



**PLANNING COMMISSION  
STAFF REPORT  
MAY 27, 2025**

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**Prepared by:** Amy Wolfson, City Planner

**DATA SUMMARY**

**File No.** 25PLN-19  
**Subject:** City-sponsored mural project at the Hwy 49 Underpass  
**Location/APN:** South Auburn St /Neal St /SR 49 intersection  
**Applicant:** City of Grass Valley  
**Owner:** Caltrans  
**Zoning/General Plan:** NA  
**Entitlement:** Mural Sign Permit  
**Environmental Status:** Class 1 Exemption

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**RECOMMENDATION:**

That the Planning Commission approve the mural, as presented, or as modified by the Planning Commission, which includes the following actions:

1. Determine the project Categorically Exempt pursuant to Section 15301, Class 1, of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) and Guidelines, as detailed in the staff report.
2. Adopt Findings of Fact for approval of the Mural Sign Permit as presented in the Staff Report; and,
3. Approve the Mural Sign Permit in accordance with the Conditions of Approval as presented in the Staff Report.

**BACKGROUND:**

The downtown landscape in the location of the Highway 49 underpass, at the intersections of South Auburn and Neal Streets, is visually appealing from multiple directions; however, the industrial appearance of the overpass in that area isn't consistent with downtown's charm. Staff examined how this could be addressed and identified that the overpass and its abutments are an ideal location for a "Transportation Art" project. Police Department staff spearheaded the idea and solicited mural concepts for the overpass abutments from local artists. At their November 12, 2024 regular meeting, City Council reviewed the proposed artwork and directed staff to proceed with the process of a transportation art project application, and directed staff to put the renderings and application through the City's mural process, which it is required to do before being submitted to Caltrans.

## **PROJECT DESCRIPTION:**

This art project seeks to have murals painted on the overpass abutments and, in some areas, the underside of the Hwy 49 overpass. Each abutment would be painted by a different artist, each of whom is a local artist who resides and works in western Nevada County. Details of the proposed art can be found in the attached document, along with a bio of each artist. The proposed artwork is substantially consistent with the exhibits that were reviewed by council at their November meeting.

***Caltrans Regulatory framework:*** The Caltrans Art Program includes the following guidelines to ensure safety and function:

- Must celebrate community identity,
- Must be scaled appropriately, and allow safe maintenance per Caltrans rules.
- Cannot include text, mimic traffic devices or use reflective/glaring finishes.
- Cannot include moving elements, simulated motion, or symbols like flags and logos (beyond limited sponsor recognition)
- Cannot include designs impacting structures, drainage, or sightlines.
- Must be durable and low-maintenance,
- Must be fully funded by sponsors for their lifecycle.
- Painting on structures needs Division of Maintenance approval to avoid hiding cracks or stressing bridges.

***City regulatory framework:*** Mural regulations are outlined in the Sign Ordinance, in section 17.38.080 (F) of the City Municipal Code. Murals that illustrate the local setting, history, or cultural significance are encouraged. The review authority must find that the “colors, placement, and size of the mural are visually compatible with the structure's architecture, and that the mural will serve to enhance the aesthetics of the city”

***Development Review Committee:*** The Development Review Committee reviewed the project at their regular meeting on May 13, 2025, and recommended approval based on the findings outlined below.

## **SITE DESCRIPTION AND ENVIRONMENTAL SETTING:**

The Highway 49 underpass currently serves as a parking area. The parking use will not be impacted by the art program, except in a limited capacity during the installment.

## **GENERAL PLAN & ZONING:**

***General Plan:*** The General Plan includes a Community Design Element, within which discussion includes design issues in various subareas, including the entrance to historic downtown. Specifically, the General Plan notes that “the entrances to Downtown via South Auburn Street and Colfax Avenue are not at all compatible with the historic nature of the remainder of Downtown” and suggests this area should be included in a beautification effort. The Community Design Element includes a specific policy to “design and construct streetscape improvements along South Auburn Street and Colfax Avenue as they enter Downtown to enhance the area visually and to improve pedestrian access (5-CDP).”

Zoning: Caltrans rights-of-way are not overlaid by a City zoning designation.

**ENVIRONMENTAL DETERMINATION:**

The proposed project qualifies for a Categorical Exemption pursuant to Section 15301, Class 1, of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) and Guidelines. A Class 1 Categorical Exemption consists of the operation, repair, maintenance, permitting, leasing, licensing, or minor alternation of existing public or private structures, facilities, mechanical equipment, or topographical features, involving negligible or no expansion of use beyond that existing at the time of the lead agency's determination. The proposed mural project will involve painting of the highway underpass abutments and therefore, will not result in an expansion of use.

**FINDINGS OF FACT:**

The following findings are required to be supported in the affirmative by the evidence presented in the record, including, but not limited to the staff report and supporting attachments.

1. The Development Review Committee reviewed the project in compliance with the California Environmental Quality Act and concluded that the project qualifies for a Class 1, Categorical Exemption in accordance with the California Environmental Quality Act and CEQA Guidelines.
2. Development Review Application (25PLN-19), as may be conditioned, complies with the Grass Valley General Plan, and Community Design Guidelines, as applicable.
3. That the colors, placement, and size of the murals are visually compatible with the structure's architecture and enhances the aesthetics of the city.

**CONDITIONS OF APPROVAL:**

1. The City shall follow the California Department of Transportation Art process, who may make adjustments to the proposed renderings to meet standards set by the Division of Maintenance.
2. The artist shall apply a protectant to the mural to reduce fading/wear and for graffiti abatement. The brand/type of the protectant shall be to the satisfaction of the Police Department and Public Works Director.
3. The City shall obtain all appropriate permits, including an encroachment permit as necessary, from the California Department of Transportation for work conducted in the public right-of-way.

**ATTACHMENTS:**

**Attachment 1 – Transportation Art Proposal**