



Rail Committee Staff Report

From: City Manager

Report Type: ACTION ITEMS

Lead Department: Transportation

Meeting Date: November 19, 2024

Report #:2407-3208

TITLE

Review the Draft Scope of Work to be included in the Cooperative Agreement between the City of Palo Alto, Peninsula Corridor Joint Powers Board, and the Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority for the Connecting Palo Alto Grade Separation Projects at Churchill Avenue, Meadow Drive, and Charleston Road; and recommend to the City Council for approval

RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that the Rail Committee review and recommend for approval the draft scope of work of the in-progress Cooperative Agreement between the City of Palo Alto, the Peninsula Corridor Joint Powers Board (PCJPB/Caltrain), and the Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority (VTA), which will outline the agencies' roles in developing preliminary engineering and environmental documentation for grade separation and crossings at Churchill Avenue, Meadow Drive, and Charleston Road, as led by Caltrain and funded by Measure B and Federal Railroad Administration grant.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Connecting Palo Alto Rail Grade Separation Project involves working on the active railroad crossings owned and operated by the Peninsula Corridor Joint Powers Board (Caltrain), and Caltrain requires it be the lead implementing agency for the project within its right-of-way. On June 10 and June 18, 2024, the City Council selected alternatives and directed the staff to advance Churchill Avenue, Meadow Drive, and Charleston Road grade crossing projects into the Preliminary Engineering and Environmental Documentation (PE&ED) Phase. In addition, the Council directed for these alternatives to be evaluated at an early development stage of this phase to seek ways to reduce right-of-way impacts and to optimize bicycle and pedestrian facilities. Since Caltrain will lead efforts for preliminary engineering design and environmental clearances required for the project, a cooperative agreement with Caltrain, VTA, and the City is an instrument that provides the framework for this work. Staff from City, Caltrain, and VTA are working to develop a cooperative agreement that includes the scope, responsibilities, funding, timeline, and general terms for the PE&ED phase. Staff recommends that the Rail

Committee review and recommend the City Council approve the Draft Scope of Work (Attachment A) that will be included in this cooperative agreement. The Cooperative Agreement is in an early draft form at the time of this writing and will be provided as late packet if available in time for publication.

BACKGROUND & ANALYSIS

Rail Grade Separation at crossings in Palo Alto along the Caltrain corridor has been an ongoing project. Over the past several years, the City has been working on developing conceptual plans to review various alternatives for rail grade separations at the three crossings of Churchill Avenue, Meadow Drive, and Charleston Road. With the support of consultants and community input, project alternatives were developed and reviewed with the goal of selecting the preferred alternative for grade separation at these crossings.

The Citizen Advisory Panel (CAP) was created in 2018 to advise staff and consultants on developing alternatives, improving community outreach, and communications efforts, and the Expanded Community Advisory Panel (XCAP) was created in 2019 for the evaluation of the Connecting Palo Alto railroad grade separation alternatives at the three crossings of Churchill Avenue, Meadow Drive, and Charleston Road. In 2021, after receiving XCAP recommendations, the City Council selected the preferred alternative and backup alternative for Churchill Avenue and narrowed alternatives in consideration to the three alternatives at Meadow Drive and Charleston Road. The Council also directed staff to conduct additional studies to support the evaluation of the remaining alternatives and seek input from Stanford, PAUSD, and PABAC. Furthermore, the City Council reactivated the Rail Committee to review the additional studies and alternatives and provide recommendations to the Council.

After reviewing various studies and refinements to the alternatives, the Rail Committee on May 23, 2024 (Staff Report # 2404-2952¹) recommended the City Council to proceed with the following to advance into the early phase of the Preliminary Engineering and Environmental Documentation phase.

- For Churchill Avenue Crossing: Selected the Seale Avenue bicycle and pedestrian crossing location as part of the partial underpass alternative.
- For Meadow Drive and Charleston Road Crossings; recommended to proceed with two alternatives; the Hybrid and Underpass alternatives;

The committee also recommended refining these alternatives to reduce right-of-way impacts and improve bicycle and pedestrian facilities.

- a. Seek ways to reduce property impacts
- b. Optimize bike/pedestrian crossings

¹ Rail Committee , May 23, 2024; Item 1, Action Item, SR# 2404-2952
<https://portal.laserfiche.com/Portal/DocView.aspx?id=72109&repo=r-704298fc>

- i. Where feasible, improve connections to bike infrastructure beyond the study area to improve the network. Improve connection to Park Blvd and explore modifications/refinements to the Bike Blvd, along Park Blvd to improve the overall bike network
 - ii. Further refine the traffic circle on Charleston Road to reduce the property impacts
- c. Refine construction impacts to better understand possible mitigations needed during the lengthy construction process.

