



# City of Palo Alto

## City Council Staff Report

(ID # 9819)

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**Report Type: Informational Report**      **Meeting Date: 5/6/2019**

**Summary Title: Status Update On Newell Road Bridge Project**

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**From: City Manager**

**Lead Department: Public Works**

### **Executive Summary**

The City of Palo Alto and Caltrans as the lead agencies under California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) and National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), respectively, and in coordination with the City of East Palo Alto, a responsible agency, are preparing to release a Draft Environmental Impact Report (EIR)/Environmental Assessment (EA) for the Newell Road Bridge Project in spring 2019.

The purpose of this informational report is to provide Council with a brief history of the project, including the community engagement and screening process that was used to select the alternatives for full analysis, in advance of the release of the Draft EIR/EA.

### **Background**

Constructed in 1911, the existing Newell Road Bridge is a 76 foot long, reinforced concrete girder structure spanning 22 feet. It functions as a two-lane bridge; however, since the curb to curb width is only 18 feet, this two-lane bridge is considered substandard. There are no sidewalks for pedestrian access, and there are no dedicated bicycle lanes or signage on the bridge.

The California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) inspected the bridge (bridge number 37C-0223) as part of their statewide local bridge inspection program and determined that it does not meet current state standards for vehicle access or multi-modal access. Specifically, the existing bridge does not comply with the following geometric design standards:

- **Roadway Section:** The standard minimum width configuration is two 11-foot wide lanes plus separate 5-foot bicycle lanes or two 14-foot “sharrow” lanes (shared bicycle/vehicle lanes).
- **Vertical Alignment:** Current standards require smooth, gradual vertical curves between grade differences. The bridge approach has a steep grade (up to seven percent) that

reduces the length of roadway a driver can see entering or leaving the bridge and reduces the response time for drivers to respond to conditions in front of their vehicle.

- Stopping Sight Distance: At the intersection of Newell Road and Woodland Avenue, the sight distance is limited by the existing bridge barriers and flood walls. Under existing conditions, the stopping sight distance can only accommodate a speed of 15 miles per hour.

As a result, Caltrans deemed the bridge functionally obsolete and added the bridge to the Federal State Transportation Improvement Program (FTIP) on April 18, 2011. Once a project is placed on the FTIP it becomes eligible to receive federal funding and subject to federally required action. The project description in the FTIP for this bridge is to “replace [an] existing two-lane bridge with a new two-lane bridge conforming to current standards.”

In addition to providing a new bridge that conforms to current Caltrans standards for vehicle access and multi-modal access, this bridge replacement project would provide natural flood protection for residents, businesses, and visitors, preserve flood capacity, and reduce flood risks in flood-prone areas as set out in Santa Clara Valley Water District (SCVWD) Governance Policies 1.4 and E-3. Specifically, the existing Newell Road Bridge abutments encroach into the creek bed and create a flow constriction in the channel. The redesign would place the supports outside of the creek channel, thus increasing the hydraulic creek capacity in this area. For these reasons, the SCVWD agreed to provide the remaining funding for the bridge design, as discussed further below.

### **Discussion**

Following is a summary of the project timeline following Caltrans’ initial action of adding the bridge to the FTIP. This discussion also summarizes the Alternatives Screening Analysis process, community engagement process, and technical report preparation process, which have been ongoing since 2013.

### Project Timeline

Table 1 summarizes the project timeline, including milestones and Council actions since 2011. Although the Newell Road Bridge Replacement Project has taken several years to advance, staff notes that the San Francisquito Creek Flood Reduction, Ecosystem Restoration, and Recreation San Francisco Bay to Highway 101 Project was completed on October 16, 2018. This downstream project increased the creek capacity, allowing upstream projects (such as the Newell Road Bridge Replacement Project) to move forward.

**Table 1: Summary of Project Milestones and Council Actions for the Newell Road Bridge Project**

| Milestone/Action   | Timeline   |
|--|--|
| City Council approved a budget appropriation for a new capital improvement project to replace the Newell Road Bridge and authorized staff to accept the Caltrans Highway Bridge Program grant funds to pay for the majority of the project design costs.   | July 11, 2011                                      |
| City Council approved a cost-sharing agreement between the SCVWD and the City of Palo Alto for the SCVWD to provide local matching funds to supplement the Caltrans funding in order to cover the cost of the new bridge design. Council also approved contract C12142825 with Nolte Associates, Inc. (now known as NV5, Inc.) to design the bridge as well as the funds for preparation of the environmental analysis for the bridge replacement. | April 9, 2012                                      |
| The City held a community meeting to identify initial potential alternatives to the proposed project and committed to formally evaluate a reasonable range of alternatives through an EIR process.   | January 8, 2013                                    |
| The City held a community meeting to present a broader range of potential design alternatives to be reviewed and to identify screening criteria for these alternatives.  | October 17, 2013                                   |
| The City held a community meeting to present the completed Alternatives Screening Analysis Report  | February 27, 2014                                  |
| The City attended a meeting of the Crescent Park Neighborhood Association (CPNA) to make them aware of the 5 alternatives that would be analyzed as part of the Environmental Impact Report (EIR) and to let them know they would have opportunities to provide public input during the release of the EIR.  | June 25, 2015                                      |
| The City filed a Notice of Preparation (NOP) of an Environmental Impact Report/Environmental Assessment with the State Clearinghouse and County of Santa Clara   | August 2015  |
| The City held an EIR Scoping meeting   | September 3, 2015                                  |
| The City worked with consultants to conduct necessary site surveys, prepare technical reports, and obtain Caltrans approval of all technical reports to be used in the environmental analysis  | September 2015 through April 25, 2018              |
| Preparation of the Draft EIR/EA  | Ongoing; anticipated to be released in spring 2019 |

