CITY OF PALO ALTO

City Council Staff Report

From: City Manager
Report Type: ACTION ITEM
Lead Department: Transportation

Meeting Date: April 22, 2024
Report #:2403-2821

TITLE
Review and provide input on Concept Plans for Quarry Road Transit Connection to the Palo Alto Transit Center and Adoption of a Resolution of Intention to Undedicate a portion of El Camino Park; CEQA status - statutorily exempt per Pub. Res. Code § 21080(b)(12).

RECOMMENDATION
Staff recommends that the City Council:

1. Review and provide input on concept plans for the proposed Quarry Road Transit Connection and;
2. Adopt a Resolution of Intention to Undedicate a portion of El Camino Park that is necessary for the new transit connection. (Attachment E).

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
This report presents a proposal for the Quarry Road Transit Connection, aiming to link the Palo Alto Transit Center (PATC) directly to El Camino Real through a currently passive section of El Camino Park. The proposal would facilitate quicker transit exits onto El Camino Real, potentially reducing bus transit times by an estimated 5-8 minutes per trip. This improvement is expected to alleviate congestion within University Circle and along University Avenue by streamlining bus movements and mitigating the need for buses to navigate through densely trafficked areas.

Concurrently, the proposal includes enhancements to pedestrian and bicycle paths within El Camino Park and at the intersection of Quarry Road and El Camino Real. These enhancements are designed to improve safety, access, and connectivity to the broader pedestrian and bicycle network, encouraging greater use of these modes of transportation. The proposal aligns with the upcoming Caltrain electrification project, which will increase train frequency and potentially necessitate corresponding increases in bus and shuttle services to match the enhanced train schedule.

The City Council is asked to review conceptual plans for this proposed transit connection and to consider initiating a process to undedicate a portion of El Camino Park needed for the project's implementation. This would involve seeking voter approval in the Fall 2024 election to repurpose a specified area of the park for the transit connection. This parkland undedication can also be considered within the context of other parkland dedication efforts citywide. The project is supported by various goals and policies outlined in the Palo Alto Comprehensive Plan, emphasizing the improvement of transportation infrastructure and multimodal connectivity.

The estimated construction cost for the proposed project is between $3-3.5 million, with efforts underway to secure funding through external sources, including the Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC). The outcome of the electoral process and subsequent design development will dictate the project's timeline and final implementation steps.

BACKGROUND

Transit and Shuttle Service at the Palo Alto Transit Center

The Palo Alto Transit Center (PATC) is the mobility hub of Palo Alto and has the second highest Caltrain ridership on the corridor. SamTrans, Santa Clara Valley Transit Authority (VTA), and Dumbarton Express all run buses to the PATC to complement Caltrain service and connect Palo Alto to San Mateo County, Santa Clara County, and the East Bay, respectively. Additionally, Stanford's Marguerite shuttle service and other private shuttles provide last-mile connections from the PATC to campus facilities for employees and visitors.

In total, roughly 600 buses serve the transit center daily; roughly half are Marguerite shuttles. Transfers from Marguerite shuttles account for approximately 40 percent of Caltrain daily boardings at the transit center.

Bus and shuttle services use a combination of 10 bus bays and curbside space at the PATC, including in University Circle. Public transit service is restricted to the use of bus bays – bays are assigned to specific operators and lines – and shuttles use stops along the curb of University Circle. Employer and Stanford Health Care shuttles pick-up and drop-off in a parking area on the Palo Alto side of the station along Alma Street. The station area also accommodates layovers for bus and shuttle service.

Caltrain electrification is currently scheduled to begin in fall 2024. Electrification will increase train service from five (5) to six (6) trains per hour per direction during peak periods and from one (1) to two (2) trains per hour per direction during off peak periods, including weekends. Bus and shuttle services are likely to increase to align with Caltrain service.

The station is also a significant source for bicycle trips on Caltrain. Bicycle equipped passengers at the PATC are estimated to be between 750-800 per day, pre-COVID. Palo Alto is the second highest bicycle ridership stop along the Caltrain corridor at roughly 14 percent of all bicycle

boardings and alightings (descending or disembarking from the train), second only to 4th/King in San Francisco. Assuming 10 percent of daily passengers travel in the peak hour, the Palo Alto Transit Center serves roughly 75-80 Caltrain bicycle passengers/hour during the peak hour.

