



CITY OF SANTA BARBARA

COUNCIL AGENDA REPORT

AGENDA DATE: March 23, 2021

TO: Mayor and Councilmembers

FROM: Transportation Planning and Parking, Public Works Department
Planning Division, Community Development Department

SUBJECT: Appeal Of The Historic Landmarks Commission's Decision To Deny
The Westside Community Paseos Proposed Within El Pueblo Viejo
Landmark District

RECOMMENDATION: That Council:

- A. Uphold the appeal of the Public Works Department and grant Project Design and Final Approval of the Westside Community Paseos Project and find that the Sola Street bike-friendly street diverters are required for functional safety; and
- B. Direct staff to retain a landscape architect and request that one or two Historic Landmarks Commission members volunteer to work with the staff team to provide recommendations on landscape and materials.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

The Westside Community Paseos Project (Project) was developed from an extensive community engagement process and incorporated into the City's Bicycle Master Plan (BMP). This City Project was awarded a \$4.4 million Active Transportation Planning (ATP) grant from the State and is scheduled for construction in 2022. A small portion of the Project is within the El Pueblo Viejo Landmark District (EPV) and subject to the Historic Landmark Commission's (HLC) discretionary approval. The project within the HLC jurisdiction includes two intersections at Sola and Santa Barbara Streets, and Sola and Garden Streets.

On February 3, 2021, the HLC denied Project Design Approval and Final Approval for that portion of the Project within the EPV. The Project was denied by HLC for aesthetic reasons generally focused on the traffic diverters, including their design and placement, and also because the Project visually and functionally disrupts the street grid in this area of EPV and the traffic on Sola Street. Public Works staff is requesting review and modification of the HLC's decision because without the traffic diverters the Project cannot achieve its public

safety purpose of creating a bike-friendly street as described in the BMP, nor can it meet the qualifications of the ATP grant funding. (See Attachment 1 – Appeal Letter).

This staff report describes the community process by which the Project was approved by Council as part of the BMP; explains the HLC's decision to deny Project Design and Final Approvals; and outlines outcomes and next steps depending on Council's decision on the appeal.

DISCUSSION:

Project Description

The Project on Sola Street extends from Castillo Street to Panchita Street (Attachment 2 – Project Plans). The purpose of the Project is to create a bike-friendly street (without parking removal) that is both safe and comfortable to a wide range of ages and biking abilities. The Project's purpose is achieved through the construction of two automobile traffic diverters (at De la Vina and Santa Barbara Streets). The traffic diverters reduce automobile traffic volumes low enough so that novice bike riders feel comfortable riding in the traffic lane.

The Project improvements within EPV include: traffic signals, traffic diverters, access ramps, landscaping, brick pavers, relocated street lights, and high-visibility bike lanes at the Sola and Santa Barbara Street intersection. Two curb extensions located at Sola and Garden Street are also under review including brick pavers and landscaping, relocated street lights, and green backed bike roadway stencils. Although a small portion of the City's Project is located within the HLC's review jurisdiction, this report also describes those portions of the project outside of the EPV for context.

Project Background

The BMP was approved by the City Council in 2016. Goals identified in the BMP include safety for all road users and completing gaps in the bicycle facility network. One of the gaps identified through the community engagement process was safe access between Downtown and the Westside neighborhood via the Micheltorena Street overcrossing.

The Project implements a portion of the [Bicycle Master Plan](#) (Attachment 3 – pages 21-29, 41, 59, 65, 66, and 71 of the BMP), which identifies Sola Street as a proposed bike boulevard connecting Santa Barbara High School on the Eastside, through Downtown to the Micheltorena Street overcrossing, which provides access to the Westside. Access to the Micheltorena Street overcrossing was the most scrutinized project in the BMP. The main reason for community concern was an option to install bike lanes on Micheltorena Street that would have resulted in the removal of 85 on-street spaces on Micheltorena from State to Castillo Streets. The Project was born out of extensive public engagement, of which the primary objective was to provide the bike connection without on-street parking removal.

