



3

Architectural Review Board

Staff Report

Agenda Date: February 21, 2013

To: Architectural Review Board

From: Shahla Yazdy, Transportation Engineer **Department:** Planning and
Community Environment

Subject: California Avenue Transit Hub Corridor Streetscape Improvements Project
Request by Transportation Division, on behalf of the City of Palo Alto for Architectural Review of Streetscape improvements along California Avenue between El Camino Real and the California Avenue-Park Blvd Plaza including: new sidewalks and bulb-outs; sidewalk and pavement treatments; trees and planting palettes; streetscape elements including furniture such as benches and seat walls; newspaper racks; trash receptacles; bicycle racks; decorative bollards; drinking fountains; street lights and pedestrian scale lighting and enhanced bicycle parking; and improvements to the Park Blvd Plaza.

RECOMMENDATION

Staff requests the Architectural Review Board (ARB) conduct a study session review of the California Avenue Transit Hub Corridor Streetscape project and provide comments on the proposed streetscape and landscape elements along California Avenue between El Camino Real and the Park Boulevard Plaza.

BACKGROUND

The City initiated the California Avenue Transit Hub Corridor Streetscape project in the Fall 2010. The RBF/David Gates & Associates consultant team is preparing the project improvement plans for the project. The project now includes additional sidewalk widening treatments in response to council requests for additional community amenities. A streetscape furniture and landscape treatment palette has been developed for the project as part of the community outreach process. The purpose of this Architectural Review Board Study Session is to solicit input and guidance on the furniture palette so that development of the final improvement plans may be completed and submitted for formal ARB review.

DISCUSSION

Project Setting:

California Avenue is in a fully developed urban setting, with intensive development extending on both sides of California Avenue. The California Avenue Caltrain Station is located on the east side of the project, with pedestrian, bicycle and train traffic creating a strong visual boundary which would be reinforced by placement of a new fountain. On the west end of the project at El Camino Real, the placement of native grasses and granite rocks in the center median would create another strong visual boundary which would be reinforced by El Camino Real. An eclectic mix of sculptures within the center medians and poetry inscribed in the brick walkways along California Avenue would create a unique urban experience.

The currently proposed street alignment, shown in Attachment A, was adopted by the City Council in July 2011 and is designed to balance the sidewalk and streetscape opportunity areas evenly throughout the corridor. The proposed mix of traditional and modern streetscape elements, such as benches and seat walls, should help to stimulate pedestrian activity and support retail activities. The landscape elements are intended to respond to community interest for a mix of colorful treatments with a strong seasonal emphasis in the Spring and Summer, while maintaining a greener appearance during other seasons. The proposed streetscape palette includes new street light standards that are not yet approved by the City Council. The Planning & Transportation Commission discussed the addition of street lighting as an element of the project at its January 30, 2013 meeting and supported staff's recommendation to request the addition of street lighting to the project for the consideration of the Council on March 4, 2013. Input on streetlight standards is also being requested of the ARB but additional information such as a photo-metric plan will be provided to the ARB for the formal ARB review.

1. Streetscape Palette

Over the course of the outreach process, a range of viewpoints on site furnishings were heard from the community. Participants at the community meetings were shown imagery of a variety of furnishing styles and were asked to indicate their preferences. Some participants felt that the street should have sleek and modern furnishings, to give it a more contemporary look and feel. Others preferred a more traditional style of furnishings, which they felt was more consistent with some of the existing brick and wood elements and the warm ambience of the space. Selected benches would provide a middle ground between the two styles, with simple, clean lines, contemporary metal accents and the warmth and traditional aesthetic of wood. Seat pads in either natural granite or a warm concrete provide additional seating options. Trash receptacles are proposed to be a warm grey metal with simple lines and include both litter and recycling sections in one unit. Newspapers would be consolidated in single racks with multiple compartments to reduce clutter. The intent is for the furnishings to act as a unifying element that conveys a polished style, yet establishes a friendly and approachable atmosphere.