The Proposed Quarry Road Transit Connection

As envisioned in the Palo Alto Comprehensive Plan as Program T3.10.4 (2017), the proposed Quarry Road Transit Connection project would create a direct transit connection between the transit center bus bays and El Camino Real at the Quarry Road traffic signal, through an underused, passive portion of El Camino Park (see **Attachment A**). The proposed project would allow buses that use the bus terminal to exit via Quarry Road to El Camino Real rather than to circle back through University Avenue. The bus operators have estimated savings of approximately 5-8 minutes per trip could be achieved by avoiding University Circle and directly connecting with Quarry Road at El Camino Real.

The bus route reorganization would have secondary benefits to the University Avenue and University Circle area by eliminating the need for some buses to make constrained turning movements in the corridor. Articulated buses require additional turning radii to access the transit center from University Avenue which regularly causes congestion and delays for vehicular traffic and creates additional conflict points for bicycles and pedestrians at the gateway to Downtown Palo Alto.

The project would also include multiple pedestrian and bicycle improvements within El Camino Park adjacent to or near the proposed transit connection and at the intersection of Quarry Road and El Camino Real. Specifically, the proposed project would:

- Upgrade the crossing of El Camino Real to accommodate pedestrians and cyclists on both sides of Quarry Road, which would reduce crossing time; and
- Add safety and accessibility measures at the intersection of Quarry Road and El Camino Real (e.g., curb extensions and tighter turning radii, new pedestrian/bicycle ramps, pedestrian and bicycle refuge islands, and high visibility bicycle markings are currently being considered).Through the above improvements, there would be enhanced visibility of the existing multi-modal path to the transit center and its connections to the existing Class 1 multi-modal path that connects to El Camino Park and into Menlo Park, through the PATC to the Embarcadero Bike Path, and to the Stanford Perimeter Trail. These connectivity improvements would also make the active park facilities in El Camino Park more accessible for bikes, pedestrians and transit riders.

  Designs for the transit connection are in the early stages, but all feasible options are under consideration, ranging from a new connection providing full access to buses between the transit center and El Camino Real to an outbound-only transit lane. The

conceptual design under consideration is illustrated in **Attachment B**. The preliminary concept design includes 12.5 foot wide inbound and outbound transit travel lanes (188 feet and 163 feet in length, respectively), with six-inch curbs, separated by a landscaped median that ranges in width between 18-33 feet that would house existing utilities.1 The utilities accommodated in the median are illustrated in **Attachment C**.

The projected area needed to implement this extension is approximately 0.24 acres, including 0.10 acres of a landscaped median that, although part of the project area, would remain in its current state. Voter approval would be requested to discontinue use for park purposes of a slightly larger area—approximately 0.33 acres total—as minor shifts in the location of the proposed project may be required as project plans are finalized, to better meet access, circulation, and other goals. The additional 0.09-acre area represents a ten-foot-wide buffer around the projected location of the improvements at the current conceptual design stage (see **Attachment D**). Following completion of project construction, the City would anticipate re-dedicating for park purposes the portion of the discontinued area that was not needed for the project. As such, these figures conservatively reflect the maximum exposure, though pending final design may have a smaller impact

The proposed project could require the removal of approximately 15 trees, and there are an additional three trees in the project buffer area. The project could include lighting, benches, signage and low level, drought tolerant landscape planting, mulch, and additional tree planting. Any lighting and planting would be harmonious and compatible with the existing conditions in El Camino Park.

Other modifications and improvements could include, but are not limited to, wayfinding signs, additional striping and green bike lanes to help identify buffered lanes and highlight any potential conflict areas between buses, transit and bicyclists in the corridor, crosswalk striping, and refuge islands.

ANALYSIS

- El Camino Park consists of approximately 10.75 acres of land and is leased by Stanford to the City under a 1915 lease that currently is set to expire in 2042. The Park has been dedicated by the City by ordinance for recreational and conservation purposes. Palo Alto Ordinance No. 2252 (Sept. 13, 1965); Palo Alto Municipal Code § 22.08.230 & Ex. A-19.

  The proposed project would develop a strip of the underused, passive portion of El Camino Park to provide a direct transit connection to the transit center, where bike and pedestrian access are currently occurring. This area of the park does not have playing fields but does provide circulation throughout that serves the park. The project is a park

improvement project in that it improves multi-modal movement to and through the park. The proposed transit connection would enhance the use and enjoyment of El Camino Park and the recreational amenities provided to the residents of Palo Alto and the surrounding communities.

