



City of Placerville MEMORANDUM

DATE: November 26, 2002

TO: City Council

FROM: John Driscoll
City Manager/City Attorney

SUBJECT: **HIGHWAY 50 OPERATIONAL IMPROVEMENTS
PROJECT/ENVIRONMENTAL DOCUMENT**

RECOMMENDATION

That the City Council take the following action:

1. Conceptually approve the Highway 50 Operational Improvements Project; and
2. Find that the Highway 50 Operational Improvements Project does not result in any significant environmental impacts or potentially significant environmental impacts in those areas of the Project subject to City approval.

INTRODUCTION

Highway 50 serves local, regional and inter-regional traffic. Over the years, there has been an increased traffic demand on Highway 50 by all of these - local, regional and inter-regional. This increased demand has caused recurrent backups on Highway 50 and many local roads, which has compromised public safety as well. Several years ago, backups would occur on Friday afternoons on Highway 50 as traffic would approach the first signal at Canal Street. That backup now occurs on Saturday mornings and often on weekday afternoons and evenings, especially during the 5 PM commute hour.

Not only is there congestion on Highway 50, but also congestion and gridlock can occur on our local roadways, such as Main Street, due to the fact that there are no alternate parallel routes, and Highway 50 is used extensively as a local street.

HISTORY

The need to make operational improvements to Highway 50 became apparent by the mid-1980's.

In 1987 and 1988, the California Transportation Commission (CTC) commissioned the study of freeway improvement alternatives along Highway 50 through central Placerville. Part of the catalyst for this study was the proposed abandonment by Southern Pacific of its railroad right-of-way along the Highway.

The City of Placerville and Caltrans jointly managed the study, and a consultant was chosen to conduct preliminary engineering and environmental studies on various freeway design alternatives. Initial concepts ranged from widening the highway from four to six lanes, to a fully depressed freeway (that is, below ground) or an elevated freeway.

A Citizens' Advisory Committee was formed, which was composed of residents of Placerville and El Dorado County, and the Committee acted as a forum for receiving citizens' views about the project, including alternatives.

A Draft Project Report was prepared and disseminated in December of 1988. As noted in the Draft Project Report, there was much disagreement amongst the public, elected officials and citizens' group, as to the best solution.

Suggestions for alternative solutions to the Highway 50/local roadway issues ranged from a total bypass of Placerville by Highway 50, to some of the alternatives previously mentioned, such as an elevated freeway, a below grade freeway, or maintaining the existing highway and widening it to six lanes. Additional variations were added to these scenarios.

Ultimately, the Draft Project Report reduced the alternatives to three. These were:

- The below grade freeway, which actually was a combination of an elevated freeway and a below grade freeway.
- An elevated freeway.
- Widening the existing highway to six lanes.

Because there was no clear consensus as to the best solution, and because many of the proposed solutions were either cost-prohibitive, or caused such esthetic and environmental consequences on the City of Placerville, no particular option was selected at that time.

The City Council did, however, in April of 1989, pass a Resolution requesting the CTC to support the City's request to be placed on the State Transportation Improvement Program, commonly known as "STIP," and to work with local citizens, property owners, business groups and staff, as well as the County and local agencies, to create an interim design that will give the City an improved transportation plan that is acceptable to the community.

Studies and discussions regarding potential solutions for Highway 50 continued into the early 1990's. A second citizens' committee was formed at that time known as the Highway 50 Committee, and it reviewed proposals and acted as a source of public input in the process.

In the early 1990's, the Advisory Committee met frequently with Caltrans, as well as City and County staff, and ultimately a concept known as the "West-End Improvements" came forth. This concept was not a "full freeway" through Placerville, as that alternative was deemed too expensive and disruptive to the City. The "West-end" concept was approved by the City Council on January 4, 1993, and endorsed by the El Dorado County Transportation Commission (EDCTC) on January 7, 1993.

