



City of Sunnyvale

Agenda Item

24-0915

Agenda Date: 2/13/2025

2025 COUNCIL STUDY ISSUE

NUMBER

DPW 25-04

TITLE Closing the Sunnyvale Avenue Caltrain Crossing to Vehicles

BACKGROUND

Lead Department: Department of Public Works

Support Departments: Office of the City Manager

Office of the City Attorney

Finance Department

Sponsor(s): Councilmembers: Mehlinger, Melton, Din, Cisneros, Sell, Srinivasan, Klein

History: 1 year ago: N/A

2 years ago: N/A

Council Strategic Priority: No

(At time of sponsorship)

SCOPE OF THE STUDY

What precipitated this study?

In 2022, City Council voted to adopt grade separation options for the Mary Avenue and Sunnyvale Avenue Caltrain crossings (RTC No. 22-0041). The adopted proposal for Sunnyvale Avenue called for the crossing to be closed to vehicular traffic and an undercrossing to be constructed for bicycles and pedestrians. The feasibility study determined that this project would cost in the \$90-110 million range. The environmental, final design, and construction phases of the project are currently partially unfunded. Due to the high volumes of all modes of traffic that cross at Mary Avenue, the Mary Avenue grade separation project will move forward first. Mary Avenue grade separation has a partial funding plan to complete environmental clearance and begin final design, but construction remains partially unfunded. The City has approximately \$175 million in Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority (VTA) 2016 Measure B Grade Separation funding. The City may use these funds as we see fit on grade separation projects for the two existing at-grade Caltrain railroad crossings, Mary Avenue and Sunnyvale Avenue. Preliminary discussions have been to use 75% of these funds on Mary Avenue Grade Separation (CIP 836460) and 25% on Sunnyvale Avenue Grade Separation (CIP 836450). These funds are not sufficient to fund the entire design and construction and are available but not yet committed to either project.

Electric train service began in mid-September 2024 along the Caltrain corridor. The new electric trains operate faster and with more frequent service, meaning that the gates at all at-grade crossings will be down for additional time. While more frequent crossings provide improved public transportation options for Sunnyvale, they may also exacerbate traffic flow challenges and increase

instances for potential collisions.

Speeding along Sunnyvale Avenue is a frequent complaint from residents. There have been multiple collisions including vehicles crashing into buildings or stationary objects. Closing the Sunnyvale Avenue crossing to vehicles would reduce volumes of through traffic in the adjacent area.

The Sunnyvale Avenue crossing is the lowest vehicular volume Caltrain crossing in the City, with major, grade-separated crossings located nearby at Mathilda and Fair Oaks avenues.

What are the key elements of the study?

This Study Issue would examine closing the Sunnyvale Avenue Caltrain crossing to vehicular traffic before the design and construction of the proposed grade separation project. The Study would also examine possible improvements of the at-grade crossing facilities for bicyclists and pedestrians. The Study would evaluate the local traffic impacts to vehicles along parallel routes including Mathilda Avenue and Fair Oaks Avenue. Impacts to the Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority (VTA) bus routes and travel times would also be evaluated with coordination with VTA staff. Other requirements that would be needed to implement closing the crossing to vehicles would also be reviewed, including items such as Caltrain, State, and Federal railroad requirements, processes and fees. Emergency access requirements to adjacent properties would be evaluated and, if needed, alternative access options conceptually designed.

The Study would evaluate converting the city right-of-way within the closed segment of Sunnyvale Avenue between Evelyn and Hendy avenues to green and/or open space. The Study will evaluate at-grade crossing improvements within the Caltrain right-of-way. The train tracks would remain as existing. All improvement options would need to account for the future grade separation project and should minimize throw-away costs and elements. Final design costs and construction cost estimates would also be prepared.

The Study would include an evaluation of funding opportunities and impacts. Funding options and recommendations for implementing the study findings would be included. An evaluation of future grade separation funding impacts would also be included.

The Study would also include an extensive outreach plan, especially to any potentially affected businesses and residents in the area. Many of the groups involved in the outreach for the feasibility study would be re-engaged as part of this Study, included but not limited to VTA, Sunnyvale Downtown Association, Chamber of Commerce, and downtown developers. Efforts to reach new interested community members would also be completed, to include groups such as new business and residential communities in and adjacent to the downtown core area. Various outreach events and methods would be considered, such as citywide or local area mailers, community meetings, pop-up events at the Sunnyvale Farmers' Market and other local events, and presentations to various community groups. Input would also be requested from the Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Commission (BPAC) and City Council prior to final recommendations.

