Summary Title: Connecting Palo Alto Rail Update

Title: Connecting Palo Alto Rail Grade Separation: Receive an Update From the Expanded Community Advisory Panel (XCAP)

From: City Manager

Lead Department: Transportation Department

Staff is providing this cover memo as additional information for the City Council as part of the Expanded Community Advisory Panel (XCAP) Update for September 21, 2020.

The report from XCAP Chairperson is included as Attachment A.

**Tentative Timeline**

The XCAP is currently working toward their goal of completing a report to the City Council with grade separation recommendations by the end of October.

XCAP Deliberations:
- September 16, 2020 – XCAP Regular Meeting, 4:00 – 7:00 pm (Begin Deliberations – Meadow-Charleston)
- September 21, 2020 – City Council meeting when XCAP Update is scheduled to be presented
- September 23, 2020 – XCAP Special Meeting, 4:00 – 7:00 pm (Continue Deliberations – Meadow-Charleston)
- September 30, 2020 – XCAP Special Meeting, 3:30 – 6:00 pm (Continue Deliberations – Meadow-Charleston)
- October 7, 2020 – XCAP Regular Meeting, 4:00 – 7:00 pm (Continue Deliberations – Meadow-Charleston- if needed or Conclusion)

XCAP Report to Council: October 2020

Subject to XCAP completing their report, staff will work with the XCAP Chair/Vice Chair to schedule sessions for the Council to receive and be fully briefed on the report and recommendations. It can be anticipated that this will require several city council
sessions to walk through the issues and dimensions of the XCAP review.

Council Deliberations following XCAP Report: Fall/Winter 2020

**Attachments:**

- Attachment A: XCAP Update to City Council #6
To: City Council

From: Nadia Naik, Chair of Expanded Community Advisory Panel (XCAP)

Date: September 21, 2020

Re: Update #6 to City Council (Amended September 10, 2020)

Executive Summary:

Since XCAP’s last update to City Council on 6/4/20, we have been continuing to receive technical information from AECOM necessary to continue our deliberations. In light of the delays to the schedule related to COVID, XCAP reviewed the committee’s continued commitment and ability to adhere to the rigorous schedule to achieve the assignment by the City Council. The committee recognized that while the need for grade separations is less imminent than it once was, it remains a priority and something Palo Alto must prepare for in the future. XCAP voiced their continued commitment to completing the task, agreed to an aggressive timeline and the new completion date is now targeted to be October 2020.

At the February 26, 2020 meeting, XCAP voted unanimously to eliminate from further consideration the two South Palo Alto tunnel options (with and without freight) from our deliberations due to cost and the complexity of technical issues associated with the alternatives. At the September 3, 2020 meeting, XCAP voted 6-3 (No votes: Phil Burton, Keith Reckdahl and Nadia Naik) to recommend Closure with mitigations for the Churchill/Alma intersection. Details are still being deliberated – including the mitigations and the options for bike/ped tunnel design. For South Palo Alto, the remaining alternatives for the Meadow/Alma and Charleston/Alma intersections that XCAP will be deliberating on are: viaduct, hybrid, trench, and underpasses.

Completed Tasks:

- AECOM created and XCAP reviewed Factsheets, Exhibits and 3D renderings for the newest alternatives (Meadow Underpass, Charleston Underpass and Churchill Partial Underpass).
- AECOM created and XCAP reviewed existing Factsheets with updated information available from the Noise/Vibration report and the Final Traffic report.
- AECOM and XCAP reviewed and updated the Matrix – Summaries of Evaluations with City Council Adopted Criteria document to improve readability and reflect updated technical information.
- XCAP generated their own “Dynamic Matrix” for internal use in deliberations.
- Discussion with Sebastian Petty of Caltrain.
Discussion:

**XCAP Team Update:**
XCAP member Adina Levin of Friends of Caltrain and numerous other public transportation advocacy groups left XCAP to focus on her advocacy given the impacts to transportation funding due to COVID.

**Schedule Changes and Community Engagement:**
Since the last update, XCAP met every two weeks and has now switched to weekly meetings during deliberations to achieve the October target.

XCAP continues to have a strong number of attendees (~30 per meeting) and receives consistent public comment. There is, however, significant repetition both from many of the same people who live near the impacted areas, particularly around Churchill and along Embarcadero, as well as in the substance of the comments received.

