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## Downtown Congestion Study Starts This Fall

By Cathy Tyson



Traffic on Mt. Diablo Boulevard Photo Cathy Tyson

A steering committee of civic leaders and volunteers recently met with senior transportation engineers from Arup, a global consultant group that specialize in infrastructure design, economics and planning, to mold an upcoming study project to investigate ways to reduce traffic congestion and accommodate future growth, while improving safety and maintaining Lafayette's small town character.

"We understand congestion is a major concern and in many ways is getting worse," said Senior Transportation Engineer Michael Iswalt with Arup. He explained that Arup will use new data sources to identify not just the number of cars on the roads, but travel patterns within the city, which will reveal much richer information, allowing the consultants to tailor solutions.

Funding for the study came from Measure J funds, via a planning grant administered by the

Contra Costa Transit Authority. Measure J is a voter-approved tax measure to continue the county's half-cent transportation sales tax, which can only be used on transportation programs and projects.

After the adoption of the Lafayette Downtown Specific Plan back in 2012, the city council "wanted to take yet another look at downtown congestion and what can be done about it," said Tony Coe, city engineer. "Similar studies have been undertaken in the past, stretching back some three decades. This particular one will look at a broader spectrum of solutions, including new technologies and traffic management methods."

Most importantly, given the current downtown congestion, the study may also for the first time seriously discuss options involving large-scale capital improvements such as a bypass corridor for regional through traffic to circumvent the downtown, said Coe.

Quantitative criteria will be used to evaluate strategies, ultimately coming up with solution options to address clogged roads that can be compared against each other and be evaluated for effectiveness.

The Circulation Commission is, as the name suggests, all about vehicular movement, parking, sidewalks and bikeways. It came to the conclusion while considering this study that "continual worsening of downtown traffic congestion compromises the mobility, health, safety and quality of life for Lafayette residents." One of the commissioners would like to expand on that, stating it is the entire city of Lafayette, pretty much, that suffers from continual worsening of traffic congestion - heavy and prolonged traffic on Reliez Station Road, Pleasant Hill Road, Happy Valley Road, Reliez Valley Road and Springhill, plus the freeway cutting through Lafayette.

Back in 2014, council member, now mayor Brandt Andersson called the congestion study "a game changer - to narrow down traffic solutions to some big ideas."

Steering committee members recently opted for the public outreach strategy to include two surveys: the first dealing with priorities and issues - to be completed this fall after a kickoff meeting by the city council - and a second survey toward the end of the process to consider ideas and final plans. In addition, the consultants propose two to three joint city council-circulation committee meetings, two to three focused stakeholder outreach events and, of course, more steering committee meetings.

Consultants are wisely gearing the public outreach strategy to include making effective use of

technology and social media to garner a robust response from a wide spectrum of participants.

The final step of the congestion study is to look at preferred solutions and implementation strategies that focus on four goal areas: downtown, BART, Highway 24, and schools. The multi-million dollar question is how to pay for actual execution of congestion relief strategies.

Lafayette residents might actually see their tax dollars at work. The Contra Costa Transit Authority is taking up a potential new sales tax measure on the 2016 ballot, according to Coe. "If voters approve such a measure, there could be some funding allocated back to Lafayette to fund, at least in part, projects that result from this congestion study."

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