The "West-End" concept connected Placerville Drive to Main Street and involved the construction of a new section of highway over the Main Street/Placerville Drive connection. This section consisted of six lanes, and included turn lanes and acceleration lanes. The highway traveled over Canal Street, rejoining the existing Highway 50 alignment at Spring Street, and included dedicated right and left turn lanes in each direction, while two through lanes of traffic would remain to carry vehicles through the area.

At about the same time, the country went into a recession, and a decrease in federal funding together with the failure of the 1992 State Highway Bonds, resulted in a severe reduction of monies available for the Highway 50 improvement plan. The original \$35 million in funding was lost, and the City, Caltrans and the EDCTC were scrambling to save approximately \$12 to \$14 million that already had been allocated for the project.

At that time, the EDCTC, in an attempt to save that funding, took over the preparation of a Project Study Report, which was a necessary ingredient in order to obtain a funding commitment from the CTC. In order to preserve all or part of the funding earmarked for Highway 50 through Placerville, there had to be a Caltrans-approved Project Study Report, together with an agreement from the EDCTC as to the projects identified in that Project Study Report. The EDCTC, in the preparation of that report, committed to a significant community participation process in developing the Project Study Report.

There were a series of community meetings held at the Shakespeare Club in Placerville. The first of these meetings was held on October 25, 1995, followed by another meeting on November 15, 1995. On November 16, 1995, the EDCTC and the City Council held a joint meeting, which was followed on December 6, 1995 by another community meeting at the Shakespeare Club. The community meeting was immediately followed on the same date by a Special City Council meeting.

The minutes of that City Council meeting reflect that Council adopted Alternative No. 4 as contained in the Draft Project Study Report as its preferred alternative. Alternative No. 4 included the extension of Placerville Drive to Main Street, including an eastbound onramp to Highway 50; improvements to the Spring Street/Highway 50 intersection; and miscellaneous improvements along Highway 50. Alternative No. 4 also included a policy of moving improvements north to avoid encroachment into the former Southern Pacific right-of-way. Another part of Alternative No. 4 was traffic improvements on the north and south Bedford Avenue approaches to Highway

50, and the inclusion of an urban design firm as part of the design process for the Spring Street intersection.

The Final Project Study Report (PSR) was completed in early March 1996, and submitted to the CTC. The CTC staff responded by requesting that the PSR be modified to include detailed drawings showing its proposed miscellaneous improvements, including the right turn lanes. In an attempt to save funding for the project, conceptual design for right turn lanes on Highway 50 were submitted to Caltrans and then forwarded to the CTC for consideration.

On April 9, 1996, as a discussion item, the City Council discussed the Highway 50 Final PSR. At that time, it was the consensus of the Council to confirm staff's recommendation to include conceptual drawings in the Highway 50 PSR that show turn lanes from Highway 50 onto Spring Street, Center Street and Bedford Avenue that use a portion of the Caltrans right-of-way. This action initiated the project approval and environmental document phase of the project.

The alternatives included in the Final PSR were twofold:

- A grade separation to provide for a connection between Placerville Drive and Main Street, including the closure of the eastbound Main Street offramp.
- Improvements to Highway 50, including and between the intersections with Canal Street, State Route 49, and Bedford Avenue, including a short realignment of State Route 49 between Highway 50 and Sacramento Street.

The improvements to Highway 50 included:

- A discontinuous third travel lane in the eastbound direction that terminates in a series of right-of-way turns and Spring Street, Center Street and Bedford Avenue.
- Lengthening the east- and westbound left turn lanes on the Highway 50 median.
- Modernizing traffic signals.
- Widening the southern approaches to and from Highway 50 at Canal Street, Spring Street and Bedford Avenue.
- Realigning State Route 49 from Main Street to Sacramento Street.

Over the next few years after the submittal of the Final PSR to the CTC, Caltrans worked on electing a preferred alternative based on the PSR, and conducted a series of workshops and meetings with the City Council and the community.

