



CITY OF
**PALO
ALTO**

Palo Alto Staff Report to Public Art Commission

January 13, 2021

RE: California Avenue Public Art Plan

BACKGROUND AND DISCUSSION

The Public Art Master Plan adopted in 2016 called out specific recommendations for short-term, mid-term, and long-term implementation. One of the mid term recommendations was to create a detailed art plan for the California Avenue district. With the current construction taking place near California Avenue and numerous private development projects taking place there, the California Avenue district is in transition. In the course of staff outreach to the California Avenue Business Association, it was made clear that there is a desire for more art in the “Avenue of the Arts”. At the 2019 Public Art Commission retreat, the Public Art Commission identified creating a California Avenue art plan a priority for 2020.

On September 19, 2019, the Public Art Commission approved the allocation of \$15,000 for a consultant to create the California Avenue art plan. Public Art staff released an open solicitation for consultants in December 2019. Staff sent the solicitation out to 8 potential applicants. As a result of the selection process, Barbara Goldstein & Associates / Art Creates Communities was identified as a finalist. The consultant team was approved as the project consultant by the Public Art Program in February 2020 to develop an art plan for the California Avenue district, bounded by the area between El Camino Real, Oregon Expressway, Cambridge and Alma street.

The [previous staff report](#) details the purpose of the California Ave Public Art Master Plan, as well as its scope, goals and key elements

The City of Palo Alto Public Art Program entered into a contract with the consultants on March 11, 2020. The work plan proposed by the consultants included the following phases:

- Project Initiation and Research
- Outreach and Public Participation
- Synthesis and Emerging Themes
- Draft Public Art Master Plan
- Draft Master Plan Review and Refinement
- Submission of Final Master Plan and Attachments to Public Art Staff

Outreach and Public Participation Phase

Faced with the new reality of the COVID-19 pandemic, the consultants had to change their stakeholder and community engagement strategy, and execute the outreach and public participation phase of the project online, utilizing coUrbanize, a web-based community engagement platform specifically designed to connect residents with municipalities and planners, facilitate proactive and transparent public engagement and broad public participation, and gather stakeholder and public input. Over a course of two and a half months, the consultants led multiple meetings, focus groups, and other engagements with City staff, California Ave business groups, and Bay Area artistic communities virtually. The Public Art Program staff led a social media campaign promoting the project and boosting public participation. The Public Art Commissioners participated in the community engagement events and provided input to the consultants during two of their regular meetings.

Input Synthesis and Draft Public Art Master Plan Phases Public input and comments gathered throughout the Outreach Phase informed the California Ave Public Art Master Plan on appropriate themes and types of art, potential sites and locations, as well as creative partnerships, collaborations and artist engagements to strengthen the unique character of California Ave and support economic development of the district. The consultants synthesized the gathered input and provided public art staff with an interim report and draft outline that specified the vision, mission, guiding principles and recommendations for California Ave District Public Art Master Plan. Based on the review and approval by staff the consultants moved forward with drafting the plan and submitted the first draft for the Public Art staff and PAC review in January 2021. The Draft Public Art Master Plan (Attachment A) is provided with the current staff report to gather public feedback from the Public Art Commission and stakeholders. All comments will be taken into consideration by the consultants to further inform and refine the final document.

TIMELINE AND BUDGET IMPLICATIONS

The consultant team is looking forward to reviewing feedback from staff and PAC and finalizing the California Ave District Public Art Master Plan. Staff and consultants anticipate that the final phase of the project should take approximately three weeks that should allow the consultants to present the final Public Art Plan for the PAC approval in February (March) 2021. The funds for the Public Art Plan were allocated from the Municipal CIP budget. Recommendations for artwork in the plan may be funded in part by the Public Art Fund, where private development in-lieu contributions are collected.

ATTACHMENT A

Chapter One: Executive Summary

In 2016, the Palo Alto Public Art Program adopted a public art plan for the entire city. One of the recommendations in that plan was to develop a specific public art plan for the California Avenue District. California Avenue has evolved over the last decade in a variety of ways that are changing its character. Streetscape changes completed in 2015 reduced vehicular traffic from 4 to two lanes, widened sidewalks, expanded bike lanes, installed new crosswalks and pedestrian safety measures, updated lighting and street furniture, new street trees, and updated a beautiful plaza near the train station, including artist Michael Szabo's *Confluence* fountain. Several beloved businesses have closed and new ones have grown up in their place. With the challenges created by the Covid-19 pandemic, there are new opportunities to think about how to stimulate greater pedestrian activity, outdoor dining and pop-up activities on the avenue.

