

**CITY OF ALBANY
CITY COUNCIL AGENDA
STAFF REPORT**

Agenda Date: July 7, 2008
Reviewed by: BP

SUBJECT: Proceed with an Environmental Review of the closure of all the City of Albany Streets adjacent to the southern side of the El Cerrito Plaza Shopping Center

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TRAFFIC AND SAFETY COMMISSION RECOMMENDATION

Adopt City Council Resolution No. 08-46 that authorizes proceeding with an environmental review of the closure of Albany streets adjacent to the southern side of the El Cerrito Plaza Shopping Center (attached).

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

To implement the recommendation of the Commission, adopt Resolution No. 08-46 and direct staff to return with a scope of work and consultant contract to prepare a Focused Environmental Impact Report (EIR) on the closure of the streets. The EIR is needed prior to a City Council decision on whether to proceed with action to amend the Circulation Element of the General Plan to plan for street closures.

BACKGROUND

On January 18, 2005, the City Council authorized the initiation of an Amendment to the Circulation Element of the General Plan, and preparation of an environmental review of that Amendment for use in considering the possible closure of Albany streets leading to the El Cerrito Plaza. To begin this process, the Council determined that a study was first needed to evaluate street closure options and serve as a basis for an environmental review. Therefore, in May 2005, the City contracted with Kimley-Horn Associates to prepare a Street Closure Study. This study considered a variety of alternatives to address the issue of significantly increased traffic volume and speeds cited by residents since the renovation of the Plaza, and particularly since the opening of Trader Joes and the former Copeland Sports.

The Albany Street Closure Study, prepared by Kimley-Horn considered three closure options:

- Option 1 – Full Closure (close Kains, Cornell, Talbot and Evelyn streets)
- Option 4 – Make all one-way outbound except Kains. Kains remains two-way
- Option 6 – Close all but Kains. Kains remains two way

A traffic calming section was also included in lieu of, or in addition to, street closure. However, the scope of the study did not evaluate the benefits or impacts of these measures (e.g., traffic circles, curb extensions and chokers, raised crosswalks). It should be noted that the 2025 traffic conditions included the projected traffic from the condominium project planned for the southeast corner of the Plaza.

Study findings for “Option 1 – full closure” would result in three intersections along San Pablo Avenue going from an existing Level of Service (LOS) D or E to an LOS F.

Study findings for “Option 4 – One-way outbound except Kains” would not significantly effect San Pablo levels of service, queuing, transit, etc. However, residents could only access their homes via the Plaza or violate the one-way travel.

Study findings for “Option 6 – Close all streets except Kains” would have moderate impacts on levels of service, queuing, etc. However, this option would principally shift all non-local traffic to Kains Avenue, which drops from LOS B to LOS E at the Kains/Brighton intersection during the PM peak hour. Based on this 2005 analysis, the projected increase in traffic on Kains would be nearly three-fold (2.8) during the PM peak hour for the year 2025.

The study consultant recommended Option 6 and suggested mitigation measures that would lessen the impacts, such as installing an all-way stop sign at Kains and Brighton, removing parking on Brighton between San Pablo and Kains, and restriping the street to provide an eastbound left turn lane on Brighton. Following review of the study findings, and public meetings during 2006, the Traffic and Safety Commission recommended full closure to the City Council.

On April 17, 2006, the City Council reviewed the study and considered the Traffic and Safety Commission’s recommendation to prepare an environmental review regarding closure of all four streets. The Council directed staff to proceed with an environmental review for a project involving closure of three streets, with the 400 block of Kains to remain open (as clarified on October 3, 2006), and partial closure at the northern end of the 500 block of Kains.

On March 5, 2007, the City Council reviewed a scope of work for environmental services with Design, Communities and Environment (DC&E). Because a traffic calming component would be needed as part of that review, the Council directed that that particular component be completed first. This study would assist the City in understanding the merits, or lack thereof, of traffic calming measures prior to deciding whether to continue with a full environmental review.

DISCUSSION/ANALYSIS

The firm of Fehr & Peers prepared the Albany Traffic Calming Study dated February 22, 2008 (attached). This study reviewed the effects of traffic calming in both the 400 and 500 blocks of Kains, Cornell, Talbot and Evelyn. The 500 block of Stannage was also

reviewed. The preliminary draft was presented to the Traffic & Safety Commission in January 2008, and on March 27, 2008 the Commission held a publicly noticed meeting to review the report with the consultant and the public.

In summary, some of the findings of the report conclude that:

- Traffic volumes in the 400 block of Kains, Cornell, Talbot and Evelyn are more than twice the volume in the 500 block during weekdays, and close to three times higher on Saturdays, which suggests that “cut-through” traffic use the neighborhood streets to enter and exit the Plaza.
- Average Daily Traffic (ADT) on the residential streets north of Brighton to the Plaza range from 1,290 to 2,110 vehicles, and Saturday ADT on these same streets range from 1,550 to 2,430 vehicles, thereby negatively impacting the quality of life on neighborhood streets adjacent to the Plaza. In comparison, ADT in the 500 block of the same streets range from 350 to 740 on weekdays, and from 320 to 830 on Saturdays.
- Traffic calming measures would not be effective in significantly decreasing the volume of traffic in the 400 blocks in that current median and 85 Percentile speeds are lower than in the 500 block of those same streets. This is illustrated in speed and volume graphs and charts in the Fehr and Peers report on pages I-IX.
- If all streets, except Kains were closed, the volume on Kains would increase by more than 200 percent.

Based on this information, the majority of the Commissioners concluded that it was better to close all the streets rather than some of the streets. Commissioner Marcia Atkinson expressed concern regarding full closure because she believed Albany and Berkeley residents have a right to access the Plaza in a convenient and efficient fashion. She supported traffic calming measures along with signage forbidding access to truck traffic, and police enforcement to stop this behavior.

Following extensive discussion, the Commission voted 4 to 0, with 1 abstention, to recommend that the City Council proceed with an environmental review for the closure of all the streets leading to the El Cerrito Plaza (i.e., Kains, Cornell, Talbot and Evelyn). The Commission directed staff to prepare a resolution stating the reasons for this action. See attached Traffic and Safety Commission Resolution #08-01.

Based on conversations with the DC&E consultant, it is recommended that the environmental document be a Focused EIR that focuses on traffic, air quality, and noise. They estimated the cost of this document, given the existence of prior studies, to be roughly \$26,000. If the City Council chooses to proceed with an environmental review, staff would return with a Scope of Work and draft contract agreement.

Findings contained in the Focused EIR would assist the City Council in deciding the next step of whether or not to proceed to amend the Circulation Element of the General Plan to plan for street closures.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

A Focused EIR to evaluate the potential impacts of closing all the City streets adjacent to the southern side of El Cerrito Plaza Shopping Center is estimated to cost about \$26,000. The Traffic Calming Study, prepared by Fehr and Peers, cost approximately \$50,000. That study was funded with gas tax monies allocated in the CIP for various transportation projects and studies, and paid for over two fiscal years (2006-07 and 2007-08). If approved, that same source of money from fiscal year 2008/09 could provide the funds to prepare a Focused EIR for a possible street closure.

Attachments

1. City Council Resolution No. 08-46
2. Traffic and Safety Commission Resolution No. 08-01
3. Albany Traffic Calming Study prepared by Fehr & Peers dated February 22, 2008
4. Excerpts of Traffic and Safety Commission minutes of March 27, 2008
5. Letters from the public