After reviewing the Rail Committee recommendation and community input at its June 10, 2024 (Staff Report 2402-2597²) and June 18, 2024 (Staff Report 2406-3169³) meetings, the City Council directed staff to advance these recommended alternatives into the Preliminary Engineering and Environmental Documentation phase of the project development.

Since Caltrain will be leading efforts for preliminary engineering design and environmental clearances required for the project, a cooperative agreement with Caltrain, VTA, and the City is a necessary instrument that will provide the framework for performing this work. Staff from the City, Caltrain, and VTA are working to develop a cooperative agreement that includes the scope, responsibilities, funding, and timeline for the next phase.

The scope outlined in this agreement includes developing plans to an initial 15% design level. The development of the design plans will involve efforts to reduce right-of-way impacts, enhance bicycle and pedestrian connectivity, optimize infrastructure improvements for the partial underpass and underpass alternatives at the three crossing locations, and minimize the impacts of the traffic circle/roundabout on the Charleston Road in the Charleston Road underpass alternative. Community and stakeholder engagement will be conducted throughout this initial phase, with the preliminary designs shared for input to support the Rail Committee's review and the Council's selection of locally preferred alternatives. This phase is anticipated to be completed in early 2026.

The project will then proceed to develop a 35% design for the selected locally preferred alternatives at each of these crossings. Concurrently, the project will also include developing environmental documentation in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)'s and California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA)'s environmental review requirements. Additional outreach will be conducted during this stage of environmental documentation to seek appropriate NEPA and CEQA analysis. This phase is anticipated to be completed by the fall of 2027.

² City Council , June 10, 2024; Item 13, Action Item, SR# 2402-2957
<https://portal.laserfiche.com/Portal/DocView.aspx?id=72813&repo=r-704298fc>

³ City Council , June 18, 2024; Item AA3, Action Item, SR# 2406-3169
<https://portal.laserfiche.com/Portal/DocView.aspx?id=73959&repo=r-704298fc>

The draft scope of work, included as Attachment A, will be included in the agreement and outline scope, costs, and timeline. Staff is seeking the Rail Committee's review and comments on the scope of work to finalize the agreement and recommendations to the City Council. Staff from three agencies are working on the draft Cooperative Agreement. If the draft agreement is available before the Rail Committee meeting in time for publication, the agreement will be provided to the committee as a late packet.

FISCAL/RESOURCE IMPACT

Funding for these projects is programmed in the 2024-2028 Capital Improvement Plan in the Meadow Drive and Charleston Road (PL-24000) and Churchill Avenue (PL-24001) Rail Grade Separation and Safety Improvements projects. The total anticipated cost for the Preliminary Engineering and Environmental Documentation Phase is estimated at \$20 million. The Federal Railroad Administration grant (Rail Crossing Elimination Program funds or RCE funds) will fund 30% of the participating cost, up to \$6.0 million, and the remaining \$14 million is funded through Santa Clara County Measure B Grade Separation funding. This cooperative agreement between the City, Caltrain, and VTA will serve to provide \$14 million from the Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority. Funding for possible amendments to the agreement and/or future agreements will be requested through budget amendments as needed or appropriated through the annual budget process.

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

The Rail Committee and the City Council meetings are open to the public, offering community members opportunities to provide comments and feedback. The Rail Committee meetings are regularly conducted, and their information is posted on the City Calendar. The Rail Committee has held over 15 meetings in the past two years to discuss the grade separation projects at these three crossings. During these meetings, the committee reviewed additional studies, stakeholder feedback, four-tracking analyses, and technical input. Residents have subscribed receive notifications about the Rail Committee meetings.

Additionally, during the PE & Environmental phase of the project, the City and Caltrain will coordinate on community engagement activities. A comprehensive community engagement plan will be developed to reach out to and involve stakeholders. This outreach will include community workshops, public open houses, and regular updates to various committees and commissions, such as the City's Rail Committee, VTA Ad Hoc Grade Separation meeting, and Caltrain TOPS Committee. The project will be brought to the City Council for review and directions at key decision points. Caltrain will be leading efforts in developing and overseeing the community engagement plan in collaboration with City staff.

ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW

The proposed action is part of a planning study for a possible future action, which has not been approved, adopted, or funded and is therefore exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) in accordance with CEQA Guidelines Section 15262. This action supports the project plans to enter the Preliminary Engineering and Environmental Documentation Phase and prepare documentation that will meet CEQA and NEPA requirements.

ATTACHMENTS

Attachment A: DRAFT Scope of Work for Cooperative Agreement for Grade Separation Projects at Churchill Avenue, Meadow Drive, and Charleston Road crossings

APPROVED BY:

Philip Kamhi, Chief Transportation Official