The City of Palo Alto has embarked on several new initiatives in the area. A 611-space parking garage, serving the commercial, retail and restaurant area has been completed at 350 Sherman Avenue. The Office of Transportation is planning pedestrian and bicycle improvements in the area, and restaurants have expanded sidewalk dining. Temporary public art was commissioned at the construction site of the parking garage, and three new artworks will be installed at the Public Safety Building.

In early 2020, the Palo Alto Public Art Program initiated the art master planning process for California Avenue. The purpose of the California Ave Public Art Master Plan is to set clear vision for the future of public art that will strengthen California Avenue's unique cultural identity as the vibrant "Avenue of the Arts", encourage cultural tourism by retaining and attracting Palo Alto residents and visitors, and support economic development of the California Avenue business community.

The Master Plan will articulate themes and opportunities for new permanent and temporary installations, as well as placemaking and event-based interventions appropriate for the district. The plan will address community engagement and educational opportunities to help broaden public's understanding of public art, encourage creative partnerships and collaborations. The Plan will identify potential gateway opportunities to distinguish Cal Ave as a unique cultural destination, different from downtown Palo Alto.

While it was initially hoped that many community engagement events would take place in person, the pandemic stimulated different forms of creative community outreach. The consultant team of Art Builds Community conducted online interviews, webinars, and focus groups and two outdoor tabling events. In addition, the planners employed CoUrbanize, an interactive mapping platform to engage the public in conversations about the future of public art in the California Avenue district.

The following vision, mission, objectives/guiding principles and recommendations are a result of this planning effort.

Vision

Public art in the California Avenue District will embody the unique cultural identity of local businesses, residents, and artists.

Mission

The Palo Alto Public Art Program art will enliven the California Avenue District by commissioning permanent and changing artworks that reflect the historic, culturally diverse, and natural environment of the area.

Objectives/Guiding Principles

1. Build partnerships between local businesses, arts groups, and the Palo Alto Public Art Program to commission art that attracts people to the district.
2. Enhance pedestrian experiences and engage people of all ages by installing changing and permanent artwork throughout identified locations within the district.
3. Build local pride and educate visitors with public art that explores the district's history by supporting outdoor exhibitions that highlight the work of local and regional artists.

Recommendations

1. Install changing and permanent artworks that enhance wayfinding and the pedestrian experience.
2. Commission iconic art that attracts people to the district.
3. Support changing outdoor exhibitions.
4. Commission public art that explores local history, cultures, and the environment,
5. Highlight the work of local and regional artists
6. Build in-kind and financial partnerships between local businesses, arts organizations, City Departments and Palo Alto Public Art Program

Chapter Two: Introduction

History

California Avenue began its life as the Mayfield community, established in 1853 by James Otterson, who built a roadhouse on the road between San Francisco and San Jose. The community became an epicenter for saloons and, by its incorporation in 1905, business owners and residents became frustrated with the activity that saloons attracted. In 1905, the district banned saloons and in 1925, Mayfield was incorporated into Palo Alto. In 1941, both the main street, Lincoln, and the Mayfield train station were renamed California Avenue.

The Avenue has always been the main street for the surrounding residential area and has been unique for its “mom and pop” businesses, restaurants, movie house, and music venues. Performers including the Grateful Dead, Joan Baez, and Miles Davis entertained in the area during the 1960s and ‘70s. Beginning in 1997, Palo Alto’s Public Art Program in partnership with the California Avenue Area Development Association (CAADA) began commissioning artworks for the Avenue, which became known informally as Avenue of the Arts. The street and surrounding area now includes a significant amount of sculpture, a fountain, and murals.

Over time, the character of the neighborhood changed. The movie house and music venues have closed, and the area has lost some of its retail. In 2015, a significant streetscape project was completed on California Avenue, improving sidewalks, crosswalks, landscaping, and bicycle parking. Buildings sold, commercial rents increased, some legacy businesses closed, and new businesses and development including Michelin star restaurants, transit-oriented housing and multi-use development began. In 2020 a new parking garage on Birch Street between Jacaranda Lane and Sherman was completed, and development of a new Public Safety Building is currently underway.