Additional Bicycle/Pedestrian Visibility and Bicycle Connectivity

High visibility bicycle and pedestrian crossings included in this project will enhance bicycle and pedestrian visibility and bicycle connectivity at the existing El Camino Real intersection connecting the PATC and Quarry Road. The existing bike path from the PATC to the Quarry Road /ECR intersection provides critical east-west access for bicyclists and pedestrians between the Palo Alto Transit Center, Downtown, the Stanford Shopping Center, and the Stanford Medical Center. This intersection is also a gateway for cyclists traveling north and south on the multi-use paths along both sides of El Camino Real, including the City's path to Menlo Park on the east side and the Stanford Perimeter Trail on the west side. Access to these important paths that allow cyclists to travel car-free in all directions would be enhanced by El Camino Real intersection upgrade that includes green bike lane markings and signage.

The proposed Quarry Road Transit Connection project aims to enhance the Palo Alto area through various improvements and modifications. The project's potential impacts and considerations include:

- Enhanced pedestrian and bicycle paths within El Camino Park and at the intersection of Quarry Road and El Camino Real, aiming to improve safety, access, and connectivity. The proposed project includes high visibility crossings and green bike lane markings to facilitate east-west and north-south travel for cyclists and pedestrians, connecting key areas such as the Palo Alto Transit Center, Downtown, the Stanford Shopping Center, and the Stanford Medical Center.
- Potential to augment the park's recreational facilities by improving connections to existing paths, thereby integrating the park more effectively into the regional pedestrian and bicycle network.
- A direct transit connection between the transit center bus bays and El Camino Real could streamline bus traffic, potentially reducing congestion and emissions in the vicinity of the park and improving the overall circulation environment for pedestrians and cyclists.
- Activation of underused areas of the park through thoughtful design, which could enhance safety and usability of the space.
- Improved functionality of the Palo Alto Transit Center by facilitating more efficient bus and shuttle service operations, which could benefit public transportation users accessing the park and surrounding areas.

Challenges and considerations for the project include:

- Potential environmental impacts, including the removal of trees and changes to green spaces, which will require thoughtful mitigation strategies.
- Funding and budget considerations, as the estimated construction costs range between $3-3.5 million, with efforts to secure funding through external sources.
- Caltrans review and approval of this project will be necessary, which will not occur until after voter approval.

Discontinuance of Parkland Use

Consideration of the required El Camino Park undedication for the Quarry Road Transit Connection proposal can be considered within the city's actions related to adding parkland to the City's existing parks inventory. The Parks and Recreation Commission has established an ad hoc committee and been working with staff to identify appropriate locations to dedicate city-owned property as parkland. The recent unanimous decision by the City Council on March 4 to dedicate the 0.2-acre Tower Well site as parkland, characterized by its historical water tower and naturalistic elements, is the most recent example of new parkland dedication. The recent dedication, along with ongoing evaluations for further parkland dedications, were considered and discussed by the Stanford Ad Hoc Committee.

The Quarry Road project was presented to the Parks and Recreation Commission (PRC) meeting at their March 2024 meeting. The PRC had the following questions related to the proposed project:

- Will the trees to be removed be replaced?
- Will the Olympic Grove Redwood Trees be impacted?
- What vegetation currently exists within the project area?
- Will the project look at cumulative impacts of other transportation projects in the area?
- Would there be adverse impacts to the fields due to the buses such as vibration?

Some members of the PRC noted that the project will create a roughly 1.0 acre of El Camino Park that is separated from the rest of the park by the new access road making that area unusable. They requested that an additional acre of land be dedicated by Stanford to compensate for this area being separated from the rest of the park.

Other comments were related to reducing lighting, ensuring new plantings are native species, and increase in air pollution exposure to field users, especially children. Overall, the commission's feedback highlighted a balance between recognizing the project's benefits and addressing environmental and community concerns.

Article VIII of the Palo Alto City Charter governs dedicated parklands and states as follows:

- All lands owned or controlled by the city which are or will be used for park, playground, recreation or conservation purposes shall be dedicated for such purposes by ordinance.
- No land heretofore or hereafter dedicated for such purposes shall be sold or otherwise disposed of, nor shall its use be abandoned or discontinued except pursuant to majority vote of the electorate. Any election and related procedures under Article VIII shall conform to the provisions set forth in general law as it existed January 1, 1965, except that the council may call such election by majority vote.
- No substantial building, construction, reconstruction or development upon or with respect to any lands so dedicated shall be made except pursuant to ordinance subject to referendum.

The proposed roadway does not qualify as a park purpose, as it will be used to transit the park rather than access the park itself. Given that El Camino Park has been dedicated by the City for recreational and conservation purposes, a majority vote of the electorate is necessary to discontinue from park use the portion of El Camino Park that would be used to facilitate transit circulation.

