



City Council Staff Report

From: City Manager

Report Type: CONSENT CALENDAR

Lead Department: Transportation

Meeting Date: December 9, 2024

Report #:2408-3322

TITLE

Approval of a Cooperative Agreement between the City of Palo Alto, the Peninsula Corridor Joint Powers Board (Caltrain), and the Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority (VTA) to Conduct the Preliminary Engineering and Environmental Documentation Phase of the Connecting Palo Alto Grade Separation Projects at Churchill Avenue, Meadow Drive, and Charleston Road Crossings and Allocating \$20 million in Grant Funding to this Phase, and authorize the City Manager or their designee to Finalize and Execute the Agreement; CEQA status - CEQA and NEPA review will be conducted as part of this agreement.

RECOMMENDATION

The Rail Committee and staff recommend that the City Council approve the Cooperative Agreement between the City of Palo Alto, the Peninsula Corridor Joint Powers Board (PCJPB/Caltrain), and the Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority (VTA) for the Preliminary Engineering and Environmental Documentation of Grade Separations at Churchill Avenue, Meadow Drive, and Charleston Road; and authorize the City Manager or their designee to finalize and execute the agreement. The Rail Committee reviewed the scope of work and voted 3-0 on November 19, 2024 to recommend that the Council approve it as part of this agreement.

The Cooperative Agreement is for the Caltrain to be the lead implementing agency for developing preliminary engineering and environmental documentation, and VTA to provide contribution funding of \$14.0 million from the 2016 Measure B grade separation funding for the three crossings. The remaining \$6.0 million of the project funding will come from the Federal Railroad Administration's Rail Crossing Elimination Program grant awarded to the City to provide a total of \$20 million towards this phase.

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). Caltrain, therefore would be the lead implementing Authority for the project within the Peninsula

Corridor Joints Power Board (PCJPB) 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 these alternatives to be evaluated at earlier development of this phase to seek ways to reduce right-of-way impacts and to optimize bicycle and pedestrian facilities.

A cooperative agreement with Caltrain/PCJPB, VTA, and City is a necessary instrument that will provide the framework for funding and performing this work. Caltrain will lead efforts for preliminary engineering design and environmental clearances required for the project. VTA is providing a majority of the funding for this Phase through a \$14 million grant using Measure B funds. The City will collaborate with Caltrain in community engagement & outreach efforts, and provide technical and community input, and seek needed reviews and approvals through the Rail Committee and the Council as Caltrain proceeds with this Phase. Staff and the Rail Committee recommend the City Council approve this Cooperative Agreement between three agencies and authorize the City Manager or their designee to finalize and execute the agreement.

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. In addition, the council directed staff to perform additional studies to further assist the review of the alternatives in consideration for the selection of preferred alternative(s) and reinitiated the Rail Committee.

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

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>

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
 - i. Where feasible, improve connections to bike infrastructure beyond the study area to improve the network
 - ii. Improve connection to Park Blvd and explore modifications/refinements to the Bike Blvd, along Park Blvd to improve the overall bike network
 - iii. 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.

The City Council 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) meeting 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/PCJPB, VTA, and City is a necessary instrument that will provide the framework for performing this work. Staff from the City, Caltrain, and VTA worked to develop a cooperative agreement that includes the scope, responsibilities, funding, and timeline for the next phase.

The scope detailed 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. During this initial phase, community and stakeholders will be conducted

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>

to support the Rail Committee's review and the Council's selection of the locally preferred alternatives. This phase is anticipated to be completed in early 2026.

After this initial review and direction, the project will proceed toward developing 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 Federal (NEPA) and California (CEQA) requirements. Additional outreach will be conducted during this stage of environmental documentation to seek appropriate NEPA and CEQA clearances. This phase is anticipated to be completed by the fall of 2027.

The agreement is included as Attachment A. Caltrain will primarily be leading the majority of the work in this phase in collaboration with City Staff. The Rail Committee reviewed the scope of work of this Agreement at its November 19, 2024 (Staff Report 2407-3208⁴) Committee meeting and voted 3-0 to recommend it for approval to the City Council. Staff is now seeking the City Council review and approval of this Cooperative Agreement. The agreement is subject to final approval by the VTA and PCJPB. City Manager or their design will review and accept any minor edits to finalize and execute the agreement.

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 will fund 30% of the cost up to \$6.0 million and the remaining \$14 million is funded through Santa Clara County Measure B Grade Separation funding. A majority of the funding will be to pay Caltrain and its consultants to do the preliminary engineering and environmental review work. Some of the funding will be used by the City to perform its part of the scope of work, which includes conducting community outreach and engagement efforts, developing and coordinating input from City departments and seek needed reviews and approvals through the Rail Committee and the Council for the project. This cooperative agreement between the City, Caltrain/PCJPB, and VTA will serve to provide \$14 million through 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

⁴ Rail Committee, November 19, 2024, Item 1, Action Item, SR# 2407-3208
<https://portal.laserfiche.com/Portal/DocView.aspx?id=105669&repo=r-704298fc>

regularly conducted, and their information is posted on the City Calendar. Residents who have subscribed to City Meetings notifications receive notifications about the Rail Committee meetings. Additionally, notifications about the Rail Committee and the City Council meetings are disseminated through the City's YouTube Channel and City Clerk agenda posting notifications to its subscribers.

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 the City Staff.

ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW

The proposed agreement will conduct an environmental review pursuant to CEQA and NEPA requirements of the grade separation alternatives.

ATTACHMENTS

Attachment A: Cooperative Agreement between VTA, Caltrain and City of Palo Alto for Preliminary Engineering & Environmental Review Phase for Grade Separation Projects at Churchill Avenue, Meadow Drive, and Charleston Road.

APPROVED BY:

Philip Kamhi, Chief Transportation Official