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Title: Hearing for Planning Commission to consider and recommend (to the City Council) adoption of a finding of “no possibility” pursuant to CEQA Guidelines 15061(b)(3); and acceptance of the Southern Blackstone Avenue Smart Mobility Strategy (Strategy) for complete street improvements along Blackstone Avenue between Dakota Avenue and Highway 180.

1. RECOMMEND ADOPTION (to the City Council) of a finding that there is no possibility that acceptance of the Southern Blackstone Avenue Smart Mobility Strategy will have a significant effect on the environment and is exempt from CEQA pursuant to CEQA Guidelines Section 15061(b)(3).
2. RECOMMEND ACCEPTANCE (to the City Council) of the Southern Blackstone Avenue Smart Mobility Strategy.

Sponsors: Planning and Development Department

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Attachments: 1. Exhibit_A_Southern Blackstone Avenue Smart Mobility Strategy_Final Report

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4/17/2019	1	Planning Commission	approved	Pass

REPORT TO THE PLANNING COMMISSION

April 17, 2019

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SUBJECT

Hearing for Planning Commission to consider and recommend (to the City Council) adoption of a finding of “no possibility” pursuant to CEQA Guidelines 15061(b)(3); and acceptance of the Southern Blackstone Avenue Smart Mobility Strategy (Strategy) for complete street improvements along Blackstone Avenue between Dakota Avenue and Highway 180.

1. **RECOMMEND ADOPTION** (to the City Council) of a finding that there is no possibility that acceptance of the Southern Blackstone Avenue Smart Mobility Strategy will have a significant effect on the environment and is exempt from CEQA pursuant to CEQA Guidelines Section

15061(b)(3).

2. RECOMMEND ACCEPTANCE (to the City Council) of the Southern Blackstone Avenue Smart Mobility Strategy.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The principal purpose of the Strategy is to develop a framework for street improvements along Blackstone Avenue. The project area is located between Dakota Avenue and Highway 180. The Strategy provides recommendations for feasible design concepts that improve the effective range of service for all roadway users. The feasible design concepts will also be supportive of transit- and pedestrian-oriented, mixed-use development as envisioned for the Blackstone Avenue corridor within the General Plan. This Strategy will be helpful to the City of Fresno (City) for grant applications to fund future roadway improvements along the corridor and will be an available resource for future planning applications and approvals.

BACKGROUND

The General Plan calls for the revitalization of the Blackstone Avenue Corridor. In order to promote and encourage revitalization, the City changed zoning along the Blackstone Avenue Corridor from auto-oriented commercial designations to mixed-use designations to accommodate future pedestrian - and transit-oriented development. The General Plan also provides the vision for Complete Streets Framework whereby future transportation infrastructure would serve the needs of transit riders, pedestrians, bicyclists, and motorists. The City applied for grant funding to study and develop feasible recommendations to implement the Complete Streets vision within the General Plan. In 2016, the City received notice it was the recipient of the Sustainable Transportation Planning Grant award totaling \$279,635 through the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans). The grant required a local match of 11.47% which totaled \$36,230 for a total project cost of \$315,865. The goal of the Sustainable Transportation Planning Grant program is to identify and address mobility deficiencies. On August 18, 2016, the Fresno City Council unanimously passed Resolution No. 2016 - 150 that authorized the City Manager or Designee to execute a grant agreement with Caltrans for the City's Strategy project. The agreement between the City and Caltrans was executed on April 24, 2017.

Since that time, staff conducted a competitive process to select a qualified consultant firm to assess the existing conditions of the project area, participate in the community outreach and engagement process, develop and evaluate design alternatives, and produce a final document. Upon staff's recommendation, on March 22, 2018, City Council awarded the consultant contract to Community Design + Architecture, Inc. (CD+A) as the consultant team for the project. A notice to proceed was issued in April 2018 followed by a kick-off meeting with the consultant team and project partners in May 2018. The development of the Strategy and complete streets vision has occurred through intensive and extensive community outreach.

Project Partners and Consultant Team:

Fresno Metro Ministry (Metro), Local Government Commission (LGC), CD+A, and Caltrans formed a project partnership with the City by providing leadership for community outreach, engagement, coordination and facilitation of design workshops, and assistance with project coordination and strategy development.

The Development and Resource Management Department (DARM) served as the project lead on the

grant application. The City has provided staffing and logistical support to meet the 11.47 percent in-kind local match. Staff has coordinated with Caltrans, LGC, and Metro, participated in community workshops, attended community engagement meetings, provided data and policy documents, reviewed consultant products and directed revisions, and ensured compliance with the Restricted Grant Agreement (RGA).

