

COMMUNITY DESIGN + ARCHITECTURE

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MEETING NOTES

El Camino Real Advisory Group (AG) Meeting #2

March 7, 2002

4:00 to 6:30 pm

at the Lucy Stern Center - Fireside Room, Palo Alto

1. Welcome and Introduction, (Virginia Warheit, Planning Division, Project Leader)
2. Initial Data Collection and Assessment, (Phil Erickson, Community Design + Architecture; Jerry Walters and Chris Gray, Fehr and Peers Associates)

Using a series of drawings, Phil Erickson presented AG members with an overview of the initial conditions assessment with respect to streetscape, urban design and land use characteristics of the El Camino Real corridor, addressing aspects such as: street pattern and block length, signalized and unsignalized crosswalks, character of street frontage, landscaped and asphalted medians, on-street parking, bus stop locations, and land use (as envisioned by Palo Alto's Comprehensive Plan).

Jerry Walters then outlined key transportation objectives related to El Camino operational and design performance, and provided examples of strategies oriented toward achieving those objectives, including:

- a. Calm Traffic Speeds: reduce highest traffic speeds, but also reduce vehicle stops and starts, in order maintain overall corridor travel times relative to parallel routes; establish lower design speeds on sections were appropriate and reinforce with reduced-design geometric elements.
- b. Manage Modal Interactions at Intersections Equitably : adapt signal hardware and timing to: 1) allow sufficient pedestrian "walk" times, 2) provide sufficient bicycle "yellow" clearance intervals, 3) prioritize buses, 4) meter traffic flow toward congested locations, 5) govern traffic speeds, 6) provide acceptable traffic Level of Service, 7) reduce pedestrian and bike conflicts resulting from "permissive" phasing and shared-lane "split" phasing, 8) provide lead time for "walk" phase; 9) detect and respond to bicycles in traffic lanes and bike zones.

- c. Re-shape Intersections to Serve Necessary Functions with Greatest Safety: eliminate high-speed right turns; provide large curb radii only at intersecting truck or bus routes; eliminate unneeded traffic lanes; within LOS constraints, eliminate shared lanes unless split-phase can be provided; provide bike queue zone for through bikes immediately to left of exclusive traffic right-turn lanes.
- d. Reduce Barrier Effects: 1) provide protected crosswalks on all legs of all intersections, 2) add protected crosswalks (new signalized intersections, signalized refuge “corral” crossings) along school routes or other pedestrian “desire-lines”, 3) reduce crossing widths through lane reductions, lane narrowing, bulb-outs, reduce curb radii, 4) include pedestrian refuge (6-foot plus) with push-button within all crossings over (? feet long), 5) lengthen “walk” times to accommodate slower walking pace.
- e. Create Buffers Between Incompatible Uses: retain business-serving parking; eliminate other parking and convert space to pedestrian and bicycle zones and landscape and hardscape buffers; provide adequately-sized sheltered waiting zones at bus-stops.
- f. Re-balance Street Cross-Section: reduce traffic lane width recognizing El Camino function as truck route and bus route; provide adequate width for bikes, consistent with Class III bike route status; in sizing bike zone, account for parked-car door-swing and high El Camino ADT, trucks and buses.

Finally, Chris Gray gave an overview of the key transportation characteristics of the El Camino corridor, such as traffic volumes, intersection Levels of Service (LOS), truck routes, bus routes, bus patronage, and presence of certain design features such as high-speed right-turn lanes.

Phil Erickson then explained how the team had used the previously presented data to identify segments and nodes along Palo Alto’s ECR corridor. The presented map indicated as Segments: (1) northern City entry point to Stanford Avenue, (2a-1) Stanford Avenue to Grant Avenue, (2b) Grant Avenue to just north of Fernando Avenue, (2a-2) just north of Fernando Avenue to Ventura Avenue, (3) Ventura Avenue to southern City entry point; and as Nodes: (1) the area where University Avenue/Palm Drive intersect with ECR, (2) the Embarcadero Avenue intersection area, (3) the area between College and Grant Avenues, and (4) the Page Mill intersection.

