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Narrowing Options for Traffic Study

By Cathy Tyson

While everyone agrees that traffic is bad in Lafayette and studying traffic congestion issues to find solutions would be a good thing, especially if it was funded with outside grant money, there was some friction at the June 9 Lafayette City Council meeting about study particulars, specifically roundabouts. A few residents chimed in that their perception is so negative, why even include roundabouts as a potential option to solve traffic snarls?

Council members responded that all options should be on the table and that it would be premature to rule out anything at this point; the study is meant to consider and weigh all potential solutions. Getting a study started in the near future has certain strategic benefits - in 2016 there is likely to be a one-half cent sales tax that would fund transportation improvement projects. City leaders want to be in a prime position for Lafayette to have potential projects ready to be implemented. A decision was necessary on the scope of the project that the grant would fund; grant requests are due in the beginning of July, said Leah Greenblat, the city's transportation planner.

She explained the best opportunity for financial support is a Priority Development Area Planning Grant, which will be decided locally by the Contra Costa Transit Authority; grants range from \$70,000 to \$750,000. "There will be a small pool of competition - it's our best shot for funding," said Greenblat.

Council Member Brandt Andersson said the study is intended to be a game changer - narrow down traffic solutions to some big ideas that may or may not be worth investigating.

The volunteers who make up the Circulation Commission, all of whom live in Lafayette and are intimately familiar with local traffic, have over the past 11 months painstakingly developed a problem statement and a broad scope of work, to keep all options on the table. They carefully examined past studies, brainstormed new areas and honed the crux of the matter into one sentence: Continual worsening of downtown traffic congestion compromises the mobility, health, safety and quality of life of Lafayette residents.

While the Circulation Commission preferred an extensive list for a consultant to consider, racking up an impressive 32 items on their "Working List of Grouped Topics for Further Study," but the more items in the study, the longer it takes to complete and the higher the price.

City staff recommended a much shorter list with a total of five items. Even that list was narrowed by council members to now focus on three key concepts and to add one additional component - parking - which contributes to the traffic mess. First was to look at signals in the downtown area to become more efficient; next, examine a downtown bypass route to more efficiently connect traffic south of Highway 24 to the freeway; and finally, implement park-and-ride service to BART and downtown from satellite parking lots outside the congested core - or consider a park-and-walk model.

Additionally, there was consensus that, presuming the study receives funding, the consultant can propose his or her completely new, well-reasoned concepts based on a thorough understanding and analysis of downtown.

How much is this going to cost? An estimated price tag of around \$250,000 for the shorter focus list, and roughly double that for the more extensive options suggested by the Circulation Commission. All involved are hopeful funding is received; no funding - no study, or it may be deferred until funding becomes available.

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