## Alternatives Screening Analysis and Public Engagement

Early in the process, the public expressed an interest in the various alternatives that may be considered for the Newell Road Bridge Replacement Project. In response to that interest, the City involved the public through community meetings during the alternatives screening process, which was intended to reduce the number of alternatives that would be carried forward in the environmental analysis.

The first community meeting was held on January 8, 2013, at which the City committed to evaluate a reasonable range of alternatives through an EIR process. At this meeting, the City presented five potential alternatives that could be considered as part of the environmental analysis. These alternatives included:

1. Removal of the existing bridge without replacement;
2. Replacement of the existing bridge with a bicycle/pedestrian bridge;
3. Replacement of the existing bridge with a bridge on the existing alignment;
4. Replacement of the existing bridge with a bridge with a partial realignment;
5. Replacement of the existing bridge with a bridge aligned with Newell Road in East Palo Alto.

On October 17, 2013, the City hosted another community meeting to further discuss the design alternatives to be reviewed and to identify screening criteria that these alternatives would be compared against. At this meeting, eight alternatives were presented for the public's consideration. Following this meeting, the City prepared an Alternatives Screening Analysis report and presented it to the community on February 27, 2014. The eight alternatives in this screening analysis included:

1. No Build (keep existing bridge);
2. Remove Existing Bridge;
3. Bicycle/Pedestrian Bridge;
4. Bicycle/Pedestrian Bridge with Emergency Vehicle Access;
5. One-Lane Bridge with Bi-directional traffic;
6. Two-lane Bridge with on Existing Alignment;
7. Two-lane Bridge with Partial Realignment of Newell Road;
8. Two-lane Bridge with Full Realignment of Newell Road.

These alternatives were evaluated under four basic screening criteria: 1) Accommodate the 100-year storm flow of San Francisquito Creek; 2) Maintain existing traffic volumes and speeds; 3) Not increase traffic on surrounding residential streets; and 4) Safely accommodate multi-modal traffic.

The results from the alternatives screening are shown below. The screening process was then used to narrow the initial eight project alternatives to those that met most of the basic screening criteria in order to fully analyze those alternatives in the environmental analysis.

| <b>Alternatives Screening: Summary of Results</b> |   |  |  |   |  |                              |
|---|---|--|--|---|--|------------------------------|
| <b>Alternative</b>                                | <b>Description</b>                                      | <b>Does alternative accommodate a 100-year storm flow event?</b> | <b>Does alternative have a negative effect on LOS?</b> | <b>Does alternative increase the TIRE index on any residential street by 0.1 or more?</b> | <b>How does alternative accommodate multi-modal traffic (0-3)?</b> | <b>Advance or eliminate?</b> |
| 1   | No Build (keep existing bridge)*                        | No   | No   | No  | 2  | Advance                      |
| 2   | Remove existing bridge                                  | Yes  | Yes  | Yes   | 0  | Eliminate                    |
| 3   | Bicycle/pedestrian bridge                               | Yes  | Yes  | Yes   | 1  | Eliminate                    |
| 4   | Bicycle/pedestrian bridge with emergency access         | Yes  | Yes  | Yes   | 1  | Eliminate                    |
| 5   | One lane bridge with bi-directional traffic             | Yes  | Yes  | No  | 2  | Advance                      |
| 6   | Two-lane bridge on existing alignment                   | Yes  | No   | No  | 3  | Advance                      |
| 7   | Two-lane bridge with partial realignment of Newell Road | Yes  | No   | No  | 3  | Advance                      |
| 8   | Two-lane bridge with partial realignment of Newell Road | Yes  | No   | Yes   | 3  | Advance                      |

\*The EIR always includes an assessment of the No Project Alternative

As summarized in the table above, the five alternatives carried forward for full analysis in the EIR/EA are as follows:

- Alternative 1: A one-lane bridge with two-way traffic (under signal control) on the existing alignment.
- Alternative 2: A two-lane bridge on the existing alignment.
- Alternative 3: A two-lane bridge on a partial realignment of Newell Road.
- Alternative 4: A two-lane bridge on a full realignment of Newell Road.
- Alternative 5: No Build/No Action Alternative (As required in accordance with CEQA and NEPA)

The City formally began the EIR process in August 2015 by filing the Notice of Preparation of a Draft EIR/EA in accordance with CEQA and NEPA. The City held a scoping meeting on September 3, 2015. Verbal and written comments were collected from the meeting attendees and will be summarized in the Draft EIR/EA.