Kathy Blake commented on Nodes: Nodes for this project may not need to coincide with key vehicular intersections. So, California may emerge as a node as opposed to Page Mill. Apply a design vocabulary that distinguishes different nodes.

Doug Moran on Nodes: Frequent pedestrian crossings occur all the way and past Arastradero Avenue.

3. Feedback from Advisory Group Members

- ❖ John Ciccarelli: The traffic problems on El Camino between Stanford Avenue and the Barron Park neighborhood may be exacerbated by the fact that El Camino west of this area is not paralleled by any other streets that could serve as a potential secondary route for traffic when El Camino is getting congested.
- ❖ John Ciccarelli: There is no place for bicyclists to safely wait at the intersections of ECR/California and ECR/Page Mill.

Bicyclists often activate the pedestrian crossing cycle at signals. When no pedestrians are waiting to cross as well this effectively prolongs the wait for automobile traffic since bicyclists clear the intersection faster than pedestrians would.

San Francisco uses a cycle that provides a one- or two-second head start for pedestrians before traffic begins to flow improving pedestrian ability to compete with right-turning traffic.

- ❖ Doug Moran: Cars exiting the McDonalds parking lot often inch into traffic because of blocked views. This causes the curbside lane to be blocked frequently and traffic flow to be restricted to two southbound lanes.

On the issue of trees: Street trees are not only planted for beautification but can also serve other purposes, such as providing protection from stronger winds. This benefit is severely reduced if trees are branched up high to meet mandated clearances.

People should be able to safely wait at the median. This will reduce the delay caused by pedestrians who have not cleared the crosswalk by the end of the pedestrian cycle.

- ❖ Kathy Durham: Is there a chance that pedestrian activated signals could be installed, where other traffic signals do not exist?
- ❖ Kathy Durham: Is there a chance that pedestrian activated signals could be installed?
- ❖ Virginia Warheit: The crossing and location of the VTA bus stop at Quarry were intended to cut down on the number of people jay walking to reach VTA busses.

Comment from other participant: People still frequently jay walk to reach a bus in time at this stop.

- ❖ Jerry Walters: In general, people will not go far out of their way (the “desire line”) in order to use a safer crossing at a signal, perhaps about 300 ft. Destinations with a pedestrian draw should therefore not be too far from a safe crossing.

- ❖ Ken Alsman: Trees for El Camino would like to see ECR to become a more pleasant street in the short-term. The group has mostly been looking at the street as a sequence of tree-planted streetscapes.

The cost of major changes in curb alignments is significant and should not be underestimated. Such work can only be funded over long periods of time. Any improvements are dependent on incremental land use changes will also take a long time.

Major changes to the existing conditions will also face strong bureaucratic challenges.

- ❖ John Ciccarelli: Bulb-outs at corners and in parking lanes present an opportunity for incorporation of street trees into the streetscape without limiting space for bicyclists. At the same time, the loss of parking spaces would be limited.
- ❖ Kathy Durham: Trees planted in the short-term should be located such that they will not need to be taken out or relocated later on when curbs are being realigned.
- ❖ Phil Erickson: What to do with existing trees is one of the many trade-offs that will need to be addressed as part of the evaluation process for the alternative schematic designs.
- ❖ Brigid Barton: Railings, signage, color and other elements can be used to give interest to the streetscape.
- ❖ Paul Goldstein: Perhaps water features could be used as barriers instead of railings, where people need to be deterred from crossing the street.

John Ciccarelli: Many alternative treatments for barriers are currently used by different communities. People using transit often cross the street in unprotected areas in order to reach a bus. In San Francisco Muni uses railings to prevent people from crossing to the median bus islands.

Doug Moran: Consider the appropriate density of landscaping in the median as it may conceal from the view of drivers those people who cross through the median as a shortcut. Perhaps pedestrian mid-block crossings in appropriate locations should be considered as an alternative to barriers.

