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Published April 6th, 2016

Committee Looks to Unsnarl Lafayette's Traffic Congestion

By Cathy Tyson

As Lafayette's comprehensive study on downtown traffic congestion continues, the all-volunteer steering committee wrestled with how to turn the very long list of suggestions into a short list, focusing on the key question: What are some of the best ways to solve downtown traffic congestion?

Does the city need more bike friendly roadways, or a direct connection to the freeway? Those were two of 50 concepts study engineers came up with after analyzing multiple complex data sources, community outreach, surveys and past studies. The Arup Group, the consultants on the project, has used state-of-the-art technology, included GPS traffic information, to investigate costs and benefits of an array of strategies that could ease congestion. By using big data that clearly identifies traffic patterns, the consultants can custom-tailor solutions for specific problems.

At this point in the year-long, grant-funded study, the focus is to weigh the broad inventory of ideas, and indicate which of those ideas merit priority for further evaluation, according to city Transportation Planner James Hinkamp. As the Downtown Congestion Reduction Steering Committee, which has been providing input and guidance throughout the study process, painstakingly went through each and every concept at a March 22 meeting, it was apparent that some concepts were better than others.

The 50 potential projects were divided into four color-coded categories: green, yellow and red - that corresponded with the costs and benefits - along with blue for "require further consideration and input from steering committee." Items in the green range garnered the most bang for the buck, while concepts in the red category had high costs or uncertain benefits. The blue category contained concepts like a free downtown shuttle and consolidating or relocating Lafayette Elementary School and Stanley Middle School. Both ideas were non-starters with the committee. Arup will analyze the most highly recommended solution ideas that are on the committee's short list, from the original universe of possible options, including "moonshots" like having a direct connection to Highway 24 through what is now McCaulou's. Going forward, three options will be selected that meet the project goals of addressing current and future traffic conditions.

Surprisingly, initial work done by the consultant found 63 percent of the traffic heading northbound on Moraga Road is going to Highway 24, which generates tremendous pressure at the Y - cars turning right and left at the intersection of Mt. Diablo and Moraga Road as they make their way to the freeway.

Bike East Bay Advocacy Director Dave Campbell attended the meeting to lobby for bicyclists; he complimented the process so far, calling it "wonderful" and noted the many good projects. When asked about actual bike ridership, he replied "a lot more people would ride a bike if it were safe to do so."

Campbell would like to see more separated dedicated bike lanes as a means to encourage ridership and get people out of cars. "I think what Lafayette is doing is a real example to other cities trying to figure out how to move more people without endlessly widening streets."

Shopping center owner Joan Bruzzone was also in attendance and made it clear she was not in favor of extending Moraga Road to connect with the freeway, and hinted at legal repercussions. Strategies that were left on the short list for now include "road diets" for Oak Hill and First Street to create "complete streets" that reduce the number of travel lanes and provide a two-way cycle track and wider sidewalks that make for a better connection with BART to enhance the bike-pedestrian experience.

"Changing the way kids get to school would help a lot," said City Engineer Tony Coe of the additional school loading zones strategy at Stanley Middle School and Lafayette Elementary School, so that concept is also on the short list.

Concepts that didn't make the cut include a BART garage. Don Tatzin commented that because the transit agency owns the land, the probability that BART would agree for Lafayette merchants'

employees to park there is "zero." Also not making the short list: a traffic management center and a roundabout at the intersection of Mt. Diablo and Moraga Road. The shorter list will go to Arup for further refinement, where they will look for the best value and to see how the narrowed-down projects match up to over-arching congestion and parking problems that the study is geared to address. Another round of outreach to residents is expected this summer.

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