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SUMMARY OF PLANNING & PUBLIC PROCESS

2.1 OVERVIEW OF PLANNING PROCESS

The planning process for the El Camino project was set up to include input from the general public and interests organized around a particular subject, technical expertise from different city departments, and input from Caltrans as the final approval agency for the actual construction of proposed improvements. The following is an overview of the key steps that were taken by the City and the Consultant Team in moving the project through the planning process:

1. Assembling of an Advisory Group of stakeholders that included a broad range of interests surrounding issues involved with the redesign of a major street like El Camino;
2. Assembling of a Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) to give input on the many technical aspects of the redesign;
3. Preparation of detailed analysis of the existing and projected traffic and transportation conditions as well as analysis of key land use and physical conditions within the right-of-way;
4. Consultants, City staff, Advisory Group and the public engaged in an interactive and iterative process to develop goals and objectives for the redesign of El Camino. As goals were shifting or being negotiated between members of the public, different conceptual design alternatives and their details were developed to help illustrate and explore feasibility issues or tradeoffs associated with sets of differently weighted goals and objectives;
5. Consultants, City staff, and the Technical and Advisory Groups developed two more detailed alternative corridor concept plans and associated typical street cross sections;
6. Consultants performed a detailed transportation analysis of alternative corridor concept plans and comparative evaluation of benefits for proposed typical cross sections and plan details and reviewed these with the Technical Advisory Group;
7. City Staff and Consultants undertook discussion and negotiations with Caltrans about the feasibility of proposed design elements with a focus towards achieving a memorandum of understanding between the City and Caltrans; and,
8. Preparation of implementation strategies for both design alternatives that allow for final implementation decisions to be made after field tests confirm the feasibility of key design concepts.

2.2 PUBLIC PROCESS

In light of the vested interest of all Palo Alto residents in a potential redesign of El Camino Real and the particular importance of the street for adjacent neighborhoods, city planning staff intended to give the project a strong public involvement component from the very beginning. Critical to this end was the inception of a broad-based Advisory Group, which was complemented by other means of public involvement. The following are the key components that allowed the public to become actively involved in the process and afforded timely information updates for interested parties and individuals:

- a broad-based Advisory Group that held its meetings in public;
- two Public Workshops;
- a project web page on the City's internet web page;
- presentations at small group meetings by city planning staff (e.g.; neighborhood groups and the chamber of commerce);
- a series of meetings with specific interest groups including Trees for El Camino, Canopy, and Safe Routes to Schools; and,
- a series of Public Hearings, including working and formal sessions by City Council and Planning and the Transportation Commission.

A. Advisory Group and Technical Advisory Group (TAC)

El Camino Real Advisory Group

The City convened a broad based Advisory Group, representative of key interests along the Corridor and beyond, including the bicycling community, tree advocates, neighborhood associations from the different neighborhoods that adjoin El Camino, business owners, Stanford University, City Boards and Commissions, and others (*please see the Acknowledgements page for a detailed list of all Advisory Group Members*).

This group held a total of 7 public meetings and was instrumental in formulating project goals, providing intimate knowledge about existing conditions and concerns, and evaluating and shaping the design alternatives for the redesign of El Camino.

El Camino Real TAC

In addition to the Advisory Group, the City assembled a group of people including city and outside agencies to act as technical advisors to the project. This group was intended to help inform both the technical aspects of the redesign and the assessment of the design's feasibility. The TAC included representatives from Caltrans, Palo Alto's Public Works and Parks Departments, City Arborists, the Valley Transportation Authority (VTA), and others (*please see the Acknowledgements page for a detailed list of all TAC Members*).

Three months into the process, a workshop was held with Advisory Group and TAC members as well as several Caltrans representatives. Aim of this workshop was to receive broad based input from attendees about the existing conditions assessment and to allow for a roundtable discussion of potential and perceived issues involved with the current design of the street as well as some preliminary design concepts for the intended redesign of the street.

B. Public Workshops

Two widely announced public workshops were held to inform the broader public about the project, to solicit input about concerns, ideas and suggestions with regard to existing conditions and the proposed designs for El Camino. Both workshops were well attended and generated feedback needed to inform the issues assessment, goal setting and design concepts stages of the project.



Figure 2.1: The El Camino Real Project generated lively discussion at two public workshops.

C. Interest Group Meetings

In addition to the Advisory Group meetings and public workshops, several meetings were held which focused on interests, suggestions and concerns of particular stakeholders. Such meetings included neighborhood associations; Palo Alto High School; and advocacy groups such as Trees for El Camino, Canopy, and Safe Routes to Schools. The City's project manager conducted several meetings with neighborhood associations to inform citizens about content and the progress of the project. This effort established additional outreach to those not able to attend public meetings and allowed for in-depth discussions about concerns particular to the location of the respective neighborhoods along El Camino.



Figure 2.2: The interests and expertise of many groups and parties went into the process for the El Camino Project.