On March 19, 1999, Caltrans held a workshop from 3 PM to 6 PM to discuss the project, and at the Council meeting following the workshop, Council was presented with several design alternatives. One alternative was the alternative endorsed by the Council in the 1996 PSR, and the second alternative, known as "Modified Alternative A," made the following changes:

- It added an auxiliary lane on eastbound Highway 50 from the Placerville Drive onramp to Canal Street.
- Added a continuous eastbound auxiliary lane from Spring Street to Bedford.
- Added an eastbound acceleration lane on Highway 50 east of Bedford.
- Eliminated the Spring Street realignment.
- Realigned the Spring Street Bridge over Hangtown Creek and reduced the widening of the Canal Street Bridge over Hangtown Creek.

With the understanding that this was a preliminary decision and not a final decision on the Project, the Council voted to proceed with the operational improvements to Highway 50 with the preferred alternative as Modified Alternative A.

Since that Council meeting, there have been four Council meetings and/or Caltrans workshops discussing the various components of the Project. A public workshop was conducted by Caltrans on June 28, 2001, in conjunction with receiving public comment on the environmental document. An informational workshop was conducted by City staff on May 1, 2002, and the environmental document was released on November 6, 2002.

PROBLEMS

Within the project limits, existing mainline Highway 50 is a four-lane divided highway with access control and signalized intersections at Bedford Avenue, Spring Street (State Route 49), and Canal Street. Some of the problems that affect public traffic traveling through the project limits are as follows:

- Combined traffic volumes from Highway 50 and State Route 49 are at capacity of the three closely spaced signalized intersections.
- Insufficient storage space is available in the mainline turn pockets for vehicles turning left at signals, and vehicles turning right into downtown cannot turn because they are blocked by traffic traveling ahead eastbound through the signal.
- Cross-streets have limited storage for all turn movements, no dedicated left or right turn pockets, and signals that lack a protected left turn phase.
- Traffic traveling between Main Street and West Placerville Drive must currently use congested Highway 50 via the ramps at West Placerville Drive and Main Street.
- The Bedford Avenue pedestrian over-crossing does not comply with the latest ADA standards, and at grade pedestrian crossings are long, so pedestrians are rushed by the signal phase.

- Bicycles are currently allowed on a section of the shoulder of Highway 50 because of the lack of an alternate route from Main Street to West Placerville Drive.

SOLUTIONS

As a result of these problems, the public experiences documentable increased inconvenience, accidents and delay. The Highway 50 Project seeks to either reduce or remedy these problems with the following improvements:

- Within the eastbound lanes of Highway 50 an auxiliary/acceleration lane will be provided for vehicles turning into or accelerating out of the cross streets that connect Main Street to Highway 50. The auxiliary/acceleration lane will extend from west of Canal Street to east of Bedford.
- The bridges at Canal Street, Springs Street and Bedford Avenue will be widened and/or replaced to provide added storage and dedicated turn lanes.
 - ◇ The bridge at Canal Street will have three dedicated lanes heading in a northerly direction. One lane will be for vehicles turning right, or east, onto Highway 50; one lane for vehicles heading directly north across Highway 50 on Canal Street; and one lane for vehicles turning left and heading in a westerly direction on Highway 50.
 - ◇ The bridge at Bedford will have similar lane configuration for vehicles exiting from downtown, except that the middles of the three northbound lanes may also be used by vehicles turning left, or in a westerly direction, onto Highway 50.
 - ◇ The bridge at Spring Street (State Route 49) will have four lanes headed in a northerly direction. The lane farthest to the right will be for vehicles turning right onto Highway 50 and heading in an easterly direction; the next lane will be for vehicles crossing Highway 50 in a northerly direction onto State Route 49; and the last two outbound lanes will be for vehicles turning left onto Highway 50 and heading in a westerly direction.
- Placerville Drive will be extended to connect with lower Main Street. This portion of the Project includes creating a new bridge over Hangtown Creek as part of the Placerville Drive extension to Main Street, as well as a new Highway 50 bridge over Placerville Drive. The Placerville Drive/Main Street connection will include a Class 2 bicycle lane on each side, as well as a sidewalk with gutter on the south edge of the road connection.
- The existing eastbound off-ramp to Main Street in the area of lower Main will be closed.
- The existing Highway 50 left turn pockets will be lengthened for additional vehicle storage at each of the major intersections.