Additional focused engagement and coordination would be performed with VTA. One of VTA's highest ridership bus routes, which is also the route that carries Fremont High School students from north Sunnyvale neighborhoods to and from school, travels through this segment of Sunnyvale Avenue. The Study findings could potentially impact this route and travel time. Extensive coordination between city and VTA staff may need to occur if the Study recommends implementation of a

vehicular closure to ensure that the service for these riders would not be negatively impacted.

Construction of a grade separated bicycle and pedestrian undercrossing would remain a long-term goal.

Estimated years to complete study: 2 years

FISCAL IMPACT

Cost to Conduct Study

Level of staff effort required (opportunity cost): Major
Funding Required for Non-Budgeted Costs: \$450,000
Funding Source: Will seek budget supplement - General Fund

Consultants would be hired to complete the Study. City staff would manage the consultant's work and be the lead for all outreach, including presentations to community groups, BPAC, and City Council. Potential costs for Caltrain staff's time for reviewing and performing evaluations is also assumed to be included. Existing city staff already familiar with the Sunnyvale Avenue Caltrain project could manage the work. However, this could delay efforts to obtain funding for both Mary Avenue and Sunnyvale Avenue Caltrain Grade Separation projects.

Cost to Implement Study Results

Unknown. Study would include assessment of potential costs, including capital and operating, as well as revenue/savings.

EXPECTED CITY COUNCIL, BOARD OR COMMISSION PARTICIPATION

Council-Approved Work Plan: No

Council Study Session: Yes

Reviewed by Boards/Commissions: Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Commission

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Defer. This policy issue merits discussion at a future Study Issues Workshop.

The Sunnyvale Avenue Caltrain crossing is a desirable route for bicycle and pedestrian traffic to and from the downtown area. Activities such as dining, shopping, the Farmers' Market and various festivals encourage local residents to bike and walk. This Study would help evaluate the options, impacts, coordination requirements and considerations for vehicular roadway closure at the Caltrain tracks.

Study of this vehicular closure would align with the City's policies promoting bicycle and pedestrian modes, including the following from the General Plan, Land Use and Transportation Element:

- LT-3.6 Promote modes of travel and actions that provide safe access to city streets and reduce single-occupant vehicle trips and trip lengths locally and regionally.
- LT-3.22 Provide safe access to city streets for all modes of transportation. Safety considerations of all transport modes shall take priority over capacity considerations of any one transport mode.
- LT-8.5 Promote walking and bicycling through street design.

Additionally, the following are included in the Active Transportation Plan:

- Proposed low stress spine route for bicyclists.
- High priority spot improvement for bicyclists at Sunnyvale and Evelyn avenues.
- Medium priority spot improvements for bicyclists at Sunnyvale and Hendy avenues.

Performance of this study would require staff priorities to shift. If directed to move forward with this Study, staff would need to reprioritize project workloads to write a scope of work, procure a consultant team, and manage the study and consultant team. This could delay efforts to obtain funding for and advance existing projects such as Bernardo Bicycle and Pedestrian Undercrossing, Mary Avenue Caltrain Grade Separation, and Sunnyvale Avenue Caltrain Grade Separation. Additionally, if the Study recommends implementing an at-grade bicycle and pedestrian only crossing at Sunnyvale Avenue, this would reduce the Sunnyvale Avenue Grade Separation project's eligibility for some funding sources. Some funding sources for grade separation projects focus on existing at-grade crossings of all modes. This would make it more difficult to obtain full funding for the Sunnyvale Avenue Grade Separation. However, it could implement the overall intent of converting this crossing to bicycle and pedestrian only much sooner due to a lower construction cost.

One of VTA's highest ridership bus routes, which is also the route that carries Fremont High School students from north Sunnyvale neighborhoods to and from school, travels through this segment of Sunnyvale Avenue. The Study findings could potentially impact this route and travel time. Extensive coordination between city and VTA staff may need to occur if the Study recommends implementation of a vehicular closure to ensure that the service for these riders would not be negatively impacted.

Prepared by: Angela Obeso, Principal Transportation Engineer
Reviewed by: Chip Taylor, Director, Department of Public Works
Reviewed by: Sarah Johnson-Rios, Assistant City Manager
Approved by: Tim Kirby, City Manager