TO: HONORABLE CITY COUNCIL
FROM: CITY MANAGER
DEPARTMENT: PLANNING AND COMMUNITY ENVIRONMENT
DATE: DECEMBER 5, 2005
CMR: 438:05
SUBJECT: 3201 E. BAYSHORE RD [05PLN-00255]: APPLICATION BY THE CITY OF PALO ALTO PUBLIC WORKS DEPARTMENT FOR SITE AND DESIGN REVIEW AND DESIGN ENHANCEMENT EXCEPTION FOR A PHOTOVOLTAIC (PV) DEMONSTRATION PROJECT CONSISTING OF 10 SOLAR TRACKERS AND 2 PHOTOVOLTAIC CARPORTS TO BE LOCATED AT THE CITY’S MUNICIPAL SERVICE CENTER (MSC). ZONE DISTRICT: PF (D) PUBLIC FACILITY WITH SITE & DESIGN COMBINING DISTRICT. ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT: EXEMPT FROM THE CALIFORNIA ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY ACT PER SECTION 15303.

RECOMMENDATION
The Planning and Transportation Commission (PTC) recommends that 1) the City Council deny the site and design review and design enhancement exception for 10 photovoltaic (pv) tracker arrays located at the City’s Municipal Service Center (MSC) as part of the City of Palo Alto Utilities Photovoltaic Demonstration project and 2) approve the site and design review for the 2 photovoltaic carports at the MSC, based upon the findings and conditions in the Record of Land Use Action (Attachment A).

Staff recommends that the City Council consider approving the originally proposed project or a reduced PV tracking array alternative that consists of 5 arrays relocated to the most central front portion of the MSC.

BACKGROUND
The project background and description can be found in Attachment C, as well as in the PTC September 28, 2005 staff report (Attachment D).

The site and design review process requires initial review and recommendation by the PTC. When the PTC recommends denial of the application, instead of proceeding to the Architectural Review Board (ARB) for review, the application proceeds directly to City Council who may approve, modify or disapprove the submitted plans. The City Council may also refer the project to the ARB for its review and recommendation.
COMMISSION REVIEW AND RECOMMENDATIONS

On September 28, 2005, the PTC heard the application for the MSC Photovoltaic Demonstration Project and recommended denial of the photovoltaic tracking array portion of the project (3-2-1-1) (see Attachment D for staff report). At issue were the number and design of the photovoltaic tracking arrays being located in front of the MSC so near to the Palo Alto Baylands. The Commission recommended approval for the carport component of the application, for photovoltaic facilities in general in the city as an alternative energy source, but did not support the proposed location and number of photovoltaic arrays proposed in front of the MSC.

The primary issue raised by Commissioners recommending denial of the portion of the project in the front of the MSC was compatibility with the surrounding environment, in particular the Palo Alto Baylands area adjacent to the Municipal Service Center. Two Commissioners stated that they did not find the tracking arrays, as a vertical element, were consistent with the Baylands Guidelines. One Commissioner expressed concern over the number of trackers proposed. The PTC recommended that the tracking arrays be considered in alternative locations. There was one public speaker at the meeting, who also recommended denial of the project for incompatibility of the photovoltaic tracking arrays with the surrounding environment. Commissioners in support of the arrays indicated such alternative energy facilities did not conflict with the Baylands or Baylands use and that the location at the edge of the Baylands along this utility corridor at a height consistent with the MSC buildings was appropriate. (See Verbatim Minutes, Attachment E).

Utilities, Public Works and representatives from the National Center for Photovoltaics, National Renewable Energy Laboratory did investigate many other City-owned locations for these facilities and the MSC was the final recommendation based on structural considerations, nearby utility facilities, solar orientation, and type of City land use (avoiding parks). City staff is recommending the MSC location due to the fact that it meets the facilities’ basic requirements and is in a visible location that further promotes the City’s commitment to Green Energy and the environment.