- The existing Bedford Avenue pedestrian over-crossing will be replaced to accommodate a widened Highway 50 mainline and to provide proper vertical clearance over Highway 50. The replaced Bedford pedestrian over-crossing will comply with ADA and, as such, will have ramp structures at each end of the over-crossing.
- As part of the Placerville Drive to Main Street connection, Forni Road will have a new intersection with the Placerville Drive/Main Street road connection.
- The traffic signals at the main intersections will be replaced. New signals will add left turn phases at those locations that currently do not have them, and the signals will incorporate emergency preemption devices to facilitate the movement of emergency vehicles through those intersections.
- The Highway 50/Bedford intersection will be realigned and will include dedicated turn lanes, not only for traffic heading north, but for southbound traffic as well.

BENEFITS

The benefits of the Project can really be broken down into subcategories. The first category parrots the name of the Project and is appropriately characterized as Operational Improvements. As noted previously, the purpose of the proposed Project is to improve traffic operations and increase mainline capacity and improve public safety. It is anticipated that the proposed improvements will meet these needs by: (1) increasing the capacity of eastbound Highway 50; (2) increasing local and regional traffic circulation by providing alternate route choices; (3) addressing operational problems at the Highway 50 intersections with Canal Street, Spring Street and Bedford Avenue by increased vehicle storage, improved geometrics and increased vehicles passage; (4) improving safety with new signal turn phases, lengthening left turn lanes, relocating local street bicycle lanes, realigning the Bedford/Highway 50 intersection; and (5) improving access and response time for emergency vehicles.

The proposed eastbound auxiliary/acceleration lane will decrease delays by increasing the capacity and volume of cars that will be able to pass through the signalized areas on Highway 50. The proposed connection between Placerville Drive and Main Street will reduce local traffic volume on Highway 50 and improve local circulation by providing alternate choices. This benefit will be especially important for local trips during the peak Highway 50 travel times. Additionally, the improved local circulation will cause less disruption on Highway 50, and therefore add to improved Highway 50 capacity. One significant benefit of the new road connection is that it improves safety and access for bicycles that will no longer have to travel on the existing Highway 50 shoulders in order to get from the Main Street area to the Placerville Drive area. Bike lanes will be provided in each direction on the Placerville Drive connector, and equally important, a sidewalk will also be provided for pedestrian travel between the Main Street area and Placerville Drive. An important benefit of the connector that also should not be overlooked is that it will provide emergency vehicles with an alternate connection for travel within these sections of the City.

While collision rates are lower than the respective statewide averages for similar facilities for most areas of the Project area, the intersection of Highway 50 and Bedford Avenue is higher.

Bedford Avenue, north of Highway 50 consists of nonstandard merging of both Bedford Avenue and the southeast terminus of Spring Street, which cannot be distinguished by conventional striping. Traffic approaching northbound from the south leg of the intersection and traffic approaching southbound from the north leg of the intersection do not have distinguishable travel lanes, thus creating significant safety issues. The Project will improve this situation by realigning the intersection, as well as creating dedicated turn lanes for both north and southbound traffic.

In addition to the operational benefits created by this project, there are significant benefits that are not traffic specific. Perhaps one of the most significant of those benefits is the fact that the Project will allow the City to relocate the existing sewer line from Hangtown Creek along the Project area. Caltrans will be required to pay a significant portion of this relocation expense as part of the Highway 50 Project. Without this contribution by Caltrans, it is doubtful that the City would be in a position to have the funds available to relocate the sewer line on its own. The environmental and esthetic benefits from relocating the sewer line are obvious.