Voter approval would be requested to discontinue use for park purposes of approximately 0.33 acres total. The preliminary design concept alternatives have estimated that up to 0.24 acres of parkland would be required to accommodate the proposed transit connection, with an additional 0.09 acres of buffer for project design that would be rededicated for park use after project construction.

If there is no desire to undedicate parkland for the Quarry Road Transit Connection project, the current state of the Palo Alto Transit Center (PATC) and the surrounding areas will remain unchanged. This means that the existing transit operations, including the flow of buses and shuttles through the University Circle and along University Avenue, will continue without the anticipated reduction in transit times. Consequently, the potential benefits of alleviating congestion and improving connectivity for pedestrians and cyclists, as outlined in the project proposal, will not be realized. The parkland will retain its current recreational and conservation designation, and no changes to the physical landscape of El Camino Park will occur as a result of the project.

- **Timeline**
  This item initiates a discussion with the Palo Alto City Council to consider placing the proposed parkland discontinuance on the ballot for the Fall 2024 election. If the ballot measure passes, the City and Stanford will work with the transit agency stakeholders and Caltrans to further develop construction plans and apply for necessary permits.

FISCAL/RESOURCE IMPACT

The preliminary cost estimate for constructing the proposed project is estimated to be between $3-3.5M but is dependent on ultimate design. These costs will be updated as the design is advanced and construction documents are prepared. Funding is being pursued through MTC but may not be identified until after the ballot measure is considered by voters. According to the Santa Clara County Registrar of Voters, a ballot measure is estimated to be an additional $85,341. This is estimated only based on projected registration and available information. It is subject to change upon final billing of the actual charges after the election.

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Stanford University has played a pivotal role in advancing the Quarry Road Transit Connection project, working in close collaboration with City of Palo Alto staff. This partnership has been instrumental in the project's development, ensuring that the proposed changes align with the broader transportation and community goals of the area.

In addition to Stanford's involvement, there has been active coordination with the various public transit operators that service the Palo Alto Transit Center (PATC). These operators include SamTrans, Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority (VTA), and the Dumbarton Express, all of which are integral to the regional transit network and have a stake in the project's outcome due to its potential impact on their operations.

Furthermore, the Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC) has been engaged in the process, given its role in funding and planning for transportation projects across the Bay Area. The MTC's involvement is crucial for securing the necessary funding and ensuring that the project aligns with regional transportation strategies and priorities.

This project has also been recently reviewed by the PRC, and the project will be reviewed by the Pedestrian and Bicycle Advisory Committee (PABAC).

The proposed Quarry Road Transit Connection Project would advance numerous Comprehensive Plan policies and programs, as follows:

- **Policy T-1.11** Encourage continued enhancement of the Caltrain stations as important transportation nodes for the city.
- **Program T1.11.1** Collaborate with Stanford University, VTA, Caltrain and other agencies to pursue improvements to the Palo Alto Transit Center area aimed at enhancing the pedestrian experience and improving circulation and access for all modes, including direct access to El Camino Real for transit vehicles.
- **Program T3.10.3** Provide safe, convenient pedestrian, bicycle and transit connections between the Stanford Shopping Center/Medical Center areas and housing along the Sand Hill Road/Quarry Road corridors to Palo Alto Transit Center, Downtown Palo Alto and other primary destinations.

- **Program T3.10.4** Pursue extension of Quarry Road for transit, pedestrians and bicyclists to access the Palo Alto Transit Center from El Camino Real. Also study the feasibility of another pedestrian and bicycle underpass of Caltrain at Everett Street.
- **Policy T-8.2** Coordinate with local and regional agencies and Caltrans to maintain and improve transportation infrastructure in Palo Alto, including the Multi-Modal Transit Center.

ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW

The proposed project is exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). The proposed project comes within the statutory exemption for "facility extensions not to exceed four miles in length which are required for the transfer of passengers from or to exclusive public mass transit guideway or busway public transit services." Pub. Res. Code § 21080(b)(12). Due to its fixed location, Caltrain qualifies as an "exclusive public mass transit guideway" service. The proposed project would extend the existing transit center facility by approximately 210 feet, through the intersection of Quarry Road and El Camino Real, to facilitate the transfer of passengers to Caltrain, among other public transit services. Staff continues to investigate whether any additional CEQA exemptions also may apply to the proposed project.

ATTACHMENTS

Attachment A: Transit and Multi-model Connections
Attachment B: Conceptual Site Plan
Attachment C: Utilities in the Landscaped Median
Attachment D: Project Buffer
Attachment E: Resolution of Intention to Call an Election to Submit the Question of Discontinuance of a Portion of El Camino Park as Dedicated Parkland

APPROVED BY:

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