



# City of Palo Alto

## City Council Rail Committee Staff Report

(ID # 8688)

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**Report Type: Action Items**

**Meeting Date: 11/29/2017**

**Summary Title: Review Draft Community Questionnaire #2**

**Title: Review and Provide Input on Draft Community Questionnaire #2**

**From: City Manager**

**Lead Department: Planning and Community Environment**

### **Recommendation**

As discussed at the last Rail Committee meeting, staff would like to distribute another community questionnaire with two objectives: (1) to gather input on grade separation alternatives that warrant in depth analysis; and (2) to communicate some of the complex questions that will be on the table as the City decides which alternatives to analyze and conducts that analysis. Staff would welcome the Committee's review and comments on the revised (and unformatted) draft attached (Attachment A).

### **Background and Discussion**

The revised process presented to the Rail Committee on September 6, 2017 includes a Community Questionnaire #2, which will be used to inform the selection of alternatives for in depth analysis in later stages of the Context Sensitive Solutions (CSS) Alternatives Analysis process.

The draft unformatted text for this Community Questionnaire #2 was discussed at the Rail Committee's last meeting on November 8, 2017 and was critiqued for its timing and content. Since then, staff has held a series of round table community meetings and adjusted the content of the questionnaire based on input received from the Committee. A revised version of Questionnaire #2 is included as Attachment A for re-review and input. Prior to publication, the questionnaire will be formatted and graphics and photos will be added in order to make it more engaging and user-friendly.

Reviewers should note that this questionnaire deliberately focuses on questions and complexities that do not currently have answers. There are two reasons for this. First, while we may have some additional information about financing and trenching/tunneling in the next month or so, there is still much we will need to know before we fully understand the issues and opportunities.. Second, we want members of our community to participate every step along the way, and not only when all information and about the issues and alternatives are known or understood. This is one of the principles of a context sensitive solutions community engagement and will help to build a constituency for the project.

The questionnaire responses, along with the results of the recent Community Roundtables, and a meeting with the Planning and Transportation Commission, will be presented to the Rail Committee at a meeting planned for January. At this meeting, a handful of alternatives will be recommended for detailed technical analysis and scoring against our adopted Evaluation Criteria.

### **Timeline**

Upon receiving input on the questionnaire, Staff anticipates that the questionnaire can be revised and posted within a few days and held open until early January. Upon closure of the questionnaire, Staff will draft a summary of the responses that will be presented to the Rail Committee at a meeting in January.

### **Resource Impact**

Funding for the context sensitive solutions alternatives analysis is included in the Fiscal Year 2018 Adopted Capital Budget in CIP PL-17001, Railroad Grade Separation.

### **Policy Implications**

Advancement of railroad grade separations is consistent with the following Comprehensive Plan goals, policies and programs:

- **Policy T-1.25:** Pursue transportation funding opportunities for ongoing transportation improvements that will help mitigate the impacts of future development and protect residents' quality of life. When other sources are unavailable, continue to fund improvements, operations and maintenance through the general fund.
- **Policy T-1.26:** Collaborate with adjacent communities to ensure that Palo Alto and its immediate neighbors receive their fair share of regional transportation funds, proportional to the need and demand for transportation improvements within these communities to address region-wide transportation issues.
- **Program T1.26.1:** In collaboration with regional agencies and neighboring jurisdictions, identify and pursue funding for rail corridor improvements and grade separation.
- **Policy T-3.15:** Pursue grade separation of rail crossings along the rail corridor as a City priority.
- **Program T3.15.1:** Undertake studies and outreach necessary to advance grade separation of Caltrain to become a "shovel ready" project and strongly advocate for adequate State, regional and federal funding for design and construction of railroad grade separations.

### **Environmental Review**

The ongoing context sensitive alternatives analysis process is being used to develop alternatives for analysis and refinement. Review under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) will commence at a later stage in the process.

### **Attachments:**

- Attachment A - Connecting Palo Alto Community Questionnaire #2 Revised

Questionnaire #2 [Revised]

There are currently seven locations ~~six roadways~~ where motorists can cross the railroad tracks in Palo Alto: Charleston Avenue, Meadow Drive, Oregon Expressway, Embarcadero Road, Churchill Avenue, University Avenue, and Palo Alto Avenue/Alma Street. These ~~locations~~intersections, called grade crossings, differ from vehicular intersections because a train, in most cases, cannot safely stop in a timely manner to avoid collisions. There are three ~~two~~ existing grade crossings that are already separated below the level of the tracks (at Oregon Expressway, Embarcadero Road, and University Avenue). Four of them cross the tracks at the same level (at Charleston, Meadow, Churchill, and Palo Alto Avenue/Alma Street).

Traffic congestion is expected to get worse at all of these locations in the future with additional trains as part of Caltrain's electrification and potentially high speed rail. This will mean that crossing gates will come down many more times each day – as much as 45 seconds every 3 minutes - - impacting traffic and safety.