Additionally, the Project has received two TEA Grants that directly relate to the Project and would not be available save and except for the Project itself. The first grant was received in 1999 and is referred to as the Hangtown Creek Beautification Project. This project proposes to restore the visual value and enhance the ecological function of Hangtown Creek in the area of lower Main Street and the vicinity of the new Placerville Drive connector. The Hangtown Creek Beautification Project will remove and dispose of the existing reinforced concrete arched culvert, including the head walls and wing walls. It will also result in a minor realignment of Hangtown Creek in the vicinity of the existing culvert. The banks of Hangtown Creek will be re-graded in that area, and the existing sewer line will also be removed in the area. Finally, as part of the Hangtown Creek Beautification Project the area around that existing culvert will be re-vegetated and beautified.

The other TEA project is a result of a TEA Grant that was received in 2002. That grant will provide for the following esthetic enhancements.

- Bridge Design. The design included in the baseline project represents an upgrade over the normal and customary Caltrans bridge design. The proposed enhanced design utilizes a barrier rail that has openings. The openings provide visibility to the stream below and contain a decorative veneer. The bridge railings also have a decorative wrought iron fence upon them. It should be noted that the decorative light fixtures shown on the bridge barrier is a separate enhancement that is prioritized below.
- Longitudinal Barrier. The original project proposed to install a longitudinal concrete-type barrier with a vinyl coated chain link fence atop the barrier parallel to the south side of Highway 50, between Canal Street and Bedford Avenue. The TEA Grant will upgrade the longitudinal barrier with colored concrete and a wrought iron fence on top.
- Decorative Lighting. Non-decorative lighting at the intersections of Canal Street, Spring Street, Center Street and Bedford Avenue is incorporated into the baseline Highway 50 Operational Improvements Project. The TEA Grant will upgrade the non-decorative light fixtures with decorative ones like those recently installed in the downtown area. This enhancement would provide decorative lighting at each end of the Hangtown Creek bridge

railing crossings at Spring Street, Canal Street and Bedford Avenue, and provide decorative lighting along the longitudinal barrier parallel to the south side of Highway 50. The decorative light theme is consistent with the recommendations set forth in the Downtown Revitalization Action Plan.

- Fencing Upgrades. There are various locations along the Operational Improvements Project corridor that will require fencing. The fencing at these locations will be upgraded from vinyl coated chain link to a wrought iron design at locations where no barriers are proposed.
- Retaining Walls. Improving the four unadorned retaining walls was not part of the original Operational Improvements Project. Treatment of the unadorned retaining walls with a design veneer is an enhancement included in the TEA Grant, however, there may be a funding shortfall to treat all of the retaining walls, therefore the City has prioritized the treatment of the retaining walls as follows:
 - ◇ Decorative veneer on the retaining wall east of Bedford Avenue.
 - ◇ Retaining wall on the south side of Highway 50, west of Canal Street.
 - ◇ Retaining wall on the south embankment of Hangtown Creek adjacent to the 1906 bridge crossing.
 - ◇ Retaining wall on the eastbound approach to the new Hangtown Creek bridge (lower Main Street/Placerville Drive connector).

It should be noted that esthetic treatments for the Bedford Avenue pedestrian over-crossing (POC), Canal Street, Spring Street, Bedford Avenue and the new Placerville Drive bridge over Hangtown Creek do have concrete treatments included in and funded by the baseline project.

CEQA ANALYSIS

For this project, the Lead Agency for CEQA purposes is Caltrans, and the City is a Responsible Agency under CEQA. A Responsible Agency typically has permitting authority or approval power over some aspect of the overall project for which a Lead Agency is conducting a CEQA review. The Responsible Agency relies on the lead agency's environmental document in acting on whatever aspect of the project requires its approval. The City's action as a Responsible Agency on the environmental document is limited to the environmental effects of the Project in that portion of the Project for which City approval is required.

In this case, Caltrans has prepared a Mitigated Negative Declaration as the environmental document for the Project. Council, therefore, must determine whether or not those portions of the Project over which City approval is required create significant impacts and, if so, whether or not those impacts have been mitigated. The CEQA guidelines define the term "significant impact on the environment" as a "substantial, or potentially substantial, adverse change in any of the physical conditions within the area affected by the project, including land, air, water, minerals,

floral, fauna, ambient noise, and objects of historic and esthetic significance." (Emphasis added). By definition, therefore, any such significant impact must be adverse in nature.