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A special listening workshop was held on April 12, 2016 that engaged the public around 11 alternatives that provide access to the Micheltorena Street overcrossing from Downtown. Sola Street was a primary bike routing for four of the alternatives because these alternatives did not remove on-street parking on Micheltorena Street. Instead, the Sola Street alternatives included traffic diverters in order to reduce traffic volumes to levels where novice bike riders could feel comfortable riding in the traffic lane. The alternatives were also presented to the Transportation and Circulation Committee on April 28, 2016 and the Planning Commission on May 5, 2016. Both bodies supported the Sola Street alternative.

The community-preferred Project on Sola Street was presented to the City Council along with the other 10 alternatives. The Sola Street alternative included four new traffic signals and two traffic diverters (one within EPV). The City Council took a specific vote on the 11 alternatives, and approved the community-preferred Sola Street alternative on June 10, 2016, and directed staff to pursue grant funding to implement the Sola Street bike-friendly street as part of the Westside Bike Boulevard and Gap Closure Project Active Transportation Grant application.

A bike-friendly street, also known as a bicycle boulevard, is a bike route along a street with low traffic volumes and speeds, and safe, efficient intersection crossings. Low traffic volumes and speeds allow cyclists to safely ride in the middle of the street so parking removal is not necessary. Modifications are required to Sola Street to turn it into a bike-friendly street, including intersection safety crossing enhancements and traffic volume management to minimize vehicle and cyclist conflicts. The specific features identified in the BMP include four new traffic signals and two traffic diverters (one diverter within HLC jurisdiction). The traffic diverters will be located four blocks apart so local traffic can circulate, but end to end trips are prevented. Without the traffic diverters, Sola Street will not be a bike-friendly street and will not provide the strong connection between the Westside and Downtown envisioned in the BMP.

The Project was awarded \$4,437,000 in grant funding through the California Active Transportation Program in 2017. In 2019, the detailed traffic analysis and design phase of the Project was initiated. Additionally, in 2020, funds from this grant were appropriated for the project approval and environmental document, plans, specifications, and estimate/right-of-way phases. Webinars to update the community on the project design were held in October 2020, and an application for project review by the HLC was submitted in November 2020.

Historic Landmarks Commission Review

The HLC reviewed the Project on two occasions, January 20, 2021, and February 3, 2021. The standard for review for this project is Santa Barbara Municipal Code (SBMC) Section 22.22.145.B (Project Compatibility Analysis Considerations), provided as Attachment 4. At the January 20th meeting, City Attorney and Planning Division staff described the HLC's purview as being limited to aesthetic elements of the Project within EPV, and the

traffic safety elements of the project as outside the purview of the HLC as they were predetermined by the City's Traffic Engineer based on local, state, and federal safety standards.

At the first public hearing on January 20, 2021, the HLC continued the Project indefinitely with the overall comment that the "Project as proposed would have a profound adverse impact on the streetscapes and does not rise to the aesthetic level of Santa Barbara." The Commission expressed concern with the traffic diversion element of the Project and commented that the proposed diverter would disrupt traffic patterns on Sola Street. The Commission also expressed concerns that the proposed diverter median and trees would block the view corridor to the mountains and Riviera and requested that Public Works minimize the visual impacts of the Project on the streetscape. The HLC did not believe they had sufficient information to evaluate the proposed brick pavers and requested to see examples of other brick pavers in the surrounding areas to provide context. Additionally, the Commission stated that mulch is not an appropriate material and that the plantings in general needed to be redesigned (Attachment 5 – HLC Minutes Dated January 20, 2021).

At the February 3, 2021 HLC hearing, Public Works staff presented additional paver colors and patterns, and examples of landscaping palettes used on other downtown capital projects. The HLC expressed concern that comments from the previous meeting related to the visual disruption of mountain views and disruption of traffic on Sola Street resulting from the traffic diverter had not been addressed. The HLC determined that the Project as designed was not appropriate for EPV, stating that an engineered solution to a historic neighborhood is insensitive and not appropriate. The Project was denied on the basis that the Project Compatibility Analysis Criteria had not been met due to the Project's overall incompatibility with the aesthetics of Santa Barbara. The HLC was particularly concerned with the potential visual disruption of the City's historic street grid and views to the mountains blocked by landscaping proposed in the traffic diverter, and the disruption of traffic flow on Sola Street. The HLC stated that the details of the Project, including the landscaping and paving materials, could not be adequately evaluated since the overall Project is not consistent with the design guidelines (Attachment 6 – HLC Minutes Dated February 3, 2021).

