



Architectural Review Board

Staff Report

Agenda Date: June 6, 2013

To: Architectural Review Board

From: Shahla Yazdy, Transportation Engineer **Department:** Planning and
Community Environment

Subject: California Avenue Streetscape Improvements [13PLN-00211]: Request by City of Palo Alto Transportation Division for Architectural Review of streetscape improvements to California Avenue, between El Camino Real and the CalTrain Station, that include traffic calming treatments, landscape elements with new street trees, street furniture, new street lighting, parking enhancements, and reduction to vehicle travel lanes from four to two lanes. Environmental Review: A Negative Declaration was prepared in accordance with CEQA guidelines and was adopted on November 29, 2011.

RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that the Architectural Review Board (ARB) recommend the Director of Planning and Community Environment approve the proposed project, based upon the required findings (Attachment A) and subject to the conditions of approval (Attachment B).

BACKGROUND

The City initiated the California Avenue Transit Hub Corridor Streetscape project in the Fall 2010. The RBF/David Gates & Associates consultant team prepared the project improvement plans for the project. The project includes additional sidewalk widening treatments and street and pedestrian scale lighting in response to Council's request for additional community amenities. A streetscape furniture and landscape treatment palette has been developed for the project as part of the community outreach process.

Previous Review

The ARB previously reviewed the project plans at a Study Session on February 21, 2013. The comments provided on the project focused on the following design concepts:

- Provide more consistency between all streetscape furniture;
- Provide a more low key central plaza pattern on the asphalt;

- Simplify the wall materials using brick, granite, concrete, etc;
- Provide consistency in the furniture in the plaza; and
- Make sure pedestrian lights are spaced such that lights are located at pedestrian crossings.

The updated concept plans have been revised based upon input received from the ARB, the community, including businesses along California Avenue, and City staff. The updated plans are included as Attachment C and will also be presented at the ARB meeting for review. The following discussion clarifies the modifications to the project in response to the previous ARB comments.

DISCUSSION

California Avenue is in a fully developed urban setting, with intensive development extending on both sides of California Avenue. The California Avenue Caltrain Station is located on the east side of the project, with pedestrian, bicycle and train traffic creating a strong visual boundary that would be reinforced by placement of a new fountain. On the west end of the project at El Camino Real, the placement of native grasses and granite rocks in the center median would create another strong visual boundary which would be reinforced by El Camino Real. An eclectic mix of sculptures within the center medians and poetry inscribed in the brick walkways along California Avenue create a unique urban experience.

The currently proposed street alignment, shown in Attachment C was adopted by the City Council in July 2011 and is designed to balance the sidewalk and streetscape opportunity areas evenly throughout the corridor. The proposed mix of traditional and modern streetscape elements, such as benches and seat walls, should help to stimulate pedestrian activity and support retail activities. The landscape elements are intended to respond to community interest for a mix of colorful treatments with a strong seasonal emphasis in the Spring and Summer, while maintaining a greener appearance during other seasons. The proposed streetscape palette also includes new street light standards for the proposed lighting along California Avenue.

Furniture and Materials

Over the course of the outreach process, a range of viewpoints on site furnishings were heard from the community. Participants at the community meetings were shown imagery of a variety of furnishing styles and were asked to indicate their preferences. Some participants felt that the street should have sleek and modern furnishings, to give it a more contemporary look and feel. Others preferred a more traditional style of furnishings, which they felt was more consistent with some of the existing brick and wood elements and the warm ambience of the space. The proposed benches would provide a middle ground between the two styles, with simple, clean lines, contemporary metal accents and the warmth and traditional aesthetic of wood. Seat pads in either natural granite or a warm concrete provide additional seating options. Trash receptacles are proposed to be a warm gray metal with simple lines and include both litter and recycling sections in one unit. Newspapers would be consolidated in single racks with multiple compartments to reduce clutter. The intent is for the furnishings to act as a unifying element that conveys a polished style, yet establishes a friendly and approachable atmosphere.