Those portions of the Project over which the City has the right of approval relate primarily to the following: (1) the Placerville Drive/Main Street Connection; (2) portions of the intersections at Bedford, Spring Street, and Canal; and (3) the relocation of the City's sewer line out of Hangtown Creek. I believe it is reasonably clear that none of these create a significant adverse effect or potential significant adverse effect on the environment. There can be little doubt that the removal of the sewer line from Hangtown Creek will actually be a significant benefit to the environment as opposed to a significant adverse impact. Such benefits are also associated with the Placerville Drive/Main Street connector in that a significant portion of Hangtown Creek now contained in a boxed culvert will be day-lighted and the Creek restored to a more natural condition.

The historic railroad bridge, also in the vicinity of the Placerville Drive/Main Street connector, will be preserved and protected as part of the Project. Several City gardens will be affected by the Project. The effect of the Project on those gardens will be less than significant. Caltrans will provide the City fair market value for any portion of land taken from these gardens for highway construction, as well as provide compensation or in-kind replacement for plant materials, irrigation and other components that have to be relocated, removed or replaced. It is not anticipated that there will be any loss of net area to any of the Community Pride gardens affected by the Project and, in fact, the net area of the relocated gardens will be increased at the Ore Cart Garden and the Gateway to Sierra Garden.

If in fact the Council were to determine that there were significant effects from the Project in those areas that require City approval, and that those effects were not sufficiently mitigated to a level of insignificance, the City has the option to file a court action within 30 days after Caltrans issued its Notice of Determination. That 30-day period would expire on December 5, 2002.

On the other hand, if the Council determines that there are no significant impacts from the Project in those areas where City approval is required, Council still needs to determine whether or not it will approve or disapprove of the Project.

Additionally, it should be pointed out that inasmuch as the majority of the Project is within areas for which City approval is not required, the City still has, as any other citizen has, the right to bring an action in court seeking a determination that the environmental document is inadequate. Such an action would have to be based upon a determination that either the mitigation measures set forth in the environmental document are inadequate to reduce a significant impact to a level of insignificance, or that there are significant impacts or potentially significant impacts that have not been identified in the environmental document.

As a practical matter, the City does not have to resort to court action. The City has the power to tell Caltrans that it does not want this project, and if it does so, it is my understanding from talking with Caltrans officials that they will respect the City's wishes and not proceed with the Project. While it is not staff's recommendation that the City take such action, it is important that the Council be aware of its options with respect to this project. Suffice it to say, however, that it is staff's position that the environmental document prepared by Caltrans, the Mitigated Negative Declaration, identifies the significant or potentially significant impacts on the environment from

this Project, and sets forth mitigation measures which adequately reduce those impacts or potentially significant impacts to less than a level of significance. The larger question is should the Council approve the Project.

PROJECT APPROVAL

As noted above, it is staff's recommendation that the Council approve the Highway 50 Operational Improvements Project. The history of this project comprises a lengthy portion of this report, and although it's been reviewed in the past, it is an important factor in the Council's determination.

The history going back to the late 1980's evidences an enormous amount of public input into the Project's ultimate design. The history also demonstrates that a host of other alternatives, including such things as bypassing Placerville, eliminating the traffic signals, and grade separation (which some people are again suggesting as viable alternatives), were considered and rejected as unfeasible and/or too costly. In fact, such things as eliminating the signals can only be accomplished as a practical matter by relocating State Route 49.

The history also demonstrates that Council action over the last seven years has been consistent with Project approval. Examples of this are as follows: (1) On November 26, 1996, the City Council accepted the recommendation of the Downtown Revitalization Committee that parking along the SP right-of-way be eventually eliminated to construct the Highway 50 improvements and the Downtown Revitalization Catalyst edge improvements; (2) On March 18, 1999, Council voted to proceed with the Highway 50 Operational Improvements and selected the preferred alternative as Modified Alternative A; and (3) On August 10, 1999, Council voted to keep the eastbound acceleration lane east of Bedford in the Project and voted to drop the request to shift Highway 50 to the north between Spring Street and east of the acceleration lane.

