



## City Council Staff Report

**From: City Manager**

**Report Type: CONSENT CALENDAR**

**Lead Department: Transportation**

**Meeting Date: June 19, 2023**

Report #:2305-1414

### **TITLE**

Approval of the Conceptual Plan for Quiet Zone at Palo Alto Avenue/Alma Street Rail Crossing and Direct Staff to Proceed with Design and Construction of the Project. CEQA status – categorically exempt (Regulation 15301).

### **RECOMMENDATION**

The Rail Committee and staff recommend the City Council approve the Conceptual Plan to implement a Quiet Zone at Palo Alto Avenue/Alma Street (Attachment A) and direct staff to proceed with the design and to construct improvements required for implementing the quiet zone at this crossing.

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The Office of Transportation is currently working on the Quiet Zone (QZ) study at Palo Alto Avenue in collaboration with City of Menlo Park. Based on the study, the project consultant has prepared the conceptual plans for improvements that will be necessary to implement the quiet zone at this crossing. A study session was conducted with Planning and Transportation Commission (PTC) and the Pedestrian and Bicycle Advisory Committee (PABAC) before seeking Rail Committee's review. The project received positive consideration and endorsements from these committees. The Rail Committee has reviewed the proposed Conceptual Plan on May 23, 2023 and unanimously recommended approval to the City Council.

### **BACKGROUND**

The City of Palo Alto (City) has received several requests for consideration of Quiet Zone at crossings across Caltrain Corridor. As the first phase of this project, the City of Menlo Park, in coordination with the City of Palo Alto, is conducting a QZ study that includes consideration of a quiet zone at the Palo Alto Avenue/Alma Street crossing. Kimley Horn and Associates was selected as consultant to perform this study. The procurement process was led by the City of Menlo Park consistent with its policies and practices. A similar study at other crossings within Palo Alto will be performed as a second phase of this project.

## **ANALYSIS**

Federal regulation requires that locomotive horns begin sounding 15–20 seconds before entering public rail grade crossings, no more than one-quarter mile in advance. These horns produce sounds from 96 to 110 decibels for at-grade crossings. The sound noise affects the quality of life of the Palo Alto residents in the vicinity of the railroad crossings and causes significant noise pollution.

Local agencies, however, can implement Quiet Zones where railroads have been directed to cease the routine of sounding their horns when approaching public highway-rail grade crossings. Train horns may still be used in emergency situations or to comply with other Federal regulations or railroad operating rules. The Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) Title 49 regulations provide opportunity for localities nationwide to mitigate the effects of train horn noise by establishing Quiet Zones. The regulations require a quiet zone study to review the Quiet Zone Risk Index (QZRI) qualifying for quiet zone or Supplemental Safety Measures (SSM) at each crossing. Based on the study, the crossings need to be upgraded to be safer without horns than they are in the current state with horns before proceeding with quiet zones.

In early 2022, City of Menlo Park issued a Request for Proposals to conduct Quiet Zone study for four at-grade crossings in Menlo Park. Due to close proximity of the Palo Alto Avenue/Alma Street crossing, City of Palo Alto staff collaborated with City of Menlo Park to include this crossing in the study. The procurement process was led by the City of Menlo Park consistent with its policies and practices. However, staff from both cities worked towards the selection of the Consultant. Kimley Horn and Associates (Consultant) was the selected consultant to perform this study.

Consultant performed the crossing analysis based on the FRA and California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) requirements and prepared preliminary conceptual plans for improvements at these crossings to meet QZ requirements. A field diagnostic meeting was held amongst a team of consultant staff, staff from the cities of Palo Alto and Menlo Park, CPUC, Caltrain, and FRA to review the existing conditions at the crossing and to seek feedback and concurrence in developing recommendations for improvements to implement the Quiet Zone. The consultant therefore developed conceptual plans consistent with FRA and CPUC requirements. The improvements for Palo Alto Avenue/Alma Street primarily recommend for modifications to median islands on both sides of the railroad tracks. These improvements include reconstruction to have median islands with eight (8) inch curb and extension of median islands to meet regulatory standards for quiet zones. A community outreach meeting was held on March 23, 2023. Staff received positive feedback and community desire to expedite implementation of quiet zone in Palo Alto.

On April 26, 2023, a Study Session (Staff Report ID 2303-1201) <sup>1</sup> with Planning and Transportation Commission was held to review proposed project recommendations and seeking feedback for implementing a quiet zone at Palo Alto Avenue/Alma Street Crossing. In addition, on May 2, 2023, a study session seeking comments and feedback was also conducted with the Pedestrian and Bicycle Advisory Committee. At both study sessions, staff received positive consideration for implementing quiet zones. The Rail Committee has reviewed the proposed Conceptual Plan on May 23, 2023 (Staff Report 2304-1285)<sup>2</sup> and unanimously recommend approval to the City Council.

### **Next Steps**

Upon approval of the project and concept plans by the City Council, the City will engage a consultant to support the design and help obtain the necessary permits and approvals from Caltrain and CPUC to modify the At-Grade Railroad Crossing. Following this, the project will bid for construction to install the required improvements. The final step involves City formally requesting the Federal Rail Administration to establish a quiet zone at this crossing.

The estimated cost for the design and construction of the improvements outlined in the concept is between \$200,000 and \$250,000. It is expected that implementation of the quiet zone will take approximately 20-24 months, assuming the City is able to secure timely approvals from the relevant agencies and funding availability. However, if external funding or grants are involved, additional coordination and approvals will be required for grant-related requirements, and the timeline will depend on the funding requirements and processing involved. As needed, staff will return to the City Council for approval of design and/or construction contract.

### **FISCAL/RESOURCE IMPACT**

This work will be incorporated into one of the City's existing transportation capital projects; the exact one is to be determined. Staff will seek funding from any applicable federal, state, or regional grants concurrently with the approval process. However, if such funding is unavailable due to the size and timing of the project, staff will seek Measure B Local Streets and Roads (LSR) funds or alternatively absorb the costs within the existing capital project.

### **STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT**

A Community Meeting was held on March 23, 2023, to seek feedback and comments. In addition, a study session at Planning and Transportation Committee was conducted on April 26, 2023, to solicit feedback and comments. Staff also presented the project at the Pedestrian and Bike Advisory Committee Rail Committee on May 2, 2023, and City School Transportation Safety Committee on May 18, 2023, for feedback before seeking Rail Committee's review and approval

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<sup>1</sup> <https://cityofpaloalto.primegov.com/Portal/Meeting?meetingTemplateId=11277>

<sup>2</sup> <https://cityofpaloalto.primegov.com/Portal/Meeting?meetingTemplateId=11356>

on May 23, 2023. All meetings are open to the public and therefore provide the community with opportunities to provide comments to the City.

**ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW**

The proposed modifications are minor upgrades to an existing street right-of-way and would not result in any new impacts on the existing environment. This project is considered as a minor alteration to the existing street system, and therefore categorically exempt (Class 1 Exemption, Section 15301) from the provisions of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA).

**ATTACHMENTS**

Attachment A: Conceptual Plan for Quiet Zone Improvements at Palo Alto Ave

**APPROVED BY:**

Philip Kamhi, Chief Transportation Official