



# RAIL COMMITTEE SUMMARY MINUTES

Special Meeting  
August 9, 2022

Vice Mayor Kou called the meeting to order at 1:01 P.M. in the Council Chambers and by virtual teleconference.

Present In-Person: Kou (Chair), Burt, Cormack

Absent:

## Oral Communication

1. Jennifer Freyd of 101 Alma Street spoke about the significant health and safety elements of the noise pollution from the sound of the horns, including disruption of sleep.
2. Miriam Freedman, also of 101 Alma Street, was delighted there will be a study on the effect of the horns from both freight trains and Caltrain passing the building in both directions into the middle of the night. She hoped the study helps the people who reside here and make it an even better place to live.

## Agenda Items

1. Discuss Consideration and Prioritization of Bicycle and Pedestrian Crossings as it relates to Grade Separations Across the Caltrain Rail Corridor and Make Recommendations to the City Council Regarding any Proposed Changes.

Office of Transportation Senior Engineer Ripon Bhatia described several existing grade-separated at Embarcadero, University, and Oregon Expressway; bicycle- and pedestrian-only crossings at California Avenue and Homer; and 4 at-grade crossings at Palo Alto Avenue, Churchill Avenue, Meadow Drive, and Charleston Road. He presented a graphic showing the approximate distances between the different crossings. There have been several documents prepared that identify additional locations where bike-ped crossings could be provided to provide better east-west connections. The Bicycle and Pedestrian Master Plan has identified at least 3 locations at the El Camino Park Caltrain/Alma Barrier at Everett Avenue, the Seale and Peers

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Park connection, and Matadero Creek Caltrain undercrossings. In 2013, a rail study identified several crossings, including those 3 above, one at Kellogg and Alma, and another one in the vicinity of Adobe Creek. It was identified that the El Camino and Caltrain/Alma Barrier connection at Everett had several utility conflicts and right-of-way concerns. It was identified to be a potential long-term project to be considered as part of the Stanford Medical Center expansion project and has been on hold until additional information can be gained and prioritized. The Seale and Peers Park connection was intended to provide for a connection with a future bike boulevard on Seale Avenue that provides connection of the residential communities across the Caltrain corridor. The Matadero Creek Caltrain crossing was also identified as part of the 2012 Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan. A Midtown Connector Feasibility Study was conducted in 2015 and 2016 with certain alternatives developed; however, there was also an NVCA area on the other side of the railroad crossing that could provide for opportunities to do some connection as well as for outreach to the neighborhood communities identified. Earlier in 2019, City Council directed staff that this should be studied separately from the grade separation project. Kellogg and Alma Street was also identified as a part of the 2013 rail study as a crossing with a partial underpass alternative, the Churchill Avenue grade-separation partial underpass. In November 2021, the City Council directed the staff to look into marriage between Kellogg and Seale as part of the Bike and Pedestrian Transportation Plan update. The Adobe Creek Crossing was also identified in the 2013 rail study as a potential crossing. The Council had directed evaluation of the bike and ped crossing in the vicinity of Adobe Creek as part of this grade-separation project direction to the BPTP. Senior Engineer Bhatia suggested discussion and prioritization of these bicycle and pedestrian crossings across the Caltrain corridor and how to integrate and include them into the Bicycle and Pedestrian Transportation Plan update.

Vice Mayor Kou inquired about updates on the Bicycle Pedestrian Transportation Plan or interactions with PABAC or Safe Routes to Schools.

Sylvia Star-Lack stated they have not started that work yet.

Public Comment:

1. Penny Ellson stated that having no existing grade separations south of Oregon Expressway will be a serious problem for South Palo Alto during the upcoming grade separation construction period. This construction will require road closure and/or lane reductions with no safe or convenient alternative for bikes and pedestrians. If students

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do not have a safe route to walk, they will go by car, generating four car trips per day for drop-off and pickup, undermining the bike culture established over decades. In 2012, BPTP offered ABC-2, recommending a project to construct a grade-separated ped-bike crossing of Caltrain in the vicinity of Matadero Creek, supported by comp plan program T1193 to increase the number of east-west pedestrian and bicycle crossings across Alma and Caltrain corridor, particularly south of Oregon Expressway. A second bike-ped grade separation crossing further south of Meadow may be needed. She asked for suggestions for alternatives if Staff believes grade separations are not needed in South Palo Alto.