On February 12, 2021, the HLC's decision to deny the portions of the City Project proposed within EPV was appealed by the Public Works Department.

APPEAL ISSUES:

Public Works staff and the City's Traffic Engineer believe that the functionality and engineering features of the Project are necessary to safely implement the City Council approved bike-friendly street and disagree with the HLC's determination that the Project visually disrupts the historic City grid and blocks views of the mountains. Further, the Public Works staff believe that HLC's denial of the small but important part (two intersections) of the overall Project would render the entire Project infeasible, since Sola

Street provides the key connection route between the east and west sides of the City, as identified in the Bicycle Master Plan, and the City Traffic Engineer has determined that diverters are necessary for the Project to be safely constructed. Additionally, Public Works staff disagrees that alternatives to traffic diversion exist to effectively manage traffic volumes on Sola Street.

Public Works staff are concerned that delays to the Project's implementation will jeopardize grant funding. The California Transportation Commission must authorize the construction grant funds in June 2021, and a construction contract awarded by the City six months later. Failure to deliver this project will require the City to repay the Active Transportation Program approximately \$180,000 that has been spent on design to date. Failure to deliver this project will also result in points removed from future applications through the Active Transportation Program, thus making any future application uncompetitive.

Disruption of Historic Street Grid and Mountain Views

The HLC expressed strong opposition to the traffic engineering design to implement the bike boulevard, as they believed it would change the streetscape, and thereby negatively alter the street grid, which they consider a "defining element" of the Landmark District. Additionally, the HLC stated that trees proposed as part of the intersection medians would disrupt the view of the mountains and Riviera neighborhood, creating a visual impact and resulting in a drastic aesthetic change to the view corridor, fundamentally altering the urban experience of Santa Barbara.

The HLC was informed prior to their decision that the engineered design of the traffic control elements are outside their purview as they follow City, State, and Federal standards. The trees and other proposed plantings can only be modified to a limited extent as well, as right-of-way trees are subject to the review and approval of the City Arborist and Street Tree Advisory Committee, and plantings in the median are required by the Municipal Code to be below eight inches in height. Further, the City is careful to balance the desire for new planting areas with the additional cost to maintain landscaping in the right-of-way.

Project Aesthetics

While the HLC understood that the Project is identified in the BMP and agrees with the goals of the Project, they felt that a design more appropriate for EPV can be achieved. The HLC was not convinced that the traffic diverter is necessary to implement the Project, and believes a more aesthetically appropriate alternative exists that still meets local, state, and Federal requirements. The Commission also stated that early guidance from the HLC would have been beneficial to help the Project's design be more aesthetically attractive and sensitive to EPV.

The HLC recommended development of a solution that combines the engineering design with a more sensitive aesthetic design. The HLC indicated that until there was an acceptable design, comments on materials such as brick pavers and landscaping is premature. The HLC ultimately determined that the design of the proposed engineering solution is aesthetically inappropriate in EPV because “the Project visually and functionally disrupts the historic Santa Barbara grid and the traffic of Sola Street” and, therefore, does not meet the Project Compatibility Analysis Criteria.

RELEVANT CITY GOALS AND PROGRAMS:

The HLC is one of four design review bodies responsible for protecting the historic and architectural qualities of the City. As an aesthetics review body, the HLC reviews projects within EPV to ensure compatibility with the architectural character of the City and neighborhood. The powers and duties of the HLC are specified in Section 817 of the City Charter, Santa Barbara Municipal Code (SBMC) Chapter 22.22, and HLC General Design Guidelines. The City Charter provides the HLC the authority to review, approve, disapprove, or approve with conditions, plans for exterior alteration, demolition, relocation, moving, or construction within the EPV Landmark District, except when determined by the City Council that HLC review is not necessary (Attachment 7 – City Charter Section 817).

