

**CITY COUNCIL AGENDA
STAFF REPORT**

Agenda date: January 18, 2005

Prepared on: January 7, 2005

Reviewed by: _____

SUBJECT: Street Closures adjoining El Cerrito Plaza

FROM: Ann Chaney, Community Development Director

TRAFFIC & SAFETY COMMISSION RECOMMENDATION

Approve Resolution No. 05-1 initiating an amendment to the Circulation Element of the General Plan and authorizing an environmental review of that amendment for use in considering the possible closure of Albany streets leading to the El Cerrito Plaza. Review and consideration of this matter will be conducted through a noticed public hearing.

BACKGROUND

In April 2004, the Traffic & Safety Commission held a meeting with residents living adjacent to or near the renovated El Cerrito Plaza. The purpose of the meeting was to identify additional traffic calming measures that could be installed on Albany streets adjoining the Plaza and discuss neighborhood traffic concerns. It should be noted that all-way stop signs have been installed along Brighton Avenue at Stannage, Talbot, and San Gabriel in an effort to slow traffic speeds and improve overall safety. A red curb was also extended at the northeast corner of Brighton and Kains to improve visibility for motorists exiting the Plaza on Kains Avenue.

During the course of the meeting, the majority of residents cited concerns over increased traffic volume and speed, increased truck traffic, and violations of one-way directional signs. Residents observed that these increases have occurred particularly since the opening of the renovated shopping center. It was the general consensus of those in attendance that the streets leading to the Plaza (i.e., Kains, Cornell, Talbot, and Evelyn) should be closed to vehicular traffic regardless of whether the mixed-use project is built. Note that Stannage Avenue is already a dead-end street at this location. Finally, residents felt that street closure should not restrict pedestrian, bicycle and emergency response traffic.

The Traffic & Safety Commission discussed this issue, and staff stated that a street closure of this kind would need legal and technical review. Following further discussion, the Commission voted 4-0 (one member absent) to recommend that the City Council consider closure of the streets adjoining the Plaza. Because the City had

officially requested that the draft SEIR (Subsequent Environmental Impact Report) for the mixed-use project address the closure issue, and because that document was originally slated to be released in the summer of 2004, staff felt it best to discuss the two issues on the heels of one another.

The SEIR was issued in November, 2004, with comments due to the City of El Cerrito by January 3, 2005. The traffic portion of the document was reviewed by the Traffic & Safety Commission, and other aspects of the EIR were reviewed by the Planning & Zoning Commission. The City Council approved comments on the SEIR at its meeting of December 20, 2004.

During the Planning & Zoning Commission's review of the El Cerrito mixed-use development project (December 14, 2004), the Commission heard testimony advocating closure of Albany's streets into the Plaza. As a result, the Commission voted 4-0 (with one abstention) to recommend to the City Council that these streets be closed except to pedestrians, bicycles, and emergency vehicles.

Lastly, attached is a letter from Tom Engberg, with Regency Centers regarding the street closure issue. Regency Realty Group, Inc. is the developer and owner of the El Cerrito Plaza.

DISCUSSION

As part of the permit issued by the City of El Cerrito for the Plaza renovation, the applicant (Regency Centers) was required to contact the City of Albany and arrange for City approved traffic calming measures to be installed as a mitigation in the neighborhoods most affected by the new retail uses on the southern side of the Plaza. An agreement was reached on July 9, 2003, for an estimated amount of \$15,000. This money was then placed in a bond and trust account with the City to "...install said measures within 18 months of the date hereof..." During that time period the stops signs mentioned above were installed and materials and labor will be charged to this account. Because the 18 month period has lapsed, a representative from the Regency Center has stated that any remaining funds will continue to be offered to the City for traffic calming measure if street closure is not implemented.

ANALYSIS

The Circulation Element of the General Plan does not address the issue of street closure adjacent to the El Cerrito Plaza. Based on consultation with the City Attorney, the General Plan would need to support such action prior to any implementation. In addition, an environmental review of a General Plan amendment relative to street closures would be necessary.

The analysis contained in the draft SEIR prepared for the El Cerrito Plaza Mixed-Use Development states the streets of Evelyn, Talbot, Cornell and Kains "are not the best routes for traffic to access the site to and from origins and destinations north of El Cerrito Plaza (e.g., Richmond, San Pablo or most of El Cerrito)." Albany's traffic study peer

review basically concurred with this finding. However, the SEIR acknowledges trip distribution from the proposed residential development and child care facility would most heavily rely on Albany streets. For informational purposes, the City conducted speed and volume counts for the streets adjoining the Plaza between July 14 and July 20, 2004. This data was collected in response to concerns raised by residents at the April 2004 Traffic & Safety Commission meeting that traffic conditions had intensified since the opening of Trader Joe's and Copelands. A summary of study results are attached in table form. In the Kimley-Horn peer review of the El Cerrito Plaza mixed-use development proposal, they state that "...traffic count information (from the city) on Evelyn Avenue during May 2003 and July 2004 shows a 19 percent increase. Data on Cornell Avenue shows a 20 percent increase. It appears that the traffic increases on the two Albany streets is connected with the opening of the Trader Joe's which occurred following the 2003 traffic count."

FINANCIAL IMPACT

Cost of preparing a General Plan amendment and environmental document is estimated to be between \$22,000 and \$27,000. This includes the following: new AM/PM turning movement counts; future year forecast; analysis of existing, existing plus closure, future plus closure; analysis using Synchro software; effect of street closure on vehicular safety, transit, pedestrian and bike mobility; presentation to City. Notification and legal advertising will cost approximately \$500. Staff time would result in an indirect cost. The Transportation Projects account, approved as part of the Capital Improvements Program, would serve to fund this amendment process.

NEXT STEPS

If Council approves the staff recommendation, staff would prepare a draft amendment to the Circulation Element of the General Plan, with an associated environmental analysis, for public hearing by the Planning & Zoning Commission and subsequently the City Council.

Attachments

- Resolution No. 05-01 - Initiating an amendment to the Circulation Element of the General Plan and authorizing preparation of an environmental review
- Traffic & Safety Commission minutes - April 22, 2004
- Planning & Zoning Commission minutes – December 14, 2004
- Table entitled "El Cerrito Plaza: Adjacent Albany Streets Data (July 14-20, 2004)
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- August 20, 2004 letter from Thomas Engberg, Regency Centers