Outreach

In 2020, the Public Art Program initiated a public art planning process to “set clear vision for the future of public art that will strengthen California Avenue’s unique cultural identity as the vibrant ‘Avenue of the Arts’, encourage cultural tourism by retaining and attracting Palo Alto residents and visitors, and support economic development of the California Avenue business community.” The plan was also intended to “distinguish Cal Ave as a unique cultural destination, different from downtown Palo Alto.”

Planning began March 2020 for comprehensive community outreach and engagement with businesses, residents, local artists and visitors to the area to provide input for the plan. Due to the restrictions created by the Covid-19 pandemic, most community outreach was conducted remotely via CoUrbanize, an online community engagement platform. Over a course of 6 weeks, the public participated in surveys, interacted with the virtual map of the district, and added their voices to the California Avenue District Public Art Plan. Additionally, signs prompting the public to engage with the planning process and text their thoughts and comments about public art were posted throughout the district. CoUrbanize included survey questions about artwork and a map showing existing artworks. Participants were invited to comment on artworks they liked, and place virtual pins on the map suggesting artwork locations and types. The [CoUrbanize](#) page remains up for public view to allow access to the input gathered through the community engagement platform. Additionally, two in-person socially distant tabling events were conducted by the planners on California Ave. The Public Art Program led a social media campaign

promoting the project and boosting public participation. Social media provided a space to ask questions and share images with a rapid response rate from the community members to provide feedback both publicly and privately.

The planners engaged with 381 participants, and conducted a series of interviews, focus groups, webinars and online meetings with City staff, artists, business owners, and the interested public. During the meetings people were invited to describe the types of art they wanted to see and experience, identify potential sites and locations, as well as discuss creative partnerships, collaborations and artist engagements to strengthen the unique character of California Ave and support economic development of the district.

The Public Art Commissioners participated in the community engagement events and provided input to the consultants during two of their regular meetings.

Internal Focus Groups

1. Palo Alto City Department Staff Focus Groups:

City staff members described opportunities and strategies:-

- Focus on the pedestrian experience and potential for public art as placemaking element.
- Support efforts of pandemic vehicular street closures for the use of the public and merchants.
- Compassion and consideration are key to building relationships between the City, merchants and community members.

External Focus Groups

The following ideas were promoted by external focus groups:

1. Artists Focus Group:

- Identify blank walls for placement of murals.
- Create temporary lighting projects.
- Collaborate with other City programs including the Palo Alto Art Center and Cubberley Artist Studio Program.
- Create temporary exhibition space for local artists/crafts people in open areas in between retail and restaurants.

2. Businesses Focus Group.

- Commission art that helps bring people to the district.
- Commission art that celebrates the music history of area.

3. Interested Public Focus Group

- Support local artists.
- Commission artworks in a variety of media.

Chapter Three: Themes and Locations

There was substantial agreement on the themes that artists could address in the California Avenue District related to neighborhood character, Palo Alto's people, and history. California Avenue is embraced as a neighborhood district with a small-town feel. To the extent that some businesses have closed and the Avenue has changed the input to have the art that reflects the history of the Avenue and Mayfield was strong. Given the need to rebuild retail districts during pandemic recovery, this is a good time to revitalize the character of the California Avenue.

Themes

The following themes recurred during our conversations and community outreach.

- **History:** The district has an architectural history that is more than 150 years old, featuring a variety of building types and styles. It has a fascinating civic history as the town of Mayfield, and a Native American history as the land of the Puichon Ohlone who lived in the Palo Alto area prior to the arrival of Europeans.
- **Nature:** Both Palo Alto and the California District are graced with beautiful trees. The district has several streets named for trees and with generous tree canopies; and there is great appreciation for Palo Alto's redwood-filled parks, and native plants.
- **Diversity:** Palo Altans are proud of the area's cultural, ethnic, gender and artistic diversity.
- **Hyper-Local:** California Avenue has been called the Avenue of the Arts for its music and visual arts history. It is also celebrated for its unique, family-owned businesses and small -own character.
- **Support for local artists:** include diverse artists from Palo Alto and the region when commissioning new work.

Locations

There are many potential locations for art placement; many of them suggested by stakeholders, community members, local artists, Public Art Commissioners, and Palo Alto staff. Most of these were focused on the retail area including:

- Street and sidewalks
- Alleys
- Art in unexpected places
- Enhancements to existing buildings
- Entrance to California Avenue from El Camino and from Oregon Expressway
- Cal Train Station
- Blank Walls
- Parking Garages
- Corridors with heavy foot traffic
- Park Boulevard
- Light poles

Chapter Four: Recommendations

Recommendation One:

Install changing and permanent artworks that enhance wayfinding and the pedestrian experience.