2. Nadia Naik agreed with Ms. Ellson's comments. She pointed out the Grade Separation Committee or XCAP flagged this issue as something that should be built as a precursor to the grade separations. She restated Ms. Ellson's point about kids driving if the route gets very convoluted and parents feel it is unsafe. It is important to have additional crossings in South Palo Alto as it continues to grow. This also meets the goals of sustainability and long-term Bike Plans. It is not just about trying to fit this in the main transportation plan but also trying to be in a good position to get federal funding. More people would coalesce around where to put bike and pedestrian crossings than grade separations, which are more complicated.

Council Member Cormack stated that if we make bicycling hard, people will not bicycle. She suggested thinking of all the places crossings are needed instead of what they have to do with the train, high-speed rail, or grade crossings. She appreciated seeing the red and yellow together on the slide and wondered if this is how to think about it. She had a concern about using up grade separation money on something not accessible to cars and then not having enough for the main separation. She inquired what Staff would like from the Committee regarding today's action item.

City Manager Ed Shikada stated this was a follow-up to the previous discussion on the work plan for the Rail Committee and a desire to discuss sequencing of the Bike-Ped Transportation Plan.

Council Member Cormack was interested to hear from her colleagues.

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City Manager Shikada inquired whether staff had had a chance to ask about the scope of the BPTP and timing for that work.

Council Member Cormack stated they had not yet discussed it but that her colleagues are interested in advancing some of that work ahead of the plan. She stated it is a big responsibility to figure out which one is needed the most and would have the best chance of succeeding.

Mayor Burt referred to page 3 of the staff report, which summarizes the timeline and the current work plan. The plan was originally in the context of an imminent bike and ped master plan that has since been delayed, and there are now historic federal and state funds available for active transportation programs like these crossings. The VTA CEO, Caltrain CEO, and Senator Becker's staff have all urged moving forward aggressively to take advantage of this funding opportunity. He questioned using Measure B discretion money to come up with preliminary designs on the bike and ped crossings, either contracting the services out or bringing them in house. He also questioned the need to work in the term micromobility with the significant future increase in electric bike traffic.

Ms. Star-Lack stated the Bike Plan scope currently includes all of the directives from Council to study the various crossings and includes project prioritization. The Bike Plan includes more community engagement than before. The tasks can be reorganized so the plan frontloads the outreach on the crossings.

Mayor Burt mentioned the need to discuss the South Palo Alto crossing in the Adobe Creek area and one Midtown a bit south of Oregon. In 2019, the Council decided not to include the Midtown crossing as part of the grade separation plan because of the parallel NVCAP project that has bike connectedness as a priority, but that project did not move forward. There is now a necessity to prioritize bike and ped crossings before vehicular separations and an opportunity of massive dollars and grant opportunities. He stated the need to expand resources and proceed on both paths, either in parallel or by frontloading, and to understand the eligibility requirements for the funding.

City Manager Shikada agrees that the availability of construction funding appears better than it has in the past. Getting positioned for those grants requires having a level of design completed in order to be most competitive. The difficulty is broad agreement for the importance for crossing but localized opposition to specific crossings. The more crossings, the less

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unique and perhaps the less problematic it is to have your home next to one of the crossings. Ancillary issues are whether having a new signal at Alma will attract more traffic on the side street or whether becoming primarily a bike crossing will limit some vehicular access. He questioned how to set up the planning and engagement process to anticipate and overcome that dynamic in a way that provides benefit for the community.

Mayor Burt added that the location issues will be significant. The most constrained vehicular crossing is the Churchill location, which may as a result be in sequence following East Meadow and Charleston. The 2 South Palo Alto locations may be highest priority because the bike and ped crossings are less constrained on their landing areas south of Oregon, and that is the part of Palo Alto that has the greatest need. A crossing at Loma Verde has advantages to residents and students but also to Stanford Research Park. He was in favor of trying to accelerate those 2 grade separations.

Vice Mayor Kou agreed with Council Member Cormack that a diagram of the proposed and existing bike-ped crossings would be helpful to refer to.

Council Member Cormack did not think the Council had yet agreed to construct the bike and pedestrian crossings before grade separation. The people who lived on Loma Verde objected to the extension of the Bike Plan, and no money or design in the NVCAP was put into that. She wanted to use the information that exists in the prior plans. People need to get around town more, and she believed more crossings are needed and questioned hiring another person to work on this. She stated that a lot of people commented in the business tax survey about the money spent on Ross Road. The community wants to know details, which is going to take time.

City Manager Shikada agreed that Staff will need to bring this topic back as work proceeds with Bike Plan. It would be ideal not to have the rail line as a barrier between the east and west of Palo Alto. To maximize the number of crossings, ideally they would be not only at Meadow and Charleston but also at El Verano, Loma Verde, El Carmelo, El Dorado, and potentially Colorado. The more crossings there are, the less problematic the individual crossings would be from a localized perspective and the more functionality it would provide for the community. He suggested working backwards from what a crossing would cost to get a sense of how many crossings to plan for in the most aggressive case. There is more work to do on how to sequence the crossing within the context of the Bike Plan, and Staff have concluded that

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community engagement is critical before the design phase of any specific crossing.