To provide more consistency between all streetscape site furniture, each site furniture element has been revisited, and the currently proposed families of site elements are simple, clean and strong in form and color finishes, with a touch of history and a look to the future. The gray metallic finish is a consistent theme color for all metal parts of site furnishings (legs and arm rests of wood benches, the light pole, trash receptacle, news rack units and pedestal, drinking fountain and game table). The proposed wood bench, granite bollards, concrete seat walls, trash receptacles, news racks, street light and pedestrian lights, and bike racks all have simple and clean forms. The proposed wood benches to replace the existing at the existing brick walls provide a simple and contemporary look.

To simplify the wall materials (previously proposed as brick, granite, concrete, stone veneer, etc.), the existing brick walls would be retained, and all new seat walls would have a simple/clean concrete form. The granite seating boulders and the stone veneer have been removed from the wall palette.

Pedestrian lights have also been located at either side of the pedestrian crossings to emphasize the pedestrian scale bulb-out and to enhance the safety and lighting levels at the crossings.

Working with the community, the preferred option for the improved plaza at the east end of the street was developed. The plaza's focal element would be a dramatic custom sculptural water feature by artist Michael Szabo. A variety of spaces would be provided in the plaza with a range of seating options, including seatwalls and benches, as well as game tables.

Landscaping and Trees

The design for the plaza retains the existing Pistache trees, and additional trees would be planted in the area left by the removal of parking spaces that are part of the existing plaza. The Parks Department has requested the removal of the most easterly Pistache tree as to prevent the leaves from clogging the fountain drainage system. Transportation staff will continue to work with Parks to make sure all of their concerns are addressed. The proposed plaza shrub palette is made up of drought tolerant plants including Coast Rosemary, Phormium, Agave, Dwarf Mat Rush, Small Cape Rush, Flax Lily and Flowering Carpet Rose.

The proposed street tree palette follows the street's existing pattern and the City's Street Tree Plan. Additional Crape Myrtles would be provided for accent color and to provide visual interest. Additional pots, with shrubs and blooming trees, would provide vitality, color and retail excitement throughout the corridor. Between El Camino Real and Ash Street, proposed shrubs include Meidiland Rose, Phormium, Dwarf Mat Rush, Hot Lips Sage, u and New Zealand Flax, and Flax Lily. From Ash Street to Park Boulevard, proposed shrubs include Hot Lips Sage, Mexican Sage, Phormium, New Zealand Flax, Fescue, Flax Lily, Agave, and Flowering Carpet Rose.

Five existing street trees are proposed for removal due to the new streetscape improvement work. The trees impacted are two (2) Valley Oak Trees, one (1) Southern Live Oak and two (2)

Shumard Oak Trees. All will be replaced with the same or similar species trees in 24" box size. The locations of these trees are shown in the Project Planting Plans, Attachment C.

Flexibility for Central Public Plaza Space

A flexible plaza design element is included between Ash Street and Birch Street and further defined in Attachment C. The flexible plaza space would use curbless transitions between sidewalks and the street to provide accessible public plaza space for special event uses or seasonal expansion of retail activities. Decorative stone bollards to protect the street from the sidewalk zones would introduce an opportunity for unique streetscape furniture to both functional as barriers and aesthetically pleasing for the community.

To provide a more low key central plaza paving pattern, the colored asphalt paving pattern at Central Plaza has been simplified with strong terra cotta color pavement bands - the horizontal bands define the sharrow/travel lanes and the parking zone while the vertical bands set the tone and create a feel for the plaza. The simple square granite blocks are proposed as bollards (visual barrier) at flush curbs between the parking zone and the sidewalk on either side of the plaza.

Park Boulevard Plaza

The Park Boulevard Plaza design is highlighted in the Attachment C and include several community-requested treatments:

- Centering and buffering access to public art and fountain elements within the plaza to preserve views to the fountain as a focal element down California Avenue;
- Providing ample useable seating areas for special plaza events or regular patron use;
- Maintaining accessible bicycle access and parking adjacent to the California Avenue transit station and underpass;
- Preserving an unobstructed view of the California Avenue streetscape and hills west of the project areas; and
- Introducing lighting improvements to the plaza.

