



**CITY OF SANTA BARBARA**  
**PARKS AND RECREATION COMMISSION REPORT**

**AGENDA DATE:** October 26, 2011

**TO:** Parks and Recreation Commission

**FROM:** Community Development Department

**SUBJECT:** Plaza de la Guerra Infrastructure Improvement Project – Concept Review

**RECOMMENDATION:** That the Commission review and comment on the 2011 Plaza de la Guerra Infrastructure Improvement project.

**DISCUSSION:**

The purpose of this staff report is to provide the Commission with an update on the Plaza de la Guerra Infrastructure Improvement Project. First initiated by the City Council in 2004, the project is funded by the City's Redevelopment Agency (RDA) through a cooperation agreement with the City. Over the last seven years, the project has undergone a number of revisions. The concept plan outlined in this staff report was completed in early 2011. As part of the design and environmental review process, the project is being reviewed by the Historic Landmarks Commission, Parks and Recreation Commission and the Downtown Parking Committee. The Parks and Recreation Commission last reviewed the project in 2007.

**BACKGROUND:**

The Plaza is part of a large parcel that includes Storke Placita, the Plaza U-Road, City Hall and the City Hall parking lot (Attachment 1). In 2004, Council directed Redevelopment Agency staff to pursue conceptual design of infrastructure improvements for Plaza de la Guerra. The firm of Campbell & Campbell was contracted to develop a design and in November 2006, staff returned to Council with concept illustrations to request clarification on the priority of certain elements. Council reconsidered the design parameters and directed staff to return with a more comprehensive concept.

In late 2007, a broader concept design involving significant parking reduction, changes to De la Guerra Street and to the parking orientation between State and Santa Barbara Streets was presented to City Boards, City Commissions (including the Parks and Recreation Commission) and community groups. Overall reaction reflected very strong concern about the loss of parking, street circulation changes and potential

project cost. The possibility of an increase in the number of Plaza events and effect on surrounding businesses was raised as a programming issue.

In response, Staff was asked to develop a concept more limited in scope that would be responsive to the original direction and would address concerns raised during the 2007 public process. Subsequently, the 2009 concept design was developed which reduced the project scope while still addressing many of the concerns raised. The 2009 concept plan design responded to the Council's desire to improve the Plaza while maintaining its character. It also addressed Council's charge for safe interaction between pedestrians and automobiles. Additionally, the plan addressed concerns expressed by the local business community through the Downtown Organization. The 2009 Concept Plan was declared a project for environmental review on November 24, 2009.

## **PRE-APPLICATION & DEVELOPMENT APPLICATION REVIEW TEAM (DART) PROCESS**

On August 16, 2010 the project was submitted for the City's Pre-Application Review Team (PRT) process. Staff from many City departments reviewed and made detailed comments on the 2009 Concept Plan. In response to the issues identified in the PRT review as well as the technical studies identified above, the 2009 Concept Plan was revised and submitted for the Development Application Review Team (DART) process in February 2011.

As part of the DART process, a Hydrology Report was prepared that included soil borings and percolation testing to comply with the Storm Water Quality Management Requirements. The testing and hydrology report concluded that the City's Storm Water Management Requirements have been met for the project.

The current 2011 Concept Plan is very similar to the project reviewed by Council in November 2009. The design intent continues to adhere to Council's direction to improve the plaza while maintaining its character, with safe interaction between pedestrians and vehicles.

## **2011 CONCEPT PLAN – KEY ELEMENTS**

A few of the more notable design elements in the 2011 Concept Plan include:

- Lowering the lawn area to be flush with the road surface. This will increase the plaza area available to community events as it eliminates the curb around the lawn. Removable bollards would separate the lawn from the road surface.
- Widening the sidewalk along the westerly (restaurants) side of the Plaza to better accommodate pedestrians. The sidewalk would retain a curb to separate it from the roadway.

- Reducing the Plaza lawn and landscaping area from approximately 17,300 square feet to approximately 10,700 square feet to accommodate the wider sidewalk and replacing some lawn area with permeable pavers.
- Improving pedestrian pathways and addressing the narrow exit from the Plaza U-Road resulting in a net loss of five (5) parking spaces in the project area. One new parking space will be added along De la Guerra Street for a net loss of 4 spaces.
- Replacing the roadway with new concrete.
- Relocating the tented electrical panel off of the lawn area.
- Replacing the existing trees due to age and condition.
- Strengthening the visual connection between the Plaza and Casa de la Guerra through relocation of the existing flagpoles, stone monument and removal of the agapanthus.

### **Parking Designations**

The project also proposes to change parking designations in the project area. The proposed project would reduce the number of spaces in the Plaza U-Road area from approximately 35 to 30 spaces. Two spaces are proposed to be eliminated at the U-Road exit in front of City Hall to improve emergency vehicle access. Three spaces are proposed to be eliminated near Storke Placita to improve the visual and pedestrian connection to State Street. The proposed parking configuration would add one space along De la Guerra Street near the Plaza for a total of 24 spaces.

Attachment 2 is a chart providing existing and proposed parking statistics for the project area. The parking statistics are shown separately for the Plaza U-Road and De la Guerra Street as well as combined totals. Attachment 3 is a graphic display of the existing parking conditions in the project area. Attachment 4 is a graphic display of the proposed parking conditions.

