

Capitola Planning Commission

Agenda Report



Meeting: September 1, 2022

From: Community Development Department

Address: State Route 1 Auxiliary Lane Improvements

Permit Number: #22-0223

APN: N/A

Coastal Development Permit and Tree Removal Permit for auxiliary lanes, bus on shoulder improvements, replacement of the Capitola Avenue Overcrossing, new landscaping, and soundwalls. The project is located within the Coastal Overlay zone and partially within a Planned Development zoning district.

The project is located within the Coastal Zone and requires a Coastal Development Permit which is appealable to California Coastal Commission after all possible appeals are exhausted through the City.

Environmental Determination: FEIR CA Dept. of Transportation, May 2021

Property Owner(s): State of California and Capitola Knolls HOA

Representative: Sarah Christensen, RTC

Project Overview

The Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission (RTC), in a joint effort with Caltrans District 5 and the County of Santa Cruz, has developed a Highway 1 Auxiliary Lanes and Bus-on-Shoulder project between Bay Avenue/Porter Street and State Park Drive. The project also includes improving the outside shoulders, constructing a new pedestrian and bicycle overcrossing at Mar Vista Drive, adding retaining walls near the Bay Avenue/Porter Street interchange, rebuilding and widening the Capitola Avenue overcrossing to accommodate standard sidewalk widths and bike lanes, replacing the outside barrier at the Park Avenue undercrossing, installing major landscaping improvements and installing soundwalls.

The project requires Planning Commission approval of a Coastal Development Permit and Tree Removal Permit for portions of the project that intersect with the Coastal Zone and the ESHA boundary. The city's authority is limited in scope to ensure consistency with the Coastal Act through the Local Coastal Program (LCP) and issuance of the Coastal Development Permit (CDP), and not to evaluate project necessity or merits outside of this role. As such, tree removal and auxiliary lane review for consistency with the LCP are appropriate while aesthetic review of signage and soundwalls is not. The city is not the lead agency for the environmental review but can require conditions and mitigation to ensure compliance with the LCP, which may be in addition to mitigation currently identified in the Final Environmental Impact Report, 2021.

Background

On May 10, 2021, the Final Environmental Impact Report (FEIR) was completed by the California Department of Transportation.

RTC informally presented the project to the City Council in February 2022 requesting design feedback on walls, landscaping, and aesthetics.

The project is currently in the permitting phase and construction is tentatively scheduled to start in 2023 with a two-year duration.

Discussion

The project area encompasses a total length of about three miles with 1.7 miles being within the Capitola boundary of which approximately one mile is within the City’s Coastal Zone. The property is owned by the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) and the area within the Coastal Zone is subject to a Coastal Development Permit (CDP).

Most of the project is proposed to be executed in the existing Caltrans right of way however, minor land acquisitions or legal agreements will be necessary for the proposed locations of sound walls that are within the city limits and not currently within the Caltrans right of way. Specifically, the RTC is in negotiations with the Capitola Knolls Homeowner’s Association to either acquire portions of HOA property adjacent to State Route 1 or record legal agreements to install soundwalls which extend into the Knolls property. The city may be involved in the future if the agreement involves minor land divisions, lot line adjustments, or zoning boundary changes. A condition of approval is included to ensure soundwalls are not constructed beyond the Caltrans property without documentation of a recorded legal agreement or a boundary adjustment.

Tree Removal and Landscaping

This project design team has prioritized tree impact minimization and maintaining the aesthetic of the highway for both cost and environmental reasons. The large project area nonetheless results in many trees proposed for removal. The following table describes the 224 trees to be removed within the Coastal Zone.

Tree Removal in the City of Capitola Coastal Zone	
	Total
Coast Live Oak <20"	112
Coast Live Oak >20"	14
Native Non-Oak <20"	50
Native Non-Oak >20"	4
Non-Native <20"	44
Non-Native >20"	0
Total Tree Removals	224

In preparation of the EIR, the project applicant considered project alternatives and chose to utilize the existing wide median rather than widening towards the outside of the highway. This option reduces impacts to the existing vegetation along the highway. In the design phase, the applicant further developed cost saving and impact reducing measures that includes a reduced shoulder in areas along the corridor to avoid impacts to riparian areas and further limit tree impacts. Within city limits, this approach was incorporated in the design at the overcrossing of the Nobel Gulch Riparian Area which is part of the City’s Environmentally Sensitive Habit Area (ESHA). Within the riparian area, seven non-native trees located in the narrow landscape area between Kennedy

