



RAIL COMMITTEE SUMMARY MINUTES

Special Meeting
September 21, 2022

The Rail Committee of the City of Palo Alto met on this date in the Community Meeting Room and by virtual teleconference at 1:00 P.M.

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

Present Virtually: None

Absent: None

Oral Communications

There was no public comment.

Agenda Items

1. Verbal Update on Interagency Activities

A. Caltrain

B. VTA. A representative was not present.

C. City Staff

Robert Barnard, Deputy Chief, Rail Development, described his work history with Caltrain and previously in Portland.

Lindsey Kiner, Consultant, discussed her history working in the Planning Department at Caltrain.

Navdeep Dhaliwal, Government & Community Affairs Officer, described her history related to infrastructure projects. She discussed Caltrain's electrification project, which will improve the customer experience and help meet regional and state climate action goals. She highlighted project milestones and described Caltrain's ongoing work toward updated standards. She discussed the corridor-wide grade separation project.

SUMMARY MINUTES

Pat Burt, Mayor, stated prospective updates to technical standards had been discussed with Caltrain and questioned where that update stands.

Deputy Chief Barnard discussed that Union Pacific Railroad needs to be engaged in order to do anything that would impact their ability to maintain competitive service levels. Caltrain is ready to engage in that conversation.

Mayor Burt discussed this further and wanted clarification on standard changes within the purview of Caltrain. He gave examples of bridge thickness or construction methods and questioned adopting those as a standard rather than an exception. There was discussion on bridge thickness requirements, and Mayor Burt recalled that it was not permitted without an exception process.

Nadia Naik, Expanded Community Advisory Panel (XCAP) member, felt it would be helpful if the Caltrain standards could point out known issues and suggest things to resolve those issues.

Mayor Burt spoke about jack box construction, the impacts of construction during grade separation, and the potential for an update to design standards that identify the range of what Caltrain is receptive to. He mentioned Churchill as a significant location.

Ms. Naik described a potential way of lifting the tracks by injecting ballast underneath the tracks as something that could be covered in design standards or construction methodologies.

Alison Cormack, Council Member, questioned how many total trains Caltrains has.

Deputy Chief Barnard stated there are currently 4 trains per hour per direction at peak; in 2024, that will increase to 6 trains. He did not have a total number of trains available.

Ms. Dhaliwal was willing to attend future Rail Committee meetings to discuss more specifics.

Council Member Cormack asked for a statement from Caltrain about why the business plan is still appropriate or any modifications to be made as a counterargument to the comments made by the public that this is not necessary.

SUMMARY MINUTES

Philip Kamhi, Chief Transportation Official stated that as frequency and regularity of transit increases, it becomes more appealing for people. This requires grade separations.

Council Member Cormack acknowledged that the Bay Area and Caltrain in particular have been the slowest in the country to rebound from the pandemic.

Vice Mayor Kou was excited to move forward and get some answers.

Chief Transportation Official Kamhi discussed an item to be brought to the Rail Committee as a study session, preferably in October, with feedback on design refinements from various committees. The quiet zone study for Palo Alto Avenue in collaboration with Menlo Park is initiating. Caltrain has expressed willingness to speak at an upcoming meeting. He summarized some issues discussed at a recent meeting with Caltrain along with Mayor Burt and Ms. Niak.

Ms. Niak felt the most salient point of that discussion was that upon completion of electrification, Caltrain needs to have design criteria for building on an electrified railroad. Their delay in dealing with the corridor-wide issues should not impede Palo Alto's ability to move forward and Caltrain is sensitive to the time schedule.

Mayor Burt stated that there was discussion about having been on one time schedule prepandemic, having more adequate time post pandemic as a result of delayed recovery, and now the necessity to make sure to qualify for all the funding currently available.

There was no public comment.

Study Session

2. Caltrain Presentation/Discussion on San Francisquito Creek Bridge

Ms. Kiner spoke about the history of the bridge and the context of the area surrounding the bridge. The bridge and nearby El Palo Alto Tree are eligible on the National Registry of Historic Places. She showed maps to give geographic orientation for the project and described the surrounding area, emphasizing that the Palo Alto Avenue grade crossing is very close to the bridge. A detailed inspection and analysis of the bridge was conducted to understand the condition of the materials.