Working with the community, the preferred option for the improved plaza at the east end of the street was developed. The plaza's focal element would be a dramatic custom sculptural water feature by artist Michael Szabo. A variety of spaces would be provided in the plaza with a range of seating options, including seatwalls and benches, as well as game tables. Existing Pistache trees would be retained, and additional trees would be planted in the area left by the removal of parking spaces that are part of the existing plaza. The proposed plaza shrub palette is made up of drought tolerant plants including Salvia, Red Buckwheat, Rosemary, Phormium, Carpet Rose, Coffeeberry, Catmint, California Fuschia and Achillea.

The proposed street tree palette follows the street's existing pattern and the City's Street Tree Plan. Additional Crape Myrtles are to be provided for accent color and to provide visual interest. Additional pots with shrubs and blooming trees would provide vitality, color and retail excitement throughout the corridor. Between El Camino Real and Ash Street, proposed shrubs include Meidiland Rose, Phormium and Blue Oat Grass. From Ash Street to Park Boulevard, proposed shrubs include Fortnight Lily, Salvia, Azure Bush Germander, Carpet Rose and Hakone Grass.

2. Flexibility for Central Public Plaza Space

A flexible plaza design element is included between Ash Street and Birch Street and further defined in Attachment A . The flexible plaza space would use curbless transitions between sidewalks and the street to provide accessible public plaza space for special event uses or seasonal expansion of retail activities. The bollard or treatments to protect the street from the sidewalk zones would introduce an opportunity for unique streetscape furniture, such as stone bollards or siding treatments, to be both functional as barriers and aesthetically pleasing for the community.

3. Park Boulevard Plaza

The Park Boulevard Plaza design is highlighted in the Attachments and includes several community-requested treatments:

- Centering and buffering access to public art and fountain elements within the plaza to preserve views to the fountain as a focal element down California Avenue;
- Providing ample useable seating areas for special plaza events or regular patron use;
- Maintaining accessible bicycle access and parking adjacent to the California Avenue transit station and underpass;
- Preserving an unobstructed view of the California Avenue streetscape and hills west of the project areas; and
- Introducing lighting improvements to the plaza.

4. Community Involvement:

The City has sponsored six design-focused community outreach meetings focusing on the alignment and on placement of streetscape furniture such as seat walls, bicycle parking facilities, newsracks, trash/recycle bins, commercial loading zones, etc. Four merchant-focused meetings, including one day-long workshop at Mollie Stone's Market, were also held to get input from the businesses in the area as to what they'd like to see on their block, as part of the project. Input from attendees at the community meetings showed a general desire to implement sidewalk widening alternatives as part of the California Avenue project along with other pedestrian-scaled improvements such as lighting, and bulb-outs at intersections to reduce crosswalk lengths and introduce additional planting opportunities. Attendees also expressed a strong interest in the design of the Park Boulevard Plaza.

Timeline:

The City anticipates continuing the detailed design phase of the project through the Spring 2013, to allow opportunities for community feedback and allow for formal review by the Architectural Review Board and Parks & Recreation Commission for the design of the Park Boulevard Plaza. Staff is currently scheduled to go to the Council on March 4 for approval of funding for the lighting element for the project.

The project design should be completed by the Spring 2013. Staff will return to PTC and Council late in the Summer 2013 for final design approval prior to advertising the project for bids. The City anticipates advertising the project for competitive bids in the Summer 2013 with construction beginning in the Fall 2013.

ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW

A preliminary Initial Study and the Negative Declaration - CEQA (California Environmental Quality Act) checklist for the project were completed, circulated for public review in December 2010 and approved by Council on February 14, 2011. The Negative Declaration concluded that the project will not result in any significant environmental impacts. Litigation challenging the timing of that review was filed shortly thereafter, and the Santa Clara County Superior Court ruled in Fall 2011 that the City should have completed CEQA review prior to submitting the environmental review and associated approvals in the proper order. In February 2012, the Court found that the City complied with CEQA. The trial court's decision is currently pending before the Court of Appeal.

ATTACHMENT A:

Project streetscape and landscape plans (streetscape furniture cut sheets included)
[Board Members only]