Drive and Highway 1 are proposed for removal. (Attachment 4. Tree Removal Plan. Page SD-10)

Proposed mitigation planting includes a select list of mostly native and drought tolerant trees that will result in a tree replacement at just over a 1:1 ratio. Capitola's Tree Ordinance requires replacement trees at a two to one ratio unless post-removal tree canopy coverage on the site will be thirty percent or more. Staff estimates that existing canopy coverage is 31.3% of the project area within the Coastal Zone. Canopy removed is estimated at 82,000 square feet and the replacement trees canopy is estimated at 114,000 square feet at maturity. Therefore, the post tree removal canopy coverage results in a net increase and continue to exceed the 30 percent requirement at maturity. Together with the proposed shrubs, groundcover, and vines, the proposed landscape plan provides layers of compatible landscaping that will improve the overall aesthetic at maturity and exceed the City's canopy coverage goal.

Proposed Plantings in the City of Capitola Coastal Zone	
	Total
Trees	
Deodar Cedar (tree)	8
Western Rosebud (tree)	97
Monterey Cypress (tree)	27
Pacific Wax Myrtle (tree)	49
Coast Live Oak (tree)	53
Tree Total	234
Shrubs	
Bearberry Cotoneaster (shrub)	293
Bush Anemone (shrub)	30
California Lilac (shrub)	31
Coffeeberry (shrub)	96
Indian Hawthron (shrub)	48
Shrubs Total	498
Groundcover & Vines	
Blood Red Trumpet Vine (vine)	69
Creeping Fig (vine)	70
Lilac Vine (vine)	32

Dwarf Coyote Bush (ground cover)	101
Kinnikinnick (ground cover)	204
Groundcover & Vines Total	476
All Plantings Total	1,208

Sound Walls

Six sections of soundwalls are proposed within Capitola city limits to mitigate freeway noise from sensitive receptor sites. The FEIR includes a baseline ambient noise study and prepared detailed noise reduction models to achieve maximum sound attenuation, minimize direct line of sight from the height of truck exhaust stacks, with the lowest wall height. Wall heights within the Capitola portion of the project range from eight to 14 feet tall. The walls extend through sections of wooded and steep terrain. The approach was again to minimize tree loss and impact where possible. The wall will be built with pier foundations to minimize impacts to roots of trees not intended for removal.

The proposed soundwalls do not obstruct access or visibility to the coast. The project FEIR analyzed views and visual impacts in detail. Additionally, the Coastal Commission specifically commented on this topic during the EIR comment period with a focus on the visibility of the soundwalls. In response to those comments, the project design team conducted additional public outreach for feedback on the visual elements of the project. The outreach included mailers, surveys, and meetings to solicit further feedback on retaining/soundwall aesthetics and proposed planting species along with bridge aesthetics, bridge barrier aesthetics, median concrete barrier staining, and Midwest guardrail staining.

Temporary Impacts

Temporary impacts will involve traffic control and detours. The greatest impact within Capitola will be at the Capitola Avenue overcrossing. The Public Works Department has worked continuously with the project design team through the design evolution of the project and will continue to be involved during construction and implementation. A detour route and traffic control plans will be established through the duration of this project phase.

ESHA

The project area intersects the Environmentally Sensitive Habitat Area (ESHA) at Nobel Creek. There is a soundwall proposed in this location at the upstream face of the Nobel Creek cross-drainage culverts on the north side of State Route 1 bordering Soquel. All associated embankment fill would be above an elevation of 85 feet North American Vertical Datum 88 per the current roadway design. Therefore, the soundwalls would be outside of the base floodplain and are not expected to cause any impacts on the Nobel Creek floodway. On both sides of the highway, the shoulder paving will not exceed the current footprint in this area.

Local Coastal Program

The FEIR prepared an itemized analysis of consistency and compliance with the Capitola LCP. Excerpted pages are included in Attachment 6. The proposed project ultimately improves traffic congestion and access to coastal resources and Capitola Village. The project also improves bus,

bike, and pedestrian infrastructure. The project design adjusts where it intersects with the Nobel Gulch Riparian area by keeping soundwalls above the floodplain and narrowing the shoulder to avoid any new paving footprint. There are no direct visual impacts to the shoreline or coastline from the project within city limits. Visual impacts are primarily related to vegetation removal/replanting and installation of soundwalls. The applicant has performed extensive community and stakeholder outreach and evaluated impacts, alternatives, and tradeoffs thoroughly. In conclusion, the project complies with all the required findings for a Coastal Development Permit as outlined in the findings section below.