### **Plaza Event Programming**

It should be noted that the Downtown Organization continues to express concern about the number and size of events allowed in Plaza de la Guerra throughout the year.

### **STREET TREE ADVISORY COMMITTEE REVIEW**

On June 10, 2010, the Street Tree Advisory Committee (STAC) conducted a site visit to Plaza de la Guerra and reviewed and commented on the proposed plans. The

approved meeting minutes are included as Attachment 5 to this report. The STAC comments fell into the following areas of discussion: Historic Pepper Tree, Palm Trees v. Canopy Trees, soil conditions and the agapanthus.

### **Historic Pepper Tree in Front of City Hall**

The STAC brainstormed ideas for additional protective measures for the Historic Pepper Tree. Many of the ideas have been incorporated into the project design such as adding railing around the tree. Other suggestions regarding tree wells are being further researched for ADA compliance. It was stated that the project should do its best to avoid paving around the Pepper Tree.

### **Palm Trees or Canopy Trees**

The STAC questioned what the appropriate tree type is for the plaza. If the existing trees are in poor condition and can't be successfully re-located, maybe canopy trees should be considered instead of palms trees. Staff explained that replacing palms with palms was consistent with the direction to improve the Plaza with minimal change. Canopy trees have potential to change the character of the Plaza and effect site lines and open feeling of the Plaza. The Plaza is a large sunny space. Openness and open views are important.

The STAC also suggested incorporating canopy trees along the Westside of the plaza near the restaurants. The committee felt that additional trees in or near new expanded sidewalk would protect against building glare, provide needed shade and would mirror the canopy trees in the planters on the east between Plaza and the City Hall / News-Press parking lots. These could balance / complement each other.

The STAC recommendations to add shade trees and tree wells on the western side of the plaza were incorporated into a revised concept plan that was submitted for the City's Pre-Application Review Team (PRT) process in September 2010. During that review, adding canopy trees and tree wells along the western edge raised issues. In particular, Parks and Recreation staff stated that the tree wells on the south side of Plaza were too small to support trees large enough to maintain pedestrian and vehicular traffic clearance. Minimum size well that will support trees of that size are 5x5 feet. The current sidewalk width is 4 feet. The 2011 Conceptual Plans proposed widening the sidewalks to 9 feet. In either case, a 5 x 5 tree grate would minimize the effect of widening the sidewalk. Further, Parks Division does not support tree grates for the tree wells lining the south side of the plaza if the grates and any weeds will be maintained by Parks. Based on the PRT feedback, Redevelopment Agency Staff decided to remove the addition of canopy trees from the plans.

Placement and clustering of queen palm trees could provide some shade and help counter / off-set the heat island effect. The 2011 Conceptual Plans incorporate these comments.

### **Soil Compaction, Aeration, Irrigation**

The Conceptual Plans submitted for the September 2010 PRT process, proposed an alternative to the plaza lawn / turf area. The proposal was to replace the lawn area with decomposed granite. The STAC had concerns that the use of decomposed granite could make it difficult to irrigate and aerate the palms. Based on this input and other comments during PRT, the decomposed granite alternative is no longer under consideration.

### **2011 STATUS REPORT TO COUNCIL**

On August 16, 2011, the Conceptual Plans were presented to City Council. The purpose of the presentation was to give the Council a status report on the project's progress. No action was requested or taken.

### **2011 HISTORIC LANDMARKS COMMISSION CONCEPT REVIEW**

On August 17, 2011, the 2011 Conceptual Plans were presented to the Historic Landmarks Commission for concept review. No action was requested or taken pending environmental review. The agenda for the meeting included HLC acceptance of the Phase I Archeological Resource Report and the Historic Structures and Sites Report. The HLC accepted both reports as presented.

### **DOWNTOWN PARKING COMMITTEE REVIEW**

On October 13, 2011, Staff presented the project to the Downtown Parking Committee for input on the parking changes proposed for the project area. The Committee discussed the need for commercial loading space in the area. The Committee agreed that the commercial loading spaces should be removed from the U-Road. Those spaces should be made available for general parking. It was recommended that the commercial loading spaces should be on De la Guerra Street between State Street and U-Road entry.

## **ENVIRONMENTAL AND DESIGN REVIEW PROCESS**

The Planning Commission held an environmental scoping hearing on September 22, 2011. An Environmental Impact Report (EIR) will be prepared focusing on archeological and historic resources as well as traffic and circulation. Request for proposals for EIR consultants will be released in November, 2011. Council will be asked to authorize a contract with the selected consultant in early 2012.

Upon completion of the EIR process, the project will be presented to the Parks and Recreation Commission for review and approval. Historic Landmarks Commission approval will also be necessary.

## **PARKS AND RECREATION COMMISSION REVIEW**

Currently, we are asking for an early concept review by the Parks and Recreation Commission. No formal action on the project will occur until completion of the EIR process which is anticipated in fall 2012.

## **ATTACHMENTS:**

1. Plaza de la Guerra Parcel
2. Parking Statistics Chart
3. Existing Parking & Circulation
4. Proposed Parking & Circulation
5. Street Tree Advisory Committee Minutes (June 10, 2010)

**PREPARED BY:** Elizabeth Limón, Redevelopment Specialist

**SUBMITTED BY:** Marck Aguilar, Redevelopment Supervisor

**APPROVED BY:** Nancy L. Rapp, Parks and Recreation Director