SUMMARY MINUTES

Deputy Chief Barnard described how the inspection of the bridge was conducted, including measuring flexion and stress of the bridge from freight and passenger trains and collecting samples of the steel for analysis. The bridge is not in imminent danger of collapsing, and there were no cracks and minimal deterioration, although the material was weaker than expected, below normal freight live loading requirements. Caltrain has restricted train movements to allow only 1 freight train on the bridge at a time until the bridge is replaced. Annual bridge monitoring will be supplemented with an additional inspection every 6 months. Caltrain is working to install continuous acoustic emission monitoring to indicate if there is a crack. Replacing the bridge is time bound and needs to be completed by 2033. The numbers of passengers loading at Palo Alto Station in 2018 and 2019 were discussed. With these numbers, bus bridging may be necessary during construction. A timeline for the next 2 years was described with the goal to coordinate with Palo Alto prior to construction to minimize rework at the Palo Alto crossing. Deputy Chief Barnard further discussed some of Caltrain's projects and goals. He spoke about the need to smooth the curves to between the bridge and Palo Alto to and the intent not to raise the bridge but possibly to shift away from the Palo Alto Tree.

Council Member Cormack questioned the necessity to coordinate with Menlo Park in terms of grade separations.

Deputy Chief Barnard felt that the need for coordination depended on the plan for the elevation, i.e. raising the stations and bridge versus being at grade or doing an under- or overpass.

Chief Transportation Official Kamhi suggested a meeting together with Menlo Park and Caltrain to discuss this.

Council Member Cormack asked about the terminology negative remaining fatigue life and the frequency of restricted train movements. There was discussion about this. Council Member Cormack felt the Council should consider using the next 2 years to focus on this grade separation. She questioned what has been learned from the grade separations that are further along in the process.

Deputy Chief Barnard felt early and active involvement with Caltrain was important.

Mayor Burt asked why strengthening is not a viable option.

SUMMARY MINUTES

Deputy Chief Barnard cited increased ridership over time and total cost increases as reasons the decision was made for replacement.

Ms. Kiner stated that environmentally clearing a bridge strengthening takes the same amount of time and it would still eventually need to be rebuilt.

Mayor Burt was not confident that Palo Alto would be ready in the time frame the bridge needs to be replaced and questioned if strengthening would provide more time to accomplish the projects at the multimodal center and Palo Alto Avenue. He expressed surprise that the El Palo Alto Tree and the bridge being eligible, not currently registered, for the National Historic Registry. There was further discussion about this. There may need to be coordination with Caltrans because of the proximity of the Palo Alto grade separation to El Camino. There was discussion about the potential for a prefab drop-in versus building on site and whether that would decrease the expected 2-year downtime. Mayor Burt spoke about the differences in elevation on the west versus the east side of the tracks and was interested in the value of slight changes in elevation.

Ms. Naik questioned using the extra track behind the Stanford Hotel as a shoo-fly track.

Chief Transportation Official Kamhi suggested the historic bridge could then be converted to a bike and pedestrian bridge.

Ms. Kiner discussed that it is a historic bridge structure and a potential for agencies donating the structure as a public park. There was discussion about the nearby rain garden in Menlo Park.

Ms. Naik mentioned the proximity of Palo Alto Avenue to the Ravenswood crossing and thinking about those grade separations together. She spoke about the study done by the city arborist to assess the roots of the trees in the area. She commented that downtown is an area where viaducts make sense. There was discussion about the impact on other agencies like AC Transit by the bussing accommodations. Ms. Naik spoke about the complexity of the project: the reconstruction of the multimodal station, University Avenue grade separation, and Palo Alto Avenue grade separation; the El Palo Alto Tree; etc.

Mayor Burt discussed the previous redesign of the intermodal transit center, whether/when that has to be redone, and how it is related to the construction at the bridge. He felt coming up with a plan for all of these projects in the next few years will be difficult.

SUMMARY MINUTES

Ms. Naik suggested more funding may be available to think about this as one reconfiguration. She believed this is now top priority because the bridge is in danger.

Chief Transportation Official Kamhi listed the transit services at the station.

Vice Mayor Kou stated integrated teams not just for construction but also the transit component afterwards. She questioned how this fits into the work plan and stated it was necessary to reprioritize.

Mayor Burt requested all information be shared on strengthening versus replacement.

Vice Mayor Kou stressed that outreach to the community will be necessary.

Public Comment

Martin Sommer suggested taking Alma across the creek into Menlo Park and reconnecting it there rather than doing an overpass for Caltrain and listed the benefits of this idea. He suggested putting the infrastructure for the auto bridge in ahead of time, using that for train traffic during construction, and then replacing the train and opening the bridge up for auto flow.

Next Steps and Future Agendas

Chief Transportation Official Kamhi verified the planned October 19 date.

Council Member Cormack suggested blocking time for Rail Committee to 4:00. There was discussion about this. The November meeting date was left open.

Adjournment: The meeting was adjourned at 3:08 P.M