The HLC is also guided by a set of general goals that define the major concerns and objectives of its review process, including goals to protect the integrity and character of EPV, and to ensure compatibility with the EPV and sensitivity to neighboring historic resources (Attachment 8 – HLC Goals). The Project Compatibility Analysis criteria, provided in Attachment 4, is considered by the HLC when it reviews and approves or disapproves the design of a proposed development project.

The HLC is limited in its purview to reviewing a project's aesthetics to further the objectives stated above; therefore, and as evidenced by this appeal, implementation of the City's far-ranging General Plan goals and other policy programs can sometimes create a conflict when they are subject to review by the City's design review bodies who must struggle with predetermined projects which may be subject to particular engineering requirements. The design review process is intended to ensure the protection and preservation of Santa Barbara's beauty and character, while transportation infrastructure projects are necessary to promote efficient and safe circulation, including bicycle lanes and routes. When these conflicts arise, the City Council is the ultimate arbitrator of these competing goals and programs.

The City Council adopted the community-driven BMP in 2016. The BMP outlines goals, policies, and implementation strategies to improve bicycle safety, convenience, facilities, and infrastructure in the City of Santa Barbara. One of the four goals of the BMP is to create a complete bicycle network by filling in gaps and improving the existing bicycle routes, which the Project proposes to do. This is also consistent with the General Plan

Circulation Element's goal of providing a comprehensive street network that safely serves all transportation modes.

ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW

The Project qualifies for an exemption from further environmental review under California Environmental Quality Act Guidelines Sections 15301 and 15304, which exempts the minor alteration of existing public structures or topographical features involving negligible or no expansion of existing use, including existing streets, sidewalks, gutters, bicycles lanes, and similar facilities. The City of Santa Barbara Environmental Review Ordinance (SBMC Chapter 22.100) identifies activities that qualify for a Categorical Exemption. The proposed Project falls within Class 1 and Class 4 (SBMC 22.100.070 – Existing Facilities, and Minor Alterations to Land).

CONCLUSION:

Staff recommends that Council consider the HLC's denial of the Westside Community Paseos Project proposed within EPV in light of the Council's prior actions to approve the BMP and authorize Public Works staff to pursue grant funding to construct the Project. While the Council's standard for review of the Project is the same as the HLC's (Attachment 4 – Project Compatibility Analysis), the Council also directs implementation of the City's policies and programs, including implementation of its General Plan, and can view the Project through that broader lens.

Therefore, Staff recommends that Council uphold the appeal of the Public Works Department and grant Project Design and Final Approval of the Westside Community Paseos Project and find that the Sola Street bike-friendly street diverters are required for functional safety. For improvement of the aesthetics of the Project, staff recommends that a landscape architect be retained, and requests that one or two HLC members volunteer to work with the staff team to provide recommendations on landscape and materials.

As an alternative, City Council could deny the appeal and uphold HLC's decision to deny the project. However, without traffic diversion, Sola will not qualify as a bike-friendly street and will no longer be eligible to receive ATP grant funding. This action will also require the City to forfeit the \$4,437,000 Active Transportation Program grant; not have the funding for the portion of the Project on the Westside; and the need to repay the Active Transportation Program \$180,000 that has been spent on design to date. This will also result in points deducted from future Active Transportation Program grant applications. Future Active Transportation Program grant applications are unlikely to be competitive due to the point reduction.

- ATTACHMENT(S):**
1. Appeal Letter Dated February 12, 2021
 2. Reduced Project Plans
 3. Bicycle Master Plan (pages 21-29, 41, 59, 65, 66, and 71)
 4. SBMC Sections 22.22.145.B. – Project Compatibility Analysis
 5. HLC Minutes Dated January 20, 2021
 6. HLC Minutes Dated February 3, 2021
 7. City Charter Section 817 – Historic Landmarks Commission
 8. Historic Landmarks Commission Goals

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