As directed by City Council, the Municipal Service Center location is currently being analyzed by the Public Works Department for the potential relocation of all City services and location of an auto dealership at this site. Part of the study will include the relocation costs of these photovoltaic facilities. The photovoltaic facilities are funded in part with federal Department of Energy grant money, therefore would need to be relocated or replaced in kind if they cannot be accommodated on-site. In particular, the PV tracking arrays, as the proposed carports would be more easily integrated into the design of an auto dealership on this site. The analysis of the PV tracking arrays could include looking at the potential of locating them along the perimeter of the MSC site with new development.

Additional tree plantings around the MSC were added with the construction of the Santa Clara Valley Water District project last summer and these tree plantings will mature in 5-10 years, providing additional screening of the MSC facilities from the Baylands. The tracking arrays originally proposed, with a height less than the MSC buildings, would not be visible from the Baylands. Therefore, Staff would like City Council to consider approving the originally proposed project or a reduced PV tracking array alternative outlined below.
Reduced Project Alternative
To address concerns expressed during the Commission meeting, Public Works and Utilities has submitted the following alternatives to the originally proposed project for Council consideration.

- Reducing the number of tracking arrays from ten to five. The grant money for the removed tracker would likely be transferred to purchase more rooftop panels at the Cubberley Center PV project.
- Locating the 5 trackers directly in front of the MSC. The area in front of the MSC is not a natural area and this location would be the furthest away from Baylands.
- Limiting designs to those that would be no taller than existing MSC buildings. The preferred pattern is therefore the square panels or the more flower-like design.
- Replace the proposed temporary promotional signage and consider lettering on photovoltaic panels with a small sign consistent with nearby Baylands Park signs. The sign will describe the Palo Alto Utilities Green Energy project and point to the educational component of the project, still under development, that will be located on the City’s Utility website.

RESOURCE IMPACT:
The proposed project will be part of the Palo Alto Green Energy program, reducing costs to the City and participating residents and businesses in the program by increasing the availability of photovoltaic energy in the City. The City received a Department of Energy $1.4 million dollar grant in the FY 2003 Energy and Water Appropriations Bill to install a variety of PV systems on City facilities. The City Utility Department is providing $1.4 million dollars in matching funds, for a total project of $2.8 million dollars. Energy produced by all three-demonstration projects (312 kW for all three projects or approximately 604,500 kWh/year) will be utilized by the immediate facilities as well as be available for use with the CPA Utilities’ Green Energy Program. As a comparison, a typical single family home would install a 3 kW PV system to cover most, if not all of its typical energy use. The proposed project at the MSC would produce approximately 110 kW or 231,000 kWh/year. The visibility of the facilities at the MSC could be promotional when applying for additional photovoltaic grants in the future.

ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW
This project is exempt from the provisions of the California Environmental Quality Act per Section 15303. The Department of Energy is the Lead Agency for the filing of an exclusion from the National Environmental Policy Act.

PREPARED BY: 
SUSAN MICKESEN
Planner

DEPARTMENT HEAD REVIEW: 
STEVE EMSLIE
Director of Planning and Community Environment
CITY MANAGER APPROVAL:

EMILY HARRISON
Assistant City Manager

ATTACHMENTS:
A. Record of Land Use Action
B. Baylands Design Guidelines & Comprehensive Plan Compliance
C. Background/Project Description/Zoning Compliance Table
D. Planning & Transportation Commission Report, September 28, 2005 –
E. Planning & Transportation Commission excerpt verbatim minutes, September 28, 2005 –
F. Arkin-Tilt Architects’ Proposed PV Project Summary
G. Photographs of Project area (Color copies to Council only)
H. Project Plans (Councilmembers only)

COURTESY COPIES:
Planning & Transportation Commission
Architectural Review Board
Karen Bengard, Public Works
Holly Boyd, Public Works
David Arkin, Arkin Tilt Architects
Emily Renzel