

From: Emily Reilly
Sent: Friday, July 21, 2006 8:58 PM
To: George Dondero
Subject: Letter for August Agenda

Recommendation: that the RTC write a letter asking Caltrans to permit the city of Santa Cruz to plant trees in the Mission Street median.

Dear RTC Commissioners,

I am concerned about the possibility of Caltrans refusing to permit the city of Santa Cruz to plant trees in the Mission Street median. Although a bit unusual, planting trees in a state highway median is neither unprecedented nor unexpected. The planting of the trees was an agreement reached after much discussion during the widening project and the trees are important. I am surprised to learn that things are not moving forward as promised and look forward to the opportunity to discuss this at our August meeting.

Sincerely,
Emily Reilly

PS I have attached a letter from Dave Tanza, a local architect and member of task force, that includes a photo of State Highway 120 taken from Caltrans' own publication.

My thanks to Debbie Bulger of Mission Pedestrian for compiling the bulleted list below:

The Problem

- The Deputy Director of Maintenance for Caltrans, District 5 has told Chris Schneiter of our City Public Works Department that we have "essentially a zero chance of getting [a permit to plant trees in the Mission Street median] approved by Caltrans." As you may know, Caltrans denied the City's first encroachment application and told us we must submit for a design exception. The Public Works Dept. has not done so yet because of the "zero chance."

Background

- On May 11, 1999 the Santa Cruz City Council passed a resolution requesting that Caltrans permit the city to landscape the Mission Street median (by New Leaf) to create a gateway to Santa Cruz at the western entrance of the city.
- During the Mission Street widening project Caltrans installed electrical and water facilities on the medians between Fair and Swift to facilitate future irrigation. Additionally, Caltrans did not install a concrete cap on the median islands so as not to preclude future landscaping.
- The Mission Street Urban Design Plan "Street Tree Planting Concept" and the cross sections of the west end Gateway recommend and depict trees planted in these medians.
- A Landscape Plan with scaled drawings for the Mission Street corridor was developed and details the placement and type of tree to be planted in the median between Fair and Swift, as well as on the rest of the corridor.

- Caltrans has a policy called Context Sensitive Solutions which calls for Caltrans to respond to community values where state highways serve as main streets. In a journal article written by Marsha Mason, Chief of Transportation Enhancement Activities for Caltrans, Mason states, "With increasing citizen awareness and empowerment, many communities are asking for attractive gateways and streetscapes, pedestrian safety features, and slower car traffic in downtown areas." [Tech Transfer, UC Berkeley, 2002]
- A report "Context Sensitive Solutions in Designing Major Urban Thoroughfares for Walkable Communities, Institute of Transportation Engineers: An ITE Proposed Recommended Practice" (which is consistent with AASHTO), recommends a horizontal offset minimum of 18 inches between tree trunks and the curb face on urban thoroughfares with speeds below 35 mph. The posted speed limit on Mission Street is 25 mph. "Landscaping and trees in medians, typically discouraged in conventional street design . . ." (p. 124).
- The new gateway treatment for Escalon, a city on State Highway 120 features a 4-lane road with median trees.

The Solution

- Caltrans has developed a PowerPoint presentation which explains the Context Sensitive Solutions policy. It ends with the statement, "Look for ways to say yes, If somebody has to be the good guy, why can't it be us?"
- We call on Caltrans to be the good guy. Be sensitive to the local business and community interests that want an appropriate gateway treatment to Santa Cruz from the North Coast. Route 1 as it goes through Santa Cruz is not a freeway. It is a low-speed main street and should not be held to highway standards.