To: XCAP Members

From: Chair Nadia Naik

Date: June 26, 2020

Re: Update of XCAP Timeline and Final Report

Since October, XCAP has been working aggressively reviewing traffic studies, noise and vibration, groundwater and creeks, emergency vehicle response time, bike and pedestrian routes, eminent domain, construction methodologies. It has also reviewed three new community generated alternatives developed in response to concerns with proposed designs. XCAP also eliminated from its consideration a tunnel for South Palo Alto. Fact sheets and renderings have now been developed for all of the alternatives reviewed to date.

COVID has significantly impacted the XCAP timeline, the committee and community engagement processes the city budget, and Caltrain itself. We must decide how to move ahead given these constraints.

Timeline and Context

The original XCAP deadline of May 1st was driven by three factors. First, after its electrification, Caltrain planned to move forward in the next few years with expanding the number of trains per hour, jeopardizing the function of our existing at-grade crossings. Second, the City Council was looking to have the grade separation progress align with a potential business tax ballot measure for November 2020. Given the economic crisis, the council has removed the business tax from current consideration. Lastly, the City was concerned that Measure B grade separation funds would be allocated on a first-come basis, jeopardizing the city’s share of those funds.

The extended timeline has also impacted XCAPers’ ability to fully participate. XCAP began in June 2019, but was only empowered by the council to control its own process and consider new alternatives in October 2019. We have recently had some attrition of XCAP members. Of the remaining members, 7 of the 10 were empaneled on the original Citizen Advisory Panel (CAP) which began in June of 2018 – meaning they’ve been working on the issue for 2 years. Their time dedication is notable and it is important to recognize the limitations of the commitment of members.

Caltrain

While Caltrain is facing significant immediate financial challenges from coronavirus, they remain committed to a long-term plan with greatly increased rail service. They are transitioning from an ad hoc approach to their corridor and grade separations to a more strategic program with adoption of specific policies and dedication of budget resources. In the near-term, this creates
tremendous uncertainty around the work Palo Alto is doing by itself as Caltrain is not yet able to provide answers to critical questions required to make alternative recommendations, such as the location of 4-track sections, encroachment, construction methods and key requirements like clearances and train gradients. There are clear risks to moving forward now, ahead of Caltrain’s decision-making process.

Caltrain’s new commitment to corridor-wide grade separations offers the potential for a partnership that could provide additional sources of funding and the approval of innovative construction methods that could save substantial time and money. Caltrain will be kicking off its Corridor-wide Grade Separation Analysis in the coming months to comprehensively address issues like standards and alternative construction methodologies. In the past, grade separations were seen as road transportation projects led by individual cities. They are now being viewed as a rail project, similar to the Alameda-Corridor East (https://www.theaceproject.org/) which include planning, funding and construction oversight which could have implications for the alternatives being considered by Palo Alto.

**Committee and Community Engagement**

The pandemic has also affected XCAP’s ability to meet face to face with experts, among each other, and to engage with the public. While technology has enabled virtual meetings, XCAPers have made it clear that lack of in person communication has made the process much more difficult. Also, the burden of participating in long online meetings while sheltering in place has taken a toll on the group.

The new alternatives include bike and pedestrian elements that have not had a chance to be vetted fully by stakeholders such as the City School Traffic Committee or PAUSD. These stakeholder groups are likely to have important technical feedback that could improve the alternatives before presenting them at the Town Halls.

While the City’s Town Halls are now planned as virtual and online, there is uncertainty about whether the new new format will be adequately accessible for much of the community, and whether addressing grade separations during a pandemic will be seen as tone deaf and not well received by the community at large. The goal of the committee has been to find a solution that works best for all of Palo Alto, but also to build support for recommendations. That is more difficult to do given the COVID circumstances.

**Budget**

XCAP has been tasked with making recommendations to the City Council for the preferred alternatives for Churchill, Meadow and Charleston. The newest alternatives require further design and renderings to fully explain to the public what is envisioned, but budget constraints related to the pandemic mean there isn’t currently funding to complete these designs.
In addition, XCAP members are concerned with the Town Halls being used to publicize alternatives that are overly conceptual and don’t provide enough information to adequately address the issues raised to date. Showing incomplete conceptual alternatives may serve to raise opposition and community dissent rather than help coalesce public support around alternatives.

**XCAP Options**

There are no alternatives that will easily all satisfy transportation and community goals. Even the new alternatives have multiple trade-offs that need to be carefully weighed.

Given the inefficiencies of virtual meetings, XCAP would likely need to commit to a longer timetable to reach its final goal of design recommendations. Several XCAPers have indicated that the timetable has stretched beyond their available remaining commitment. There is significant risk that continuing for many more months means losing enough members that the committee falls apart without a final report. To mitigate this possibility, and in response to the impacts of COVID, we may want to consider changes in the scope of the committee’s work:

**Option 1)**

XCAP could summarize the findings to date by including as much work as possible in the appendices, but not make any recommendations. This would mean XCAP would write a final report in July/August with potential late August submission.

**Option 2)**

XCAP could summarize the findings to date and, if there was agreement, could recommend Council remove alternatives from further consideration (for example: South PA tunnel options), and describe the pros and cons of the remaining alternatives. This could include recommendations related to where further policy direction might be necessary (ex. contradictory criteria), and areas where missing technical information should be sought by the City in the future. The report could also recommend issues to be directed to Caltrain as part of their upcoming Corridor-wide grade separation study. Fewer XCAP meetings might be possible if more of the writing of the report is performed by sub-committees. This would mean XCAP would write a final report in July/August with a September submission.

**Option 3)**

Under this scenario, XCAP would give recommendations or, if no agreement could be reached, XCAP would attempt to rank preferences for the various alternatives. The
deliberations would begin after the Town Halls in August, with report writing in October and a November/early December report submission.

All of these timelines assume all meetings are three hour zoom calls, no slippage in the schedule due to conflicts or holidays, and that XCAPers can agree to a revised report structure and to write the sections of the report collectively in the allotted time. Delays in writing the report could further delay the final delivery date.