LGC and Metro have been responsible for all community outreach and engagement. Metro is a 45-year old Fresno based community-benefit organization, and functions as the staff and support agency for the Better Blackstone Association. LGC is a 35-year old highly regarded Sacramento-based non-profit with extensive experience in coordinating and facilitating public participatory planning processes, land use and transportation planning, and design. Both Metro and LGC have multi-cultural and multi-lingual staff and long-term experience with effectively engaging disadvantaged and environmental justice community members in the planning processes.

CD+A is an Oakland-based urban design, planning, architecture, and landscape architecture firm with a focus on context-sensitive design of multi-modal streets and transit facilities, integrated transit facilities, transportation/land use integration, and mixed-use and pedestrian-friendly community design. CD+A has analyzed and documented the existing conditions of the project area along the Blackstone corridor. The firm has also participated in community design meetings and workshops, and developed design concepts based on input from the community and overseeing agencies. CD+A has also prepared the Strategy document.

Outreach

Project partners, led by Metro, produced a Community Outreach Plan (COP) that aimed to maximize stakeholder participation and community engagement in the visioning and strategy development process. The COP looked at methods to reach and engage three essential groups, which include General Plan stakeholders, agencies and decision-makers. Over the course of the project, 15 neighborhoods were canvassed, 8,300 flyers were distributed for community meetings, workshops, and input sessions, 1,700 commercial and residential doors were knocked on, 1,200 calls were made, and 751 one-on-one meetings were held with project team members and members of the community. The City, Metro, LGC, and CD+A convened a Community Engagement Advisory Group (CEAG) of approximately thirty (30) participants within the project area to help guide the engagement process throughout the project. Participants of the CEAG included environmental justice groups, neighborhood leaders and associations, community members, clergy, business owners, and institutional representatives. The CEAG met on a monthly basis to review bilingual presentation and materials that were prepared by City staff or CD+A for public distribution.

Metro assembled volunteer outreach teams that sent emails and made phone calls to individuals and businesses located within or adjacent to the project area. Volunteer teams, under Metro's leadership, completed door-to-door canvassing within and adjacent to the project area. Project partners with CD+A completed listening and learning sessions with members of the business community, Fresno Unified School District, the Fresno Housing Authority, Fresno City College, and leaders of neighborhood associations.

A multiday charrette was held on June 23, 2018 and June 26, 2018 at Fresno City College. Individuals that attended the June 23, 2018 workshop participated in a walk audit along the corridor, and were able to provide feedback on potential improvements that are needed along Blackstone Avenue. After the walk audit was completed, attendees returned to Fresno City College to report out

improvements they desired to see along the Corridor. Attendees learned about the concept of Complete Streets, and current best practices to improve busy corridors such as Blackstone Avenue through a presentation provided by CD+A. After the presentation, attendees were able to weigh in on what improvements they wanted to see on Blackstone Avenue and Abby Street and what they were willing to give up to make room for the improvements they are supportive of. Participants overwhelmingly voting giving up parking and one travel lane in each direction in order to have a safe area for riding bicycles, wider sidewalks, and more shade trees.

Individuals that attended the June 26, 2018 workshop were provided a recap of the workshop that occurred on June 23, 2018, as most were not present at the June 23rd workshop. Attendees were also able to weigh in on what improvements they wanted to see on Blackstone Avenue and Abby Street and what they were willing to give up to make room for those improvements. Again, participants overwhelmingly voted to give up parking and one travel land in each direction in order to have a safe area for riding bicycles as well as wider sidewalks and more shade trees. Both days of the charrette attendees indicated a preference for more frequent and safer crosswalks and a better connection to existing neighborhoods.

The 3rd community meeting was held on August 23, 2018 at Ted C. Wills Community Center. Individuals that attended the meeting were provided with a summary of the input received from the multi-day charrette followed by a presentation of near-term and long-term improvements throughout each segment of the corridor. Improvements presented to attendees included conceptual drawings exhibiting more frequent and comfortable crosswalks, additional shade street trees, the reduction of a northbound and southbound travel lane to accommodate future installation of an expanded sidewalk and cycle track.

In addition, the project team held an Open House on November 8, 2018 at Ted C. Wills so that the public could receive another opportunity to review and comment on near-term and long-term conceptual plans before the Strategy was drafted. After the Strategy was drafted, an electronic copy was posted on the project website at: www.fresno.gov/blackstone <http://www.fresno.gov/blackstone>, hardcopies were distributed to Fresno County libraries within the City, and notice of the comment period was issued in the Fresno Bee and on the City's social media platforms. Finally, the Strategy was reviewed by the Bicycle Pedestrian Advisory Committee (BPAC) and the Disability Advisory Commission (DAC).