2.3 COORDINATION WITH CALTRANS

The California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) is not only a co-sponsor of the El Camino project, but also the owner and operator of State Highway 82. Caltrans is also the approval agency for any proposed changes to the design and operation of El Camino Real and its right-of-way. From the beginning of the project it was, therefore, critical to involve Caltrans representatives from both the operations and design divisions of the agency. Although Caltrans representatives were included in the project TAC group, it quickly became clear that more intense discussion, coordination, and negotiation with the agency was necessary if a redesign of El Camino was to be achieved that would fully address the goals set by the community.

Therefore, Caltrans and the City decided to conduct focused meetings separate from the TAC and to involve key decision-makers from the operations and design divisions of both Caltrans District 4 and Caltrans Headquarters in Sacramento. City staff, the Consultant Team, and Caltrans representatives conducted a total of six meetings to discuss issues of roadway design, design standards, and the Caltrans' approval processes for projects such as the redesign of a major arterial like El Camino.

A. Goal Setting and Negotiations Process

At the beginning of the more focused negotiation and coordination process, Caltrans requested that the community clearly state the goals it wanted the redesign of El Camino Real to achieve. This was followed by establishing linkages between such community goals and individual, or sets of, roadway design elements included in the proposed design alternatives.

Based on this approach, a matrix was developed (*please see the Appendix for a copy of the matrix*) that reflected:

- all key design elements included in proposed design alternatives;
- the existing condition or characteristic (i.e. a dimension) of a given design element;
- the City’s desired condition or characteristic of a given design element contained in a proposed design alternative; and
- existing Caltrans standards for the respective condition or characteristic of the design element in question, as well as a discussion of the specific approvals process for the requested change.

Over time, as the community considered the different design alternatives, the content of the “Desired by City” column would change, sometimes eliminating a conflict between Caltrans standards and the “desired” condition, sometimes adding a new element to the negotiation and discussion process.

B. Design Exceptions Process and Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)

In its approval process for road projects, Caltrans breaks down a given street design into individual design elements, such as travel lanes, turn lanes, lane transitions, medians, shoulders, parking, bicycle lanes, sidewalks, etc. Using the design standards of the “Highway Design Manual,” Caltrans determines whether a design element contained in a proposed design conforms to the standard or requires a design exception. For instance, a design exception is required if a design proposes travel lanes that are narrower than the Caltrans standard for the respective facility type. The facility type is typically determined based on speed, volume, and other highway characteristics.

If a design exception is required, the typical Caltrans process requires the preparation of construction drawings for the roadway. For Caltrans review the applicant would also complete a ‘Fact Sheet’, that includes a description of the project, existing conditions, future conditions, any non-standard design elements, and the justification for design exceptions. It also contains information on the cost required to meet the design standards, traffic data, and an analysis of the accident history. Finally, Caltrans representatives, which include the Caltrans project manager, the District Design Manager, and Caltrans Headquarters representatives, must approve the design exception.

For this project, the typical exceptions process could not be followed because no construction drawings or detailed design plans were prepared. The preparation of such detailed designs would have been cost-prohibitive given the extent of the proposed improvements and the interdependencies of many of the potential design exceptions. In other words, if one or several design exceptions are not granted, the basis of the detailed designs would change and all of the work would need to be redone. Instead, the Consultant Team, City staff, and Caltrans discussed and negotiated design elements and any needed design exception through the ‘Exceptions Matrix’ described above. At the end of the process the design elements were distinguished in three different categories requiring:

- no design exception;
- planning-level exception; and,
- full detail design-level exception.

The use of planning-level exceptions allows several key design elements to be approved prior to the preparation of detailed design documents. This reduces the risk that the investment in the detailed design will be wasted by later rejection of a proposed design exception.

At the end of the Design Plan process, the City and Caltrans will draft and sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) about the intended redesign of El Camino in Palo Alto. This document will be legally non-binding, but it will clearly spell out the City’s and Caltrans’ mutual understanding of both the intentions of the project and the design solutions agreed upon between the two parties.

C. Large Trees in Narrow Medians

In a process that has run parallel with Palo Alto’s redesign effort for El Camino, the cities of Menlo Park, Redwood City, and Palo Alto expressed strong community interest in improving El Camino Real by planting large canopy trees in the medians. All three cities requested permission from Caltrans to allow large trees in medians narrower than the standard 12 feet. Caltrans responded to the cities’ interest by commissioning a study, by Professor Ed Sullivan of California State Polytechnic University in San Luis Obispo, that was to explore the “Safety of Median Trees with Narrow Clearances on Urban Conventional Highways.” The subject of the study was of critical importance to the redesign and tree planting efforts on El Camino because of the frequent occurrence of left-turn lanes paralleled by narrow medians. If the planting of trees in such narrow medians remained prohibited, it would create a visual discontinuity in certain locations in spite of replanting efforts within medians that were 12 feet or greater.

At the time of this writing, the initial public draft of the tree study has been distributed and reviewed by both Caltrans and the three cities. Although Caltrans and the three cities differ in their interpretations of the provided results, a compromise was negotiated by Assemblyman Joe Simitian. According to this compromise, the three cities will be given approval for their tree planting projects as part of a pilot project, that would help to further determine safety aspects of tree plantings in narrow medians through a monitoring program.



Figure 2.3: Narrow median on El Camino today.



Figure 2.4: Tree-lined narrow median in Downtown Oakland.