Although it is a popular neighborhood shopping district, California Avenue's entrances could benefit from increased visibility – Camino Real, Alma, and the CalTrain station. Street-oriented, artistic enhancements will make the district more visible to drivers in automobiles and will improve pedestrian and bicycle navigation. The following recommendations provide long and short-term guidance.

Short Term: One to Three Years

a) Commission an artist team to create a visual strategy from the California Avenue train station to Park Boulevard, creating a more vibrant entrance to the district.

The blocks leading from the CalTrain Station to Birch do not reflect the vibrant active California Avenue district beyond. These can be easily and inexpensively enlivened with color and pattern. Adding artistic flair to these blocks will signal the entrance to a lively district.

- Engage property owners in conversation with the artists and encourage their participation in planning the project.
- Hire artist/team to create and implement a visual strategy for walls facing California Avenue from CalTrain parking lot to Park.

b) Collaborate with OOT to include art in pedestrian and traffic improvements.

The City of Palo Alto Office of Transportation is embarking on a series of pedestrian improvements in the California Avenue District. These improvements provide an opportunity to reinforce the unique identity of the district.

- Commission artist -designed crosswalks at the intersection of El Camino Real and California Avenue, bringing attention to the entrance of this district.
- Include artist-designed street murals, banners and bike lanes on California Avenue.
- Add artistic enhancements to row of bike racks adjacent to fountain plaza.

c) Commission a series of artworks in the alleys that lead people from parking structures and parking lots to California Avenue.

There are seven alleys leading from parking lots and structures on streets parallel to California Avenue. Commissioning a series of bold, interconnected artworks on the alley walls and lighting them adequately will make the alleys more welcoming, assist with pedestrian navigation, and improve the feeling of safety.

- Award a commission to one artist/artist team and encourage them to think of the alleys as a sequence of connected experiences.

d) Designate eight to ten additional locations for wall art.

Permanent or temporary wall art that invites participation will bring attention and add interest to the district, stimulating curiosity, participation, and acting as a “selfie spot”.

- Designate blank walls on the sides of parking lot-facing buildings for large-scale mural art.
- Commission temporary murals on the Birch Street stairwell wall of the new parking structure.
- Repurpose planter frames and blind windows of the Lot 5 Cambridge Street East parking structure for changing wall art.

Mid-Term: Three to Five Years**a) Place functional, placemaking art in unexpected places.**

There are ‘leftover’ spaces around the district that can become welcoming with the help of artists.

- Commission artist-designed parklets include seating, shade, planters or plinths for changing sculpture.
- Pilot this project on the Public Safety Building plaza across the street from the Birch Street/350 Sherman Avenue Parking Garage.

b) Employ an artist or artist team to enliven the façade of the Ted Thompson 275 Cambridge Avenue parking garage.

This parking garage offers multiple opportunities for artwork to be integrated into the site visible from Cambridge and California Avenue.

- Commission an artist/designer team to develop a project that refreshes the appearance of the structure, to better compliment the tree canopy on Cambridge Avenue, the street-side planters, and lighting.
- Commission temporary public art installations in the window cutouts visible from California Avenue.

Recommendation Two:**Commission iconic art that leads people to the district.**

The entrances to California Avenue from Camino Real, Birch and Oregon Expressway could benefit from increased visibility. Well designed, visible public art can call greater attention to the district.

Short Term: One to Three Years**a) Develop a strategy that makes the entrance to the district more visible from Oregon Expressway.**

The entrance to the California Avenue District from Oregon Expressway at Birch is easy to miss. It is marked by a small, white sign, written in 1950s style script and does little to announce the district.

- Initiate a conversation between the City of Palo Alto Public Art Program and the Office of Transportation to create a more visible entrance to the district from Oregon Expressway.
- Commission an artist to work with community members and OOT to develop permanent 'gateway elements' to the district working with existing infrastructure such as light poles, curbs or retaining walls leading from Oregon Expressway and Birch Street.

Mid-Term: Three to Five Years

The intersection of California Avenue and Camino Real is busy and the entrance to the retail district is difficult to see. The existing monument sign and surrounding area would benefit from an artistic update for higher visibility.

a) Remove California Ave monument sign and remaining elements of the deaccessioned artwork at El Camino Real and California Avenue

- Commission an artist to rethink the entrance to California Avenue as a sculptural gateway that is adequately tall and illuminated, visible day and night.