AECOM and Staff have developed a Virtual Town Hall (vrpaloalto.com) which runs from August 19th – Sept 7th. The majority of the exhibits in the Town Hall are the result of documents created for XCAP’s deliberations.

**Business Community Outreach:**
To date, XCAP has not received any feedback from the business community on either existing or new alternatives since the PA Chamber’s representative on XCAP (Judy Kleinberg) left the committee in Jan 2020.

**PAUSD Outreach:**
The Staff is the point of contact for PAUSD since the departure of their representative from XCAP last year. As reported previously, on 2/26/20 XCAP received a letter from the PAUSD Superintendent regarding impacts from existing alternatives at the time (Churchill viaduct and closure) which seemed to indicate they had not fully understood the alternatives to date. (The district communicated concerns indicating that a closure of Churchill “may negatively impact student safety related to bicycle commuters,” but the Churchill Closure would include one of two bike/ped underpass alternatives that would improve bike/ped crossing in the Churchill area.)

Staff reported to XCAP that they had presented to the City/School liaison committee but, we have not received any feedback from them, the PAUSD school board, or the City School Transportation Safety Committee (CSTSC). XCAP assumes that Staff will continue to communicate with PAUSD and other partners to ensure they fully understand both the existing
and new alternatives and we encourage them to provide additional feedback before XCAP finalizes deliberations. We also recommend the City work with the district to promote the XCAP’s work and involve the parent community to the extent possible.

**Bike/Pedestrian Outreach:** Since the XCAP Chair presented to the Palo Alto Bicycle Coalition (PABAC), we have received more feedback regarding bike/ped issues. PABAC, a highly technically experienced advisory group, previously described the renderings and exhibits as “very unclear” and expressed feeling like bike/ped design considerations had been “shoe horned” into the work rather than being a focus from the beginning.

As noted above, in the Viaduct, Hybrid, Trench, Tunnel and closure alternatives, bike/ped movement is relatively straightforward and is not usually analyzed in great detail at this stage of development. The new alternatives, however, attempt to provide greater design flexibility and, thus involve more complex bike/pedestrian designs. Palo Alto has made a commitment to treat all modes (cars, bikes, peds, scooters, etc.) equally in their planning efforts, but XCAP has run into some difficulty because, from the Staff and the Consultant’s perspective, the level of detail sought by the committee and the community is beyond what is typical at this phase. Many have expressed concern that it is difficult to make recommendations if we can’t evaluate the details needed to achieve good bike/ped design and ensure we have addressed concerns for all modes. The committee recognizes, however, that due to time and funding constraints, there cannot be more work done on these alternatives at this time and that we will need to make recommendations based on the information provided to date. XCAP has discussed the possibility of including recommendations for future areas of study in their final report.

**Workflow items:**

**Noise and Vibration Report:** XCAP reviewed and received the [final draft of the Noise and Vibration Report](#). The subsequent technical information was used to update the Matrix and the Factsheets for each alternative.

**Website:**
The Staff have been able to update the website with the following information.

**Meeting Summaries** – Meeting summaries are now available for each XCAP meeting that include any official actions taken by XCAP.

**Compilations of Public Comment** – An email address was developed for XCAP such that members of the public could email a single address with comments. Public comments are collated and included in XCAP’s packet (similar to how City Council receives emails) such that XCAP members have a succinct record of emails received and that the public both easily see the emails they’ve sent to XCAP and read emails received by XCAP from other members of the public. There have been some reports of emails being caught in SPAM and not being delivered to XCAP members. Staff is looking into the issue.
**Future Schedule and Work Plan:**

XCAP approved that the Chair would assign sections of XCAP’s Final Report to various group members to begin production of a final deliverable for the City Council. An outline of the report and the assigned sections can be viewed here: [https://connectingpaloalto.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Shared-at-Meeting-Item-4-Memo-re-XCAP-deliberation-Feb-202020.pdf](https://connectingpaloalto.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Shared-at-Meeting-Item-4-Memo-re-XCAP-deliberation-Feb-202020.pdf)

XCAP members have begun releasing drafts of various sections. The Chair and Vice Chair are editing and collating the received chapters and providing feedback for consistency. This work is ongoing.

**Caltrain Update – Sebastian Petty, Deputy Chief, Caltrain Planning**

A summary of Mr. Petty’s presentation to XCAP is available [here](https://connectingpaloalto.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Shared-at-Meeting-Item-4-Memo-re-XCAP-deliberation-Feb-202020.pdf). Mr. Petty reviewed the significant impacts that COVID19 has had on Caltrain operations. We highly recommend reading the entire summary.