**Q1: What do you see as the biggest challenge with increased traffic congestion at rail crossings in the future?**

- A. Traffic will overflow into residential neighborhoods
- B. It will be less safe for pedestrians and bicyclists to cross
- C. It will take longer for me to drive across the tracks or along Alma Street
- D. Other. Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_
- E. None of the above

If we don't do anything, traffic delays will increase and more traffic will divert to existing grade separations like Embarcadero and University as motorists look for ways to avoid the worst congestion. (Grade separations mean trains and road vehicles cross each other on separate levels).

**Q2: What do you see as the biggest challenge with increased traffic on roads that currently go over or under the tracks?**

- A. Traffic volumes on Embarcadero will affect residential neighborhoods and access to/from Palo Alto High School
- B. Traffic volumes on University will affect the downtown commercial district
- C. These areas will be less safe for pedestrians and bicyclists
- D. Other. Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_
- E. None of the above

Now let's get specific about some of the options the City should consider in planning for the future of the rail corridor.

**Q4: One of the grade crossings could be closed and replaced with a crossing for pedestrians/bikes only. Are you open to considering this alternative? Which crossing would you choose?**

- A. Yes, we should consider closing (fill in the blank)

- B. No, I am not open to this idea
- C. I might be open to this idea, but I would need more information

**Q5: If one of the existing grade crossings is closed, should the City consider widening one of the roads that currently go over or under the tracks?**

- A. Yes, I would be open to considering widening of Embarcadero, Oregon Expressway, or University
- B. No, I would not be open to considering widening of any existing roads
- C. I might be open to this idea, but I would need more information

**Q6. What about considering the *addition* of a new grade-separated crossing for pedestrians/bicyclists only?**

- A. Yes, I think we should consider a new pedestrian/bicycle bridge or tunnel at (fill in the blank)
- B. No, I am not open to this idea
- C. I might be open to this idea, but I would need more information

There are a number of different ways the City could construct new grade-separated rail crossings for cars. These include putting the tracks in a trench or tunnel below grade with the roads above; leaving the tracks where they are and putting the roads over or under the tracks or a hybrid approach where the tracks are raised or lowered slightly and the road is lowered or raised slightly.

~~**Q6. Without knowing more about feasibility or impacts, which of the crossing designs would you be open to considering in Palo Alto? (Check all that apply)**~~

- ~~A. Trench or tunnel (keep roadways at grade, run rail traffic beneath in a trench or tunnel)~~
- ~~B. Putting the roadway up over the tracks~~
- ~~C. Putting the roadway under the tracks~~
- ~~D. A hybrid option where the tracks are lowered a little and the roadway goes up and over should be considered~~
- ~~E. A hybrid option where the tracks go up a little and the roadway goes down a little bit should be considered~~
- ~~F. I would need more information~~

Trenching or tunneling could cost significantly more than other approaches and there may be some constraints that make it difficult to put the railroad tracks in a trench or tunnel, particularly at the north end of Palo Alto where the San Francisquito Creek channel is quite deep.

**Q7. If it turns out a trench or tunnel at the north end of Palo Alto is too challenging, which of these alternatives would you like the City to consider?**

- A. Using a trench under Charleston, Meadow, and Churchill along with another method to cross the tracks at Palo Alto Avenue/Alma Street
- B. Using a trench under Charleston and Meadow along with closing Churchill and using another method to cross the tracks at Palo Alto Avenue/Alma Street
- C. We should not consider using a trench at all and focus on other methods to cross the tracks at Charleston, Meadow, Churchill, and Palo Alto Avenue/Alma Street

**Q8. If there are cost constraints that make trenching or tunneling -challenging, which of these alternatives would you consider?**

- A. Close the Churchill crossing and use the savings to help fund the trench at Charleston and Meadow.
- B. Trenching or tunneling is the best solution, no matter what it costs and we should consider allowing development along the rail corridor to fund the trench.
- C. Trenching or tunneling is the best solution, no matter what it costs and we should consider one or more other local funding options, such as a parcel tax, and/or business tax to fund the trench.
- D. Take the trench off the table if it costs more than we can afford with the available regional, state, and federal money.

**Q9. If residential private property has to be taken for the construction of a grade separation option, how would that impact your perspective?**

- A. We should consider the best feasible options whether or not they involve impacts to private property
- B. We should only consider options that do not impact private properties along the corridor
- C. We should consider all feasible options, but prioritize those that affect the fewest private properties.
- D. Other. Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

**Q: 10. Planning, design, and construction of rail corridor improvements are likely to take a long time to complete, and the improvements will last for generations. How old will you be in 2030??**

- A. Less than ~~23~~0
- B. Between ~~32~~1 and 40
- C. Between 41 and 65
- D. Over 65
- E. I'm not telling 😊