Community Involvement

To date, the City has sponsored six design-focused community outreach meetings focusing on the alignment and on placement of streetscape furniture such as seat walls, bicycle parking facilities, newsracks, trash/recycle bins, commercial loading zones, etc. In addition, four merchant-focused meetings, including one day-long workshop at Mollie Stone's Market, were also held to get input from the businesses in the area as to what they'd like to see on their block, as part of the project. Staff has also met with the Business Association of California Avenue (BACA) on a monthly basis to update the businesses on the latest project developments. Input from attendees at the community meetings showed a general desire to implement sidewalk widening alternatives as part of the California Avenue project along with other pedestrian-scaled improvements such as lighting, and bulb-outs at intersections to reduce crosswalk lengths and introduce additional planting opportunities. Attendees also expressed a strong interest in the design of the Park Boulevard Plaza.

Department Review

Staff has circulated the project plans to Public Works Engineering and Operations, Urban Forestry, Landscape Architect, Parks and Open Space and Utilities Departments for review and comments. Most comments have been incorporated and are shown in the attached plans.

One issue that staff would like direction from the ARB on is regarding the selection of the proposed Silver Linden trees along the south side of California Avenue, between Ash and Birch.

The project includes adding five (5) new Silver Linden trees to the widened sidewalk area along California Avenue, between Ash and Birch, where the sidewalk would be widened by an additional 10 ft. The trees would match the existing trees that are currently on California Avenue and would create a unifying visual corridor as the backbone of the streetscape design. The proposed trees on the widened sidewalk would create a visual symmetry to the existing Linden trees on the north side of the block of California Avenue. The overall effect will be simple, clean and strong. The nice form and vibrant green leaf color will provide a cohesive and distinct corridor for vehicular speeds. The yellow white flowers, in drooping clusters, would provide more delicate interest to the sidewalk users walking under the branches. These characteristics make it a good tree for both auto and pedestrian users. The tree is tall when planted and fast growing, providing shade quickly for cars parked along the street. Given their height, they will not interfere with opening doors when entering and exiting the vehicle. From a maintenance perspective, the tree is relatively clean with small leaves that will not clog drains and it is relatively drought tolerant. In the long term, once the trees grow taller, the lower branches can be trimmed to create nice overhead canopy for strolling the street in the shade, and maintains views to storefronts. In addition, the area merchants have expressed that shading is important, as they would like to utilize the widened sidewalks for outdoor seating and dining purposes, and the shade provided by the Linden trees would provide a comfortable atmosphere as patrons enjoy sitting on the proposed seat pads.

During the City department review, the Public Works Engineering Landscape Architect suggested Crepe Myrtles as the second row of trees, instead of the proposed Silver Linden, on California Avenue. The reason for this recommendation is because of the large scale nature of the Linden Trees, and especially with the existing Linden Trees that are on this block, a smaller scale tree, Crepe Myrtle, was suggested.

The ARB is requested to provide direction on the preferred tree selection.

NEXT STEPS

Staff will finalize the construction plans through June 2013 and will return to the Planning and Transportation Commission and Council in late Summer 2013 to award the project for bids. The City anticipates advertising the project for competitive bids in the Summer 2013 with construction beginning in the Fall 2013.

ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW

Pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), a Negative Declaration was prepared for this project and was adopted by the City Council on November 29, 2011. The

Negative Declaration concluded that the project would not result in any significant environmental impacts. Litigation challenging the CEQA compliance was filed shortly thereafter and the Santa Clara County Superior Court ruled in February 2012 that the City did comply with CEQA.

ATTACHMENTS

- A. ARB Findings for Approval
- B. Conditions of Approval
- C. Project Plans

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Manager Review: Jaime Rodriguez, Chief Transportation Official

FINDINGS FOR APPROVAL

California Avenue Streetscape Project [13PLN-00211]

Architectural Review Findings (PAMC 8.76.020)