CEQA

The California Department of Transportation (Department), as assigned by the Federal Highway Administration, has prepared a Final Environmental Impact Report/Environmental Assessment for the proposed project located in Santa Cruz County, California. The Department is the lead agency under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). The FEIR is viewable at link:

<https://scrtc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/FinalEIREA-StateRoute1BayPorter-StPark-AuxiliaryLanes.pdf>

Recommendation: Staff recommends the Planning Commission consider application #22-0223 and approve the project with the following Conditions and Findings for Approval.

Conditions of Approval

1. The project approval consists of a Coastal Development Permit and Tree Removal Permit to develop Highway 1 Auxiliary Lanes and Bus-on-Shoulder project between Bay Avenue/Porter Street and State Park Drive for the area of Highway 1 located within the Coastal Zone. The project also includes improving the outside shoulders, constructing a new pedestrian and bicycle overcrossing at Mar Vista Drive, adding retaining walls near the Bay Avenue/Porter Street interchange, rebuilding and widening the Capitola Avenue overcrossing to accommodate standard sidewalk widths and bike lanes, replacing the outside barrier at the Park Avenue undercrossing, installing major landscaping improvements and installing soundwalls. The proposed project is approved as indicated on the final plans reviewed and approved by the Planning Commission on September 1, 2022, except as modified through conditions imposed by the Planning Commission during the hearing.
2. The Final EIR adopted avoidance, minimization, and/or mitigation measures shall be followed for the project.
3. The RTC shall execute legal agreements and/or complete any necessary lot line/boundary adjustments, prior to any work in the area outside of the existing Caltrans right of way. The RTC and Capitola Knolls HOA shall work with the city, as needed, to complete any necessary lot line adjustments or alterations to land boundaries.

Coastal Findings

1. **The project is consistent with the LCP land use plan, and the LCP implementation program.** The proposed project conforms to the City's certified Local Coastal Plan (LCP) land use plan and the LCP implementation program. The applicant has prepared an exhaustive analysis of the LCP, engaged with city staff, Coastal Commission staff, stakeholders, and the community.

2. **The project maintains or enhances public views.** The proposed project will impact views along the highway. The applicant has evaluated the need for soundwalls and performed a performance benefit and efficiency analysis to minimize wall height to the extent possible. The walls will be constructed of a stacked and staggered (mixed) block wall and planted with creeping vines. Vegetation removed is replaced with a select and primarily native plant list. Views will change but there are no views to the coast, shoreline or major landmark that will be impacted.
3. **The project maintains or enhances vegetation, natural habitats and natural resources.** The proposed project will remove 108 non-native trees and replant with only native and drought tolerant specimens. The project also adjusts to minimize impacts to the Nobel Gulch Riparian area. Vegetation will be disrupted in the short term and enhanced after project completion.
4. **The project maintains or enhances low-cost public recreational access, including to the beach and ocean.** The project purpose is to improve access and ease traffic. Access to public recreational resources will benefit from the project for all transportation modes.
5. **The project maintains or enhances opportunities for visitors.** The project will maintain opportunities for visitors while improving access.
6. **The project maintains or enhances coastal resources.** The project maintains coastal resources while improving access.
7. **The project, including its design, location, size, and operating characteristics, is consistent with all applicable design plans and/or area plans incorporated into the LCP.** The project is consistent with local policy documents and the LCP. The applicant has communicated formally and informally with the city, stakeholders, and the community in preparation of the project design.
8. **The project is consistent with the LCP goal of encouraging appropriate coastal development and land uses, including coastal priority development and land uses (i.e., visitor serving development and public access and recreation).** The project will improve public and visitor access to coastal resources and recreation.

Attachments

**Note: All project plans and exhibits are oriented with South at the top of the page.*

1. Project Overview Slideshow
2. Soundwall Detail
3. Land Acquisition Plan
4. Tree Removal Plans
5. Capitola ESHA Map
6. FEIR Excerpt – LCP Analysis
7. Landscape Plans