB 2025)
- List of solid waste disposal sites identified by SWRCB with waste constituents above hazardous waste levels outside the waste management unit (CalEPA 2025a)
- List of “active” Cease and Desist Orders and Cleanup and Abatement Orders from SWRCB (CalEPA 2025b)
- List of hazardous waste facilities subject to corrective action pursuant to Section 25187.5 of the Health and Safety Code, identified by DTSC (CalEPA 2025c)

¹ California Public Resources Code, Section 21092.6.

4. EXCEPTIONS

The Foothill College campus is listed on the SWRCB's GeoTracker website as a completed LUST cleanup site. The case was closed as of March 15, 1996 (SWRCB 2025). Foothill College is not on any other list pursuant to Section 65962.5 of the Government Code or any additional list compiled for purposes related to identifying the prior release of hazardous materials. Therefore, the exception under State CEQA Guidelines Section 15300.2(e) does not apply to the proposed project.

4.6 SECTION 15300.2(F): HISTORICAL RESOURCES

A categorical exemption shall not be used for a project which may cause a substantial adverse change in the significance of a historical resource.

The project site is part of the Foothill College Historic District, which has the potential to be eligible for the National Register and the California Register; however, the proposed project would not result in the demolition of any potential district contributors or other historic resources. The proposed project would not impact any areas outside of Parking Lot 2A. Additionally, the Foothill College Facilities Master Plan Environmental Impact Report (Certified EIR)² includes Mitigation Measures IV.D-1a through IV.D-1c, that require a qualified historic architect to monitor the design, plans, and construction of the larger projects; trees to be retained or replaced in kind; and new signage and lighting fixtures to be constructed that reflect the defined architectural vocabulary of the 1961 campus, to ensure that projects on the campus are compatible with eligible historic resources (FDA 2009).

Several archaeological sites have been recorded along Adobe Creek, through the southern part of the campus and approximately 0.17 miles south of the project site, and the Santa Clara Valley is known for having buried archaeological resources. However, there have been no archaeological sites recorded on the campus (FDA 2009). The only ground-disturbing activities included as part of the proposed project would remove the surface parking lot and a limited amount of earthwork in the adjacent open space and thus, archaeological sites would not be expected to be impacted. Should sensitive resources be found during construction, the proposed project would comply with Mitigation Measures IV.D-2a and IV.D-2b of the Certified EIR, which require work to be halted if buried cultural or paleontological materials (e.g., bone, brick) are exposed during construction and an archaeologist to be permitted to remove any items found in a professional manner for further laboratory evaluation. Further, the proposed project would comply with State and federal historic preservation laws, regulations, and codes, including laws related to archaeological resources. In particular, the proposed project would be required to comply with State CEQA Guidelines Section 15064.5(e), which specifies procedures to be used in the event of a discovery of Native American human remains on non-federal land. With mandatory compliance with applicable laws and regulations related to historic,

² State Clearinghouse No. 2007091014, certified March 2009.

4. EXCEPTIONS

archaeological, and paleontological resources, as well as the mitigation measures of the Certified EIR, the proposed project would not result in significant impacts to unknown archaeological, tribal cultural, or paleontological resources. Therefore, the exception under State CEQA Guidelines Section 15300.2(f) does not apply to the proposed project.

4. EXCEPTIONS

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5. CONCLUSION

As discussed in Section 3, *Exemptions*, the proposed project meets the criteria for categorical exemptions using Class 3, *Existing Facilities*, and Class 14, *Minor Addition to Schools*, pursuant to State CEQA Guidelines Sections 15301 and 15314, respectively. Additionally, as explained in Section 4, *Exceptions*, no exceptions to the categorical exemptions in State CEQA Guidelines Section 15300.2 apply, and the proposed project would not have a significant effect on the environment. Thus, this analysis finds that an exemption may be used, and a Notice of Exemption may be prepared for the proposed project.

5. CONCLUSION

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