- (1) *The design is consistent and compatible with applicable elements of the Palo Alto Comprehensive Plan.* This finding can be made in the affirmative in that the project incorporates quality design that recognizes the importance of the area as described in the Comprehensive Plan. The project is also consistent with The Palo Alto Comprehensive Plan policies related to enhancing public spaces, revitalizing the urban forest, and promoting economic development (e.g. Policies L-15, L-21, L-22, N-14, L-28).
- (2) *The design is compatible with the immediate environment of the site.* This finding can be made in the affirmative in that the design and layout of the project elements take into consideration the existing conditions along California Avenue, including building locations and circulation issues.
- (3) *The design is appropriate to the function of the project.* This finding can be made in the affirmative in that the project elements are consistent with the enhancement of the public street within a busy business district that has a special focus on the pedestrian and bike users of the area.
- (4) *In areas considered by the board as having a unified design character or historical character, the design is compatible with such character.* This finding is not applicable.
- (5) *The design promotes harmonious transitions in scale and character in areas between different designated land uses.* This finding is not applicable.
- (6) *The design is compatible with approved improvements both on and off the site.* This finding can be made in the affirmative in that the project is compatible with the surrounding office and retail uses of the downtown commercial area; see responses 2 and 3 above.
- (7) *The planning and siting of the various functions and buildings on the site create an internal sense of order and provide a desirable environment for occupants, visitors and the general community.* This finding can be made in the affirmative in that new street elements are accessible and attractive to users.
- (8) *The amount and arrangement of open space are appropriate to the design and the function of the structures.* This finding can be made in the affirmative in that the project enhances the public sidewalks and plaza for visitors and patrons to make it functional and desirable.
- (9) *Sufficient ancillary functions are provided to support the main functions of the project and the same are compatible with the project's design concept.* This finding is not applicable.

ATTACHMENT A

- (10) *Access to the property and circulation thereon are safe and convenient for pedestrians, cyclists and vehicles.* This finding can be made in the affirmative; please see response to 2 above.
- (11) *Natural features are appropriately preserved and integrated with the project.* This finding can be made in the affirmative in that the proposed tree removals are supported by the city staff and are not considered significant as to require retention. The new landscape plan for the street would be desirable and attractive.
- (12) *The materials, textures, colors and details of construction and plant material are appropriate expression to the design and function.* This finding can be made in the affirmative, see Findings 2, 3, 4 and 13.
- (13) *The landscape design concept for the site, as shown by the relationship of plant masses, open space, scale, plant forms and foliage textures and colors create a desirable and functional environment.* This finding can be made in the affirmative in that the proposed landscape design enhances the street experience as well as provides a functional easy to maintain layout.
- (14) *Plant material is suitable and adaptable to the site, capable of being properly maintained on the site, and is of a variety which would tend to be drought-resistant to reduce consumption of water in its installation and maintenance.* This finding can be made in the affirmative in that the selected landscaping is relatively low maintenance and drought tolerant.
- (15) *The project exhibits green building and sustainable design that is energy efficient, water conserving, durable and nontoxic, with high-quality spaces and high recycled content materials.* This finding can be made in the affirmative in that the project intends to utilize drought tolerant and low maintenance plantings.
- (16) *The design is consistent and compatible with the purpose of architectural review as set forth in subsection 18.76.020(a).* This finding can be made in the affirmative in that the project design promotes visual environments that are of high aesthetic quality and variety.

DRAFT
CONDITIONS OF APPROVAL

California Avenue Streetscape Improvements / File No. 13PLN-00211

PLANNING & COMMUNITY ENVIRONMENT

The Architectural Review Board (June 6, 2013) recommended approval of the application referenced above, and the Director of Planning and Community Environment (Director) approved the project on date, 2013.

PLANNING DIVISION

1. The project shall be in substantial conformance with the approved plans and related documents received May 15, 2013, except as modified to incorporate these conditions of approval.
2. The Conditions of Approval document shall be printed on all plans submitted for building permits related to this project.
3. Transportation staff will work collaboratively with other City departments to assure all required standards are complied with for the implementation of the project.
4. All trees shall be maintained, watered, fertilized, and pruned according to Best Management Practices-Pruning (ANSI A300-2001 or current version). Any vegetation that dies shall be replaced or failed automatic irrigation repaired by the property owner within 30 days of discovery.
5. The project approval shall be valid for a period of one year from the original date of approval. In the event a building permit(s), if applicable, is not secured for the project within the time limit specified above, the ARB approval shall expire and be of no further force or effect. Application for extension of this entitlement may be made prior to the one year expiration.