Mayor Burt disagreed that more crossings would have less concern from the community. He was surprised to go from not having enough bandwidth for the most important crossings to considering even more. The concerns have not been about additional bikes on streets but about restrictions on the ability to use vehicles on streets. In the Loma Verde area, an off-road path along Matadero Creek was studied and was not feasible because people objected to a bike path over their back fence and because of inability to have needed access from the water district. An on-street path on Loma Verde where there are a lot of vehicles was looked into, but he believed El Carmelo was more likely a good route. Connectedness is critical, and the grade separation plan was about connecting Palo Alto. Continuing to expand bike, ped, and micromobility is also important as part of the Climate Plan. Accessibility has changed with new vehicles like electric bikes and 3-wheeled cargo bikes. The expansion of community commitment on the climate initiative presents a great opportunity to reconnect how these 2 things fit together. He stated he sees it as a political opportunity.

Ms. Naik referred to a map from the Rail Corridor Study, page 47, showing the prioritization of existing and potential crossings. On South Palo Alto, there are critical intersections of improvement shown at Meadow and Charleston. There is only about a third of a mile between Meadow and Charleston but  $\frac{3}{4}$ -mile gaps to the north and south of where those other potential crossings would be. To the left of Meadow on the map, the potential crossing site is the Matedero Creek area. There is extra space, in part on the Caltrain right of way, that was identified as a place of interest. The map helps to illustrate the things Ms. Ellson talked about and the number of crossings north of Oregon compared to south of Oregon. She stated the map would be useful in talking about prioritizing things.

Vice Mayor Kou appreciated the recommendations and suggestions about connectivity and questioned what the City Manager's office is able to do.

City Manager Shikada stated that using the opportunity with the RFP for the overall planning to incorporate this frontloading will be an important step to define further.

Vice Mayor Kou questioned when the Committee would be able to revisit this.

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Ms. Star-Lack stated the need to get the RFP out of procurement.

City Manager Shikada stated if not the next meeting then certainly the one after that.

Council Member Cormack questioned if there are any distance constraints to what would qualify for grade separation funding versus other federal money tied to climate and bikes.

Mayor Burt did not know whether the grade separation dollars applied to bike and ped crossings on the new federal and state dollars. He believed Measure B dollars could be applied but advised pursuing active transportation dollars and not dipping into Measure B dollars.

Council Member Cormack suggested it would be helpful to have a table showing the different types of money and any constraints involved. She realized it is difficult to wait for a plan but did not want to shortcut the process and run into roadblocks.

Vice Mayo Kou requested confirmation on whether the Council had approved looking into bike and ped crossings.

Council Member Cormack clarified that she did not believe the Council had determined that additional bike and ped crossings should be built before the grade separation.

Mayor Burt believed at the last grade separation meeting there was direction to evaluate that as a priority, not definitive action.

Ms. Naik clarified that the Council did not specifically vote to do any bike-ped separations ahead of a grade separation. On page 3 of the staff report, the Council asked to consider the merits of Seale versus Kellogg and look at some of the other improvements. The Council talked about referring the discussion to the Rail Committee.

Vice Mayor Kou clarified that the Committee could have the conversation but not move forward with actual work. She also requested to revert the language of Loma Verde back to Matadero for clarification and consistency.

Senior Engineer Bhatia stated that he had referenced Matadero Creek on his report and that term could continue to be used.

## **NO ACTION TAKEN**

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## VERBAL UPDATE ON INTERAGENCY ACTIVITIES

- a. Caltrain was not in attendance.
- b. VTA was not in attendance.
- c. Senior Engineer Bhatia stated that with regard to the grade separation on the design refinements, City Staff have been outreaching to several entities, including Stanford, PAUSD, PABAC, and the designers involved in the initial design for the partial underpass and underpass alternatives, to seek feedback and comments as directed by the Council. That is ongoing. In addition, Caltrain will provide an update at the next Rail Committee meeting on their initial findings and study analysis of the San Francisquito Bridge. VTA is still evaluating whether funding could be utilized for ped-bike crossing. Staff has met with a consultant regarding the Quite Zone Study, who will formulate a timeline, about a year to 15 months, and a schedule. They will look at connecting with CPUC on diagnostic meetings, doing data collection analysis, conducting the study report in accordance with FRA requirements for making an application to FRA and doing outreach. Caltrain also reached out with some preliminary conversations about the service agreement. They are working with all the agencies up and down the corridor in the next steps of the review for the grade separation project. Staff will find out more about how Caltrain is integrating services in the existing and future phases.