**Highlights:**

**COVID:**
- Operations have been impacted but grade separation projects remain active (funded with outside funding sources like county sales taxes)
- Business plan paused - not cancelled; decisions the Board has made have not been voided
- Scenario planning will consider whether changes to travel patterns are significant and lasting or more temporary and marginal

**Corridor-wide Grade Separation Study**
- Will begin Fall of 2020 (funding secured in this past year’s capital budget). Budget authorized hiring a single point of contact to manage work broken up between multiple contractors and phases. Phase 1: expected to take 6 months; entire study about 2.5 years.
- A corridor and community process, including all local jurisdictions on the corridor, regional and state partners will work to develop and determine the scope, timeframe, contracting method and how the study should be governed. Focus will be policy framework, not specific grade separation or crossing designs.
- Phase 2: Will echo what was heard and seek feedback from city representatives, especially on standards and construction methods and why they’re needed to understand mutual implications of all decisions.
- Will consider economies of scale, construction standards and design standards comprehensively (so individual projects are not asked to go through onerous design exemption processes) and how construction contracting and sequencing approaches can be used to keep costs and impacts under control. And, will include organization analysis and governance around project delivery vs. operations and corridor management, structure for
decision making on issues that span multiple jurisdictions and impact both cities and rail operations and structure for administering funding.

**Four Track Sections/Grade Separations:**
- Caltrain Board adopted a long-range service vision within the context of the business plan and a Rail Corridor Use Policy (RCUP) giving direction to Staff to be careful of permanently encumbering any land they own because they might need it for a small four track section to accommodate HSR.
- Work needs to be done with PA and MV to narrow down the area where that infrastructure could realistically fit.
- On Caltrain-owned corridor, assumption: if HSR comes, they would operate at 110mph blended with Caltrain’s service (FRA requires a grade separation for operating speed of 125mph or higher). HSR plans do not include grade separations, but instead are looking at quad gates and other kinds of safety improvements. Caltrain is pushing back on this HSR assumption through HSR EIR process.
- At a corridor level, standards like what is an acceptable grade will need to be evaluated rather than taking a case by case exception approach to ensure Union Pacific is comfortable.

**Funding Grade Separations:**
- Costs are rising in the Bay Area and because railroad is getting more complicated with electrified infrastructure, positive train control and more complex systems. Construction methodology and standards are also challenging and increase cost.
- Interest in grade separations has increased without realistic levels of funding to complete projects.
- Currently, there are no grade separation funding programs outside of local tax measures and no meaningful Federal programs. State funding has been fairly miniscule relative to size of the projects. Corridor as a whole needs to be involved with representation from the region and the state to fund grade separations.
- Caltrain has no money for grade separations and no dedicated money to support grade separation engineering on a case-by-case basis. Currently, if cities have funding for grade separations, Caltrain can’t analyze city plans until the city submits them and can front Caltrain money to hire consultants to do the analysis. Usually there is funding available to support the railroad’s participation.
- As Palo Alto designs advance and move towards construction, the railroad will need to be more heavily involved. This could be a service agreement with Palo Alto directly or a three-party agreement with VTA and Palo Alto if they were contributing significant funding and Caltrain to cover costs. Those costs would be higher if Caltrain needed to do work that is looking at things outside of the normal standards that would generate a lot of work the railroad needed to do. Note: As projects advance, costs increase because the level of design and level of review necessary increases dramatically.
- Experts note the highest factor in prioritization of grade separations is how they can be grouped together for contracting purposes. Bundling multiple projects as a corridor to advocate for creation of new funding sources or to articulate comprehensive project
benefits is likely to yield better results than cities relying on current county funding schemes.

- Caltrain has seen a lack of success in going after Federal funding for individual grade crossings. Sequencing of grade separation projects can have implications for service patterns to accommodate multiple construction projects – and projects that cross jurisdictions, add to the complexity.

**Summary**

Despite all the impacts of the COVID19 emergency, the XCAP remains committed to providing City Council with a final report of its findings and recommendations. XCAP remains confident that despite the recent impacts to its operations, our region will recover and Caltrain will eventually run a high volume of trains again. Although the time horizon has been extended by some amount, traffic congestion and the issue of safety at the grade crossings will return to Palo Alto, necessitating grade separations.