TO: HONORABLE CITY COUNCIL

FROM: CITY MANAGER

DEPARTMENT: PLANNING AND COMMUNITY ENVIRONMENT

DATE: SEPTEMBER 27, 2004

SUBJECT: DISCUSSION AND ACTION ON HOMER AVENUE INGRESS AND EGRESS TO AND FROM THE NEW BICYCLE/PEDESTRIAN UNDERCROSSING OF CALTRAIN AT HOMER AVENUE AND THE PALO ALTO MEDICAL FOUNDATION. ALTERNATIVES FOR CONSIDERATION AND POSSIBLE ACTION ARE: (1) DIRECT STAFF TO STUDY THE CONVERSION OF HOMER AVENUE BETWEEN ALMA STREET AND HIGH STREET AND HIGH STREET BETWEEN FOREST AVENUE AND CHANNING AVENUE, FROM ONE-WAY TO TWO-WAY TRAFFIC; (2) ADOPT A RESOLUTION ESTABLISHING A CONTRAFLOW BICYCLE LANE AND ELIMINATING PARKING ON HOMER AVENUE BETWEEN ALMA STREET AND HIGH STREET, AND CONVERTING HIGH STREET BETWEEN FOREST AVENUE AND CHANNING AVENUE FROM ONE-WAY TO TWO-WAY TRAFFIC; AND (3) DIRECT STAFF TO ACCOMMODATE BICYCLES ON ALMA STREET THROUGH IMPLEMENTATION OF SIGNAL TIMING FEATURES

RECOMMENDATION
Staff recommends that Council approve the retention of the existing lane configurations along Alma Street, Homer Avenue and High Street following the opening of the Homer Undercrossing. The Planning and Transportation Commission does not concur with staff’s recommendation, and instead recommends implementation of a contraflow bicycle lane on Homer Avenue, as described under the Board/Commission Review and Recommendation section of this report.

BACKGROUND
The Homer Avenue Caltrain Pedestrian/Bicycle Undercrossing is scheduled to open in November 2004. The undercrossing will provide a connection for bicyclists and pedestrians to cross under the Caltrain tracks and access the South of Forest Area (SOFA), downtown Palo Alto, the Palo Alto Medical Foundation and surrounding areas. Projected daily usage of the undercrossing is approximately 1200 pedestrian trips and 600 bicycle trips.
Because Homer Avenue is a one-way street in the westbound direction, there is currently no direct route for bicyclists using the undercrossing to proceed eastbound from the undercrossing and access the downtown and SOFA areas. Staff has evaluated several options for accommodating the anticipated eastbound flow of bicycles from the undercrossing. These include: (1) convert Homer Avenue between Alma and High, and High Street between Forest and Channing, from one-way to two-way streets (Alternative 1); (2) provide a contraflow (eastbound) bike lane along Homer Avenue between Alma and High but retain one-way westbound vehicle traffic, and convert High Street between Forest and Channing from a one-way street to a two-way street (Alternative 2); and (3) make no changes on Homer Avenue and High Street, but implement traffic signal timing features at the Homer/Alma intersection to minimize vehicle traffic on Alma during the time bicyclists would be traveling from the undercrossing to Forest along Alma (staff recommendation). A complete description of each alternative, along with the related advantages and disadvantages, is given in the staff report presented by the Transportation Division to the Planning and Transportation Commission (Attachment A).

BOARD/COMMISSION REVIEW AND RECOMMENDATIONS
Staff presented each of the above alternatives, along with the recommendation to endorse the staff recommendation, to the Planning and Transportation Commission on July 28, 2004. After a lengthy discussion, including public comment both for and against the staff recommendation, the Commission voted 4-1 to (1) implement Alternative 2 as soon as practical; (2) implement the staff recommendation during any interim period between when the undercrossing opens and when Alternative 2 can be constructed, and (3) study the feasibility of converting Homer and Channing from one-way streets to two-way streets from Middlefield to Alma as a long term solution to the eastbound bicycle egress issue.

DISCUSSION
Staff believes it is prudent to proceed with the simplest, most cost-effective solution that provides safety for bicyclists first (staff recommendation), and proceed to more extensive measures only if subsequent observations indicate that such measures are necessary to ensure bicyclists’ safety. However, should Council support the recommendations of the Planning and Transportation Commission and direct staff to design and implement Alternative 2, staff will work with the Palo Alto Bicycle Advisory Committee (PABAC), experts in the field, and other stakeholders to create a contraflow bike lane which maximizes bicyclist safety, minimizes vehicle conflicts and minimizes potential driver and bicyclist confusion. The contraflow bike lane would most likely incorporate the following general features:

- Separation from vehicle lanes would be provided by double yellow centerline and/or raised physical features such as “bots dots” or “chatter bars”
- Signs at the intersection of Lane 8 West (the alley) and Homer Avenue, warning drivers exiting the alley about bicyclists in the contraflow lane
Implementation of Alternative 2 would result in the loss of eight parking spaces along the south side of Homer Avenue between Alma Street and High Street. The loss of these spaces could be absorbed by existing on-street parking along Alma Street south of Homer, and in the future by the new underground public parking that is being provided by the 800 High Street project (63 parking spaces). Staff has included a resolution establishing a contraflow bike lane on Homer Avenue (Attachment C), including the removal of these eight parking spaces along the south side of Homer Avenue and the conversion of High Street between Forest Avenue and Channing Avenue from a one-way street to a two-way street, should Council direct staff to implement Alternative 2.

Due to a heavy workload, staff does not recommend undertaking a study of converting Homer and Channing to two-way operation at this time. Should Council direct staff to conduct such a feasibility analysis, a number of difficult issues with respect to the satisfaction of stakeholders, including Whole Foods Market, Channing House, and South of Forest Area residents, would need to be resolved. The study would include a traffic analysis of both streets, including a signal warrant study of the intersection of Channing and Alma, an analysis of traffic flow, queues and likely changes in vehicle speeds and crash rates; an evaluation of alternatives for truck loading at Whole Foods; an analysis of the safety effects of a conversion to two-way operation on Homer, on pedestrians at Whole Foods; and an evaluation of the effects on mitigations for Channing House drivers exiting and entering from Homer or Channing. Such an undertaking would require a full year and staff reassignment. Extensive outreach and consultation with business, resident, and commuter stakeholders should accompany and inform the technical evaluation. As a result, the Transportation Division work program for the year would have to be re-prioritized and some priority tasks would not be undertaken.

ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW
As indicated in Attachment A, the staff recommendation is exempt from environmental review under CEQA Section 15301(c) (Existing Facilities). Should Council direct staff to implement Alternative 2, the project would be exempt from environmental review under CEQA Sections 15304(h) (Creation of Bicycle Lanes on Existing Rights-of-Way) and 15301(c) (Existing Facilities).

ATTACHMENTS
A. Staff report to Planning and Transportation Commission
B. Minutes from July 28, 2004 Planning and Transportation Commission meeting
C. Resolution to establish an eastbound (contraflow) bike lane, including removal of eight parking spaces along the south side of Homer Avenue and the conversion of High Street to two-way traffic.
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cc:  Palo Alto Bicycle Advisory Committee  
     City/School Traffic Safety Committee  
     Ole’s Car Shop  
     Palo Alto BMW, Inc.  
     Honda Small Car Shop  
     Doug Ross  
     Attendees of 5/20/04 stakeholder’s meeting