ANALYSIS

The Southern Blackstone Avenue Smart Mobility Strategy is based on a community-driven process that led to the development of feasible design concepts. The following objectives of the Southern Blackstone Avenue Smart Mobility Strategy are:

1. Increase access and safety for all travel modes and all users
2. Identify and address deficiencies in the street design that impact business opportunities and performance within Activity Center areas and along the corridor
3. Identify multimodal access and safety improvements for pedestrians, bicyclists, and transit riders
4. Identify potential sidewalk and streetscape enhancements to support pedestrian comfort, access to transit, and access to businesses and services
5. Identify potential treatments that support the management of traffic speeds within Activity Centers along the corridor between Dakota Avenue and Highway 180
6. Integrate on-street and off-street parking with recommended multimodal improvements

7. Identify opportunities for gateway improvements and directional signage
8. Recommend locally feasible implementation and funding strategies for recommended improvements.

Today, the overwhelming majority of the right-of-way is dedicated to moving automobiles and trucks. Currently, Blackstone Avenue lacks dedicated bicycle facilities and space for pedestrians traveling along the corridor and access to transit stops is limited to narrow sidewalks that are often further narrowed by obstructions such as utility and signal poles, fire hydrants, and fences and other items encroaching into the public right-of-way from adjacent private properties. The overwhelming majority of outreach participants supported the notion of redistributing space currently assigned to the use of automobiles to be used by pedestrians, bicyclists, and transit riders. The Strategy provides the City with several concepts that can be used to achieve the complete streets vision supported by community members, and can be incorporated into the design of future projects and planning proposals. Options described in the strategy include the following:

- Reducing a south- and northbound travel lane at certain segments within the project area.
- Encouraging the City to study lowering of the posted speed limit of 40 miles per hour to 30.
- Encouraging the City to increase frequency of safe crossings to reduce the distance between safe crosswalk locations initially from one quarter of one eighth of a mile, with additional crosswalks later being added in between these locations where this is supported by future development that increases the presence of pedestrians and bicyclists.
- Increasing pedestrian and bicycle-friendly intersection improvements along the project area to include high visibility striping of crosswalks at signalized and unsignalized intersections, bulb-outs, median refuges, and directional curb ramps.
- Enhancing the streetscape to include additional tree planting, pedestrian-scale lighting, pedestrian and bicycle wayfinding signage, and providing for additional bicycle parking near existing or planned retail or civic uses.
- Segment-Specific Recommendation: North of Shields (Dakota Avenue to Shields) - The envisioned long-term improvements include the introduction of a two-way separated bikeway on the west side of the street, reconfigured or widened sidewalks, a widened landscape median, and potential future implementation of a traffic signal or pedestrian hybrid beacon (HAWK) at Garland Avenue. Space for these improvements can be gained by reducing the number of travel lanes in each direction from three to two and by removing the parking lane on the west side of the street. If it is determined during future planning and design phases that two one-way separated bikeways located on each side of the street are preferable over the recommended two-way approach, such a configuration can also be accommodated within the existing right-of-way.
- Segment-Specific Recommendation: Shields Avenue to Hedges Avenue - The envisioned long-term improvements include the introduction of separated bikeways on either side of the street, widened sidewalks, and widened landscape medians in locations where dedicated left-turns are eliminated or shortened. Space for these improvements can be gained by reducing a southbound and northbound travel lane and by removing the parking lane on the west side of the street. In addition, the cross section includes 6-foot wide sidewalk easements on either side of the street as required by the Development Code for new development along the corridor.
- Segment - Specific Recommendation: Hedges Avenue to Highway 180 - The envisioned long-term improvements include the introduction of a separated bikeway, pedestrian-scale lighting, on-street parking on both sides, and widened sidewalks. Space for these improvements can be gained by reducing a southbound and northbound travel lane and by narrowing the existing

wide lanes to 10' and 11' respectively.

- Pilot Project: The Strategy is sensitive to the community's desire to see improvements to the corridor in the near term; based on that notion the implementation component of the strategy provides a path for the City to pilot test a low cost version of the envisioned long-term improvements. The recommended segment to initially test near-term improvements is between Shields Avenue (anchored by Manchester Center) and McKinley Avenue (anchored by Fresno City College). The Strategy provides potential costs as well as identifies potential funding opportunities to implement near- and long-term improvements along the Corridor, specifically within the project area. The Strategy provides a detailed matrix of likely funding sources for which Blackstone Avenue improvements would be highly competitive or are clearly eligible.

ENVIRONMENTAL FINDINGS

Staff has conducted a preliminary review of the project and has determined that it is exempt from CEQA pursuant to California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) Guidelines Section 15061(b)(3) under the common sense exemption that CEQA applies only to projects which have the potential for causing a significant effect on the environment. Because the proposed action is for Council to accept the Strategy document for the purposes of providing a resource for future land use planning and approvals and does not commit the City to any one particular option set forth in the document, it can be seen with certainty that there is no possibility that accepting the Strategy document may have a significant effect on the environment. Therefore, this action is exempt from CEQA pursuant to CEQA Guidelines Section 15061(b)(3).

Attachment:

Exhibit A: Southern Blackstone Avenue Smart Mobility Strategy Final Report