Recommendation Three:

Support changing outdoor exhibitions and events.

While there is an active gallery behind the Printers Cafe and the street boasts a storied history of music performances, there is little remaining presence of artmaking activity on the street.

a) Install permanent exhibition structures to accommodate changing digitally-printed exhibits at the plaza corner at the southeast side of California and Park.

- Build a series of uniform, robust structures that can accommodate digitally printed copies of original art in all media including photography and poetry.

c) Install a structure that can accommodate pop-up art events at the northeast side of the fountain plaza adjacent to the CalTrain parking lot.

While the fountain plaza at California Avenue is attractive and welcoming, it is a passive space at an active train commuter entrance to the district. Adding a small, pop-up arts venue will create a livelier welcome to the district and encourage people to gather after hours.

- Commission an artist-designed shipping container-type structure to accommodate a gallery, performance space, popup art/craft shop or classroom.

Recommendation Four:

Commission public art that explores local history and environment

Community members and artists described specific themes that can be used as inspiration for artwork in the district.

- a) Encourage artists to focus on history, nature, cultural diversity in developing their work.**

- Consider historical and cultural themes for permanent murals facing parking lots.
- Focus on environmental theme at the Ted Thompson parking garage.

b) Include small scale artworks at historic sites.

- Consider artwork that explores Mayfield history at the Mayfield School historic sign.
- Commission art that pays tribute to Sarah Wallis at the park that bears her name.

Recommendation Five:

Highlight the work of local and regional artists.

There is a wealth of artistic talent in Palo Alto and the surrounding communities. Some of these artists are part of the Cubberley Artist Studio Program, some have exhibited, taught and participated in classes at the Palo Alto Art Center, some teach at Stanford University, or show their work in local galleries.

a) Affirmatively seek out Palo Alto and regional artists of diverse backgrounds to apply for public art commissions.

- Highlight the work of Palo Alto and regional artists at events that introduce them to the community.
- Commission regional artists to create projects that invite interaction including “selfie spots” and artworks that invite people to add their own words or visual elements.
- Animate empty storefront with commissioned temporary artworks, light-based and digital art.
- Create outdoor exhibits featuring the work of Palo Alto and regional artists.
- Seek out emerging artists who are currently working in the service industry to showcase the talents of under-represented regional artists.

Recommendation Six:

Build in-kind and financial partnerships between local businesses, arts organizations, City Departments and Palo Alto Public Art Program.

The key to the success of the projects recommended above is to create partnerships with businesses, community groups, or other government entities to employ art to address a mutual interest. These partnerships will be particularly important as California Avenue emerges from the shutdowns created by the Covid-19 pandemic. There are several potential partnerships and funding opportunities that will support other plan recommendations.

a) Partnerships

- a. Use the Percent for Art in Private Development as an incentive match for partnership projects.
- b. Approach a local paint company to be an in-kind partner in transforming the walls from the CalTrain station to Park Avenue.
- c. Collaborate with local arts organizations to commission exhibits, classes, arts retail, and performances at Confluence fountain park.

- d. Partner with Office of Transportation on pedestrian and bike improvements to integrate artist-designed street murals or crosswalks, banners, and artist-designed bike lanes, helping to direct bicycle and foot traffic to stores and restaurants.
- e. Partner with businesses, restaurants and shops to sponsor and maintain long-term wall mural projects and artistic displays in empty storefronts.
- f. Approach neighborhood associations to co-sponsor changing wall-based artworks.
- g. Collaborate with local arts organizations and the Cubberly Artist Studio Program to curate changing exhibits, and conduct workshops and other activities in the popup gallery at fountain plaza.
- h. Encourage business owners and community members to serve on artist selection panels, participate in community conversations about art, and volunteer as public art docents.

b) Funding

The Public Art Program can seek additional funding to realize the ambitions of this public art plan.

- Projects with historic themes, whether related to Mayfield history, architecture, music or art history, will be eligible for Cal Humanities grants if their scope is planned and the work includes humanities scholars.
- There is \$15 billion dollars in the new COVID-19 recovery act set aside for the arts. Palo Alto Public Art can explore the guidelines for these grants once they are made available.
- Set aside a small portion of long-term parking fees from California Avenue District public parking for any artistic improvements contemplated for parking lots and structures.