City Manager Shikada reiterated that Caltrain has reached out to City Staff to get involved with the City's grade separation projects. There is a conversation of establishing Memoranda of Understanding that will describe roles and responsibilities in their involvement, which is good news but will likely have a bill associated.

Vice Mayor Kou stated that Caltrain is working with Palo Alto and a lot of the technicalities they will be figuring out together may be applied to other grade separations. She questions if it should be shared along the corridor.

City Manager Shikada stated that is already a part of the conversations but there are site specific elements that are involved. It is a question of the costs, who pays, and how it relates to other work up and down the corridor.

Mayor Burt stated there are 2 issues, the engineering standards up and down the corridor and where Caltrain stands on upgrading those standards separate from whatever engagement they have on Palo Alto's specific ones.



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VTA has a similar interest in being a lead agency on the grade separation engineering and construction, and they have on board very significant staff with such experience and capacity, whereas Caltrain has to outsource a lot of that. He suggested not assuming Caltrain is the right one because VTA has arguments why they are the right one. There would be a relationship with Caltrain because they own the corridor and would be pursuing the standards. By example, VTA has done jack box construction.

City Manager Shikada stated Staff are in conversation with both agencies and both agencies are also talking to each other.

## Public Comment:

1. Ms. Ellson stated that Staff recently brought plans to PABAC and the group was disappointed with the quality of the bicycle-pedestrian components of the projects. She questioned whether the City was planning to continue working with AECOM or if it was possible to get a more experienced consultant, perhaps with experience as bicyclists, so they can understand what works and does not work. She stated there were some elements in the plans that would make the street less safe for bicyclists and wondered if that might be addressed through choice of consultant.
2. Elizabeth Alexis was also at the PABAC meeting, which did not go very well. Consultants who do not know much about bicycles presented to people who are only about bicycles but also added new elements to the plans that nobody who knew anything about bicycles would do. Staff need to engage directly with the people in these meetings because they are going to have to work out these things together, and establishing a relationship is important. She discussed looking at an alternative like the partial underpass or the underpass that is more a bike and pedestrian network concept and thought this needed to be extended out to Mitchell Park for possibilities of protected bike lanes where there are none. If they are not in the Bike Plan, it is difficult to do that. The Bike Plan may need to have versions A, B, and C depending on what alternatives are done for the grade separations because one would look at different networks based upon that choice.

City Manager Shikada stated AECOM is contracted to do the grade separation work but not the bike work. That will be a separate procurement. Regarding the level of bike-related specificity in the previous grade separation alternatives, those were originally scoped primarily to focus on

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property impacts to get an order of magnitude understanding of the implications of those alternatives with the presumption that specificity around bicycling infrastructure would be accommodated at a later stage. Staff learned through that exercise that there is an expectation that that be better defined upfront and incorporated into the alternatives in ways that everyone has a better visual of how they all fit together.

Vice Mayor Kou wondered if Staff and one of the Committee should discuss the discussion points to have with Caltrain prior to the next meeting.

Mayor Burt suggested including Caltrain so they are ready to respond. He also inquired about whether the next meeting was to discuss where Caltrain is in the engineering standards as opposed to the proposed MOU.

Senior Engineer Bhatia stated Caltrain will discuss the San Francisquito Bridge analysis.

Mayor Burt stated that he wants to understand where they stand on this and their responses. By having public discussions in the past and preceding them with private discussions in preparation, it influenced Caltrain's focus on this subject.

Vice Mayor Kou stated it would also be valuable for Caltrain to have an idea of what to focus on. She suggested reaching out to the mayor to set up time for a discussion.

Ms. Niak stated it might be helpful to bring back the original plans for Palo Alto Avenue as a refresher on San Francisquito Creek. She recommended putting it in the staff report so the public can follow along on that conversation.

Vice Mayor Kou agreed with that idea.

## NEXT STEPS AND FUTURE AGENDAS

Senior Engineer Bhatia stated that Caltrain is available September 21, the third Wednesday, and would appreciate sticking to that.

Council Member Cormack requested the clerk send a hold out on the calendars for the rest of the year.

Mayor Burt stated that the Community Health Fair is from 2 to 4 on that Wednesday and had agreed to be there for a portion of it.

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Vice Mayor Kou clarified that the Health Fair is taking place on Sunday, August 21.

## CORRESPONDENCE (INFORMATION ONLY)

Adjournment: The meeting was adjourned at 2:26 P.M.