

Capitola City Council

Agenda Report



Meeting: November 21, 2024

From: Public Works Department

Subject: Bay Avenue and Hill Street Traffic Safety Update

Recommended Action: Receive an update on the Bay Avenue and Hill Street Intersection Quick Build Project and provide direction as needed.

Background: The Bay Avenue and Hill Street intersection has been a long-standing concern in the community. During hearings in 2004 to consider renovations at the Nob Hill commercial center there included significant discussion about how best to address the Bay/Hill intersection.

More recently to address these issues, the City commissioned traffic engineers from Kimley Horn to conduct a comprehensive Intersection Operations Analysis in 2022. The findings were reviewed by the City Council during multiple meetings in late 2023 and early 2024, including evaluations by a City Council subcommittee.

In addition to technical studies, staff held meetings with relevant property owners and organized a community meeting at the Bay Avenue Senior Center in early 2024. Staff also maintained active communication with the Capitola representative on the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission's Elderly and Disabled Transportation Advisory Committee.

The result of that process was the City implemented the Quick Build Project, a traffic safety improvement in late July/early August 2024.

The Quick Build Project included lane reductions, enhanced crosswalk markings, and temporary bulb-outs to improve pedestrian safety and manage traffic flow. Since implementation, several factors have affected traffic patterns, including the closure of the Park Avenue on-ramp to southbound Highway 1 in late September 2024 (scheduled to reopen in late November 2024) and the Capitola Avenue Bridge closure in March 2024 (expected to reopen in summer/fall 2025). These closures have altered driver routes at the Bay Avenue and Hill Street intersection, impacting both vehicular and pedestrian activity.

Discussion:

Community Feedback

Staff has received substantial community input regarding the new traffic configuration at the intersection. Key areas of feedback include:

- **Traffic Congestion Concerns:** Numerous residents have expressed frustration over increased congestion, particularly during peak hours. The reduction to one lane in each direction has been cited as a source of delays and confusion.
- **Safety Perceptions:** While the project aims to enhance safety, some community members report feeling that the changes may be insufficient or, in some cases, introduce new safety challenges, especially for cyclists and drivers adapting to the layout.
- **Adjustment Challenges:** The timing of the project, coinciding with freeway construction, Capitola Avenue Bridge closure, and the school year's start, has contributed to reported difficulties in adjusting to the new traffic patterns.

Based on feedback, staff has made a number of adjustments to the initial Quick Build Project. Those changes include:

- **Minor Adjustments to configuration:** While keeping the configuration the same, small adjustments were made, including adding bike stenciling and additional dashed lines to indicate that the right lane is ending/turn only.
- **White standard cross hatched striping** through spaces currently delineated with solid blue paint, to better define that area. (scheduled for December)

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection for the corridor study was paused when the highway on-ramp was closed. Data have been collected during this adjustment period, amid ongoing construction and closures, to help evaluate traffic flow and safety at the intersection. Staff engaged Kimley Horn to conduct traffic counts and assess safety at the intersection. Key findings are summarized below:

- **Traffic Count Data:**
 - Bike/Pedestrian Usage: There has been an observed increase in bike and pedestrian activity at the intersection. This uptick is likely due to a perceived increase in safety and changes in travel patterns caused by the ongoing closure of the Capitola Avenue Bridge.
 - Vehicle Traffic: Minimal increases in vehicle traffic were recorded, with a slight rise during the AM peak hours. Midday and PM traffic counts showed little to no change.
- **Queue Lengths:**
 - Queue lengths are consistent with predictions from the analysis conducted in 2022.
- **Level of Service (LOS):**
 - The Level of Service (LOS) has declined compared to the previous 4-lane configuration, as expected. The main factor contributing to the reduced LOS is decreased northbound and southbound throughput capacity along Bay Avenue due to the temporary 2-lane configuration.
 - The increase in bike and pedestrian traffic has had a partial impact on vehicle operations, reflecting a trade-off between vehicle delay and improved bike/pedestrian safety and visibility.
 - Some driver confusion has been observed, which is typical following new construction projects. This confusion is expected to decrease over time as drivers adjust to the new layout.
- **Accident and Near-Miss Analysis:**
 - An accident and near-miss analysis was conducted to evaluate the safety performance of the intersection post-implementation. This analysis involves reviewing reported collisions and observing near-miss incidents, which are instances where a collision was narrowly avoided. This approach helps to identify potential safety concerns not fully captured in accident reports.
 - The collected data is currently being analyzed, and the findings will be shared during upcoming meetings to provide a more comprehensive evaluation of the intersection's safety.

The original intention of the Quick Build Project was to collect and evaluate data over 18-24 months, with findings integrated into the upcoming corridor study. Additional data will be collected for corridor study purposes after the Park Avenue ramp reopens to provide a clearer picture of regular traffic patterns. This ongoing evaluation will help inform future discussions on the effectiveness of the temporary measures and guide the long-term corridor study, which is scheduled for City Council review in early 2025.

Fiscal Impact: The project utilized the \$50,000 allocated in the Fiscal Year 2024-25 budget for short-term improvements. Additional funding requirements will be addressed following the quick-build project evaluation and corridor study outcomes.

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