- ❖ John Ciccarelli: In order to reach destinations between College Terrace and Barron Park residents have to use ECR for access for lack of an alternative route parallel to ECR or any other form of back side access.
- ❖ Brigid Barton (Q): Would it be conceivable to have a crossing that would allow all four pedestrian crossings at intersections to have a green light at once?

John Thomas (A): On a street like El Camino Real this would not be feasible. One way of reducing the crossing distance would be to construct curbs with smaller radii.

- ❖ Annette Bialson: Perhaps the old pedestrian tunnel north of Page Mill could be made safe and be put to use again.

John Ciccarelli: Perhaps, if the nearby vacant lots would redevelop and VTA would improve the use of their property, which currently serves as a parking lot.

- ❖ Annette Bialson: Sidewalks west of ECR south of Grant Avenue are too narrow. Pedestrians often can be seen walking single file during lunchtime. Many employees in the Palo Alto Square complex would like to cross at Grant Avenue and not walk all the way to California Avenue.
- ❖ Susan Rosenberry (Q): Is Light Rail in serious consideration for ECR?

Phil Erickson and Chris Gray (A): The Consultants have addressed this question in a meeting with VTA. At this point VTA does not consider light rail running in the center of the roadway as a viable option for ECR. Rather, VTA is pursuing the short-term inception of Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) service for the corridor. However, operation of side-running streetcars within the outside lane would be feasible if dependent on future operational considerations and travel demand.

- ❖ Paul Goldstein: Between Stanford and California Avenues there is a sense of the two sides of the street to be somewhat close and spatially related to one another. This sense would perhaps be diminished if a tree planted median were introduced in this location. Consider more than just medians.
- ❖ Jerry Walters described that at intersections other than Page Mill, Embarcadero, and Charleston the LOS at many individual intersections is acceptable and explained that eliminating through lanes or left turn pockets for this segment might be a possible design alternative. In response Doug Moran and John Ciccarelli raised concerns about the accuracy of the traffic data leading to this statement. Doug Moran stated that traffic in the area in question is generally very congested and that turn pockets seem rather too short. Jerry Walters noted that the root cause for the apparent congestion at several of these locations may actually be over-saturation of intersections such as El Camino/ Page Mill, and noted that further traffic analysis is being conducted to clarify such issues.

4. Draft Performance Criteria

Phil Erickson explained that the Consultant Team will work with the TAC and AG using performance criteria to evaluate the different design alternatives that will be developed during the next phase of the project. The performance criteria are intended to describe how well or poorly an alternative performs relative to a given criterion. For example, an alternative may score high on traffic flow and efficiency but low on accommodation of pedestrians and bicyclists. Some of the performance criteria will be quantitative, i.e. like many of the transportation related factors, while others will be qualitative, such as 'beautification of the streetscape'. As part of this process, the Consultants may be asking

members of the Advisory Group and perhaps members of the TAC to partake in a Visual Preference Survey, which would inform the selection of a design alternative on the basis of a general visual preference. In addition to traffic related criteria, addressed earlier by Jerry Walters, other key criteria will be: Streetscape Beautification, Cost Effectiveness, Public Transit Accessibility, Economic Development, Community Fabric, and Environmental Quality.

Overall, performance criteria will need to be weighted and consideration given to trade-offs between different (and potentially competing) goals for the future of the street. This discussion of performance criteria and trade-offs will directly inform the character of the designs that will be developed in the second half of the study.

In the context of identifying suitable measurements for the selected performance criteria, the consultants will investigate the usefulness of employing Pedestrian and Bicycle Level of Service (Pedestrian LOS and Bicycle LOS) as measurement for the quality of the pedestrian and bicycle environment and safety. There may also be certain “inputs” into the Ped and Bike LOS models that cannot be measured within the budget constraints of this project; the consultants are investigating this issue further. Desired minimums for certain characteristics will also be a part of the evaluation process (i.e. minimum sidewalk width, minimum spacing for pedestrian-scaled light fixtures etc.).

5. Next Advisory Group Meeting

The next Advisory Group Meeting #3 will take place on April 23, 2002.

6. The meeting was adjourned at 6:30 pm.