### Preparation of Technical Reports

In addition to these initial alternatives screening process with the public, once the NOP was issued, staff along with qualified consultants began to work on the 10 Technical Reports and associated documents required for the environmental analysis. These included: Air Quality Technical Memorandum, Community Impact Assessment, Final Supplemental Traffic Evaluation Report, Hazardous Materials Technical Memorandum Update, Historic Property Survey Report, Location Hydraulics Study, Natural Environment Study, Noise Study Report, Visual Impact Assessment, and Water Quality Assessment Report.

Staff from both the City of Palo Alto, as the lead agency under CEQA, and the City of East Palo Alto, as a responsible agency, reviewed and commented on each of these reports internally before submitting draft reports to Caltrans for review and approval.

In addition, staff from both Palo Alto and East Palo Alto evaluated the five project alternatives to discuss and determine the Locally Preferred Alternative (LPA) that would be identified as the proposed project in the Draft EIR/EA for the purposes of CEQA. Alternative 2, a two-lane bridge on the existing alignment will be identified as the proposed project for the purposes of CEQA in the environmental document. The LPA was identified based on several factors, including: less impact to the environmentally sensitive areas, lower retaining walls on adjacent parcels, minimized utility relocations, maintenance of as many of the existing parking spaces during and post construction, and overall cost associated with the project.

### **Timeline**

In preparation for the release of the Draft EIR/EA, the City of Palo Alto has been coordinating with private property owners within Palo Alto and East Palo Alto whose property may be affected by the proposed project. City staff has also been refining the formal project plans for the planning entitlement process.

Once the draft EIR/EA is released, there will be a 45 day public review period. During the public review period, the Architectural Review Board (ARB) will hold a public hearing to allow for comments on the public document and to review/make a recommendation on the proposed project. At least one additional community meeting will be conducted within the project area to encourage public engagement during this public review period. Staff will also bring the project to the Planning and Transportation Commission in order to obtain their input though their formal recommendation is not required for this Architectural Review application.

Following the public review period, staff will return to City Council to certify the EIR and to make a decision on the proposed project. Once certified by the City, the Caltrans Director will certify the EA.

### **Resource Impact**

As discussed above, the City applied for and obtained a Caltrans Highway Bridge Program (HBP)

grant in 2011 to pay for approximately 88.5 percent of the design, planning, of the bridge. The City subsequently entered into an agreement with the SCVWD for the SCVWD to contribute the remaining funds (approximately 11.5 percent) for the design of the new bridge. Due to the unforeseeable project delays and changes to requirements and consultants' pay rate schedule over time, the original approved funds do not cover a portion of environmental permitting process or account for the pay rate changes associated with the design of the project. Staff will be requesting additional funds from Caltrans and SCVWD to complete the planning entitlements and design. We have brought this to the attention of both agencies and anticipate that they will approve and fund the necessary adjustment. Once approved, staff intends to bring a contract amendment to City Council in the fall of 2019.

Based on Caltrans' protocol, construction funds are not approved and allocated until the planning entitlements and environmental review process is complete. Staff intends to submit the funding application to Caltrans for the 88.5 percent of the construction costs of the bridge once the EIR is adopted and the project is approved. A separate application will be submitted to SCVWD for the 11.5 percent associated with construction costs.

Thus far, the typical payment process has been to utilize City funds temporarily to cover the consultant's costs. Concurrently, staff sends copies of the consultant's invoice to Caltrans and SCVWD requesting their respective payment of 88.5 and 11.5 percent. This allows us to advance the project and Palo Alto is then reimbursed for project expenses.

### **Policy Implications**

This is an informational report; therefore, no action is requested at this time which could have policy implications for the City. However, overall the project will improve safety, provide multi-modal transportation options across San Francisquito Creek, and increase the storm flow capacity under the bridge. These improvements are consistent with city policies. A complete analysis of the project's consistency with City policies will be provided when the formal project is brought forth to the Council for review.

### **Environmental Review**

No formal action is requested at this time; provision of this informational report is not a project requiring environmental review under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) or National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). An Environmental Impact Report/Environmental Assessment (EIR/EA) is currently being prepared in accordance with CEQA and NEPA for the Newell Road Bridge Replacement Project. The City of Palo Alto and Caltrans will serve as the lead agencies in accordance with CEQA and NEPA, respectively.