It is staff's opinion that the benefits from this project far outweigh its perceived detrimental impacts. The majority, if not all, of those impacts will occur during the construction phase as a result of disruption of travel during construction activities. Staff and Caltrans are presently working on a Value Analysis process to arrive at a plan that will minimize the impacts on traffic and the surrounding neighborhood during construction.

Regardless of whether or not the Project increases capacity by 530 vehicles per hour, or some lesser number as some contend, the addition of the auxiliary/acceleration lane, the widening of the bridges, with additional lanes exiting downtown, and the Placerville Drive connector to Main Street, will improve traffic operations not only on Highway 50 but on local streets as well.

It cannot be argued that this project is the ultimate fix, as it is not. Traffic will continue to worsen, and gridlock will occur regardless of this project. However, it only makes sense to complete this project and improve the operational efficiency of Highway 50 and local streets so that the gridlock, when it occurs, will be of a shorter duration than it would otherwise be without this project. It needs to be understood that the funding cannot be "banked" for an "ultimate fix." If this project does not go forward, the allocated funds will be put toward some other project in California by the CTC, and it will be a very long time before any other funding will be available to address these traffic issues.

Setting aside the traffic operational aspects of the Project, the esthetics and enhancements alone justify Project approval. Relocation of the City sewer line out of Hangtown Creek is a significant benefit, which would not occur without this project. The Hangtown Creek Beautification Project, which is a portion of the overall Project, will have an additional beneficial environmental effect by day-lighting that portion of Hangtown Creek and restoring it to a more natural condition.

The enhancements to the downtown area, which will result from the 2002 TEA Grant, are invaluable. Instead of the bleak and somewhat depressing appearance of the downtown area that passersby on Highway 50 presently see, the TEA Grant enhancements will make Placerville a truly inviting place and one of interest to the Highway 50 traveler. The wrought iron fencing, the traditional style streetlights, the bridge treatments will portray an historical image of Placerville that will beckon even the most casual passerby to visit our attractive downtown area.

The Project presents a very real opportunity to enhance the public's image of Placerville and its downtown area. The enhancements are consistent with the Downtown Revitalization Plan put forth by Freedman, Tung & Bottomley. With the relocation of the sewer line out of Hangtown Creek and with the remaining railroad right of way being conveyed to the City by Caltrans, an opportunity is presented to beautify the Hangtown Creek area and take advantage of the asset that the Creek should be to the downtown area. Even with Caltrans utilizing a portion of the railroad right-of-way, there will remain an average of 20 feet. There are only a couple of pinch points, the narrowest of which will be no less than 8 ½ feet. This will leave room for landscaping, if the Council so desires, and even potentially pedestrian walkways along the Creek.

The issue of the old railroad right-of-way also needs further clarification. Opposition to the Project by some is based upon a perception that the Project, by utilizing a portion of the old railroad right-of-way, precludes the City from creating a trail over the old railroad right-of-way. There are several erroneous assumptions leading to this conclusion that need to be clarified. First, the City has never determined that the best place for a trail is over the old railroad right-of-way. The City is now seeking a grant to produce a non-motorized circulation plan, which will identify the best location for these types of facilities. Next, even if the old railroad right-of-way was to be utilized as a trail, prohibitive safety issues exist at the Center Street crossing, and potentially at the other street crossings. These issues would have to be resolved before a continuous trail of any type could be placed on the old railroad right-of-way.

There is a further issue at the east-west crossing of the Bedford Street intersection. Even though the signals at this intersection will be designed to allow for an east-west pedestrian crossing, a significant decision would have to be made to utilize such a cycle because of its impact on delaying north-south traffic on Bedford at Highway 50.

Perhaps of paramount importance is the fact that the City does not own the old railroad right-of-way. Caltrans does, and Caltrans has agreed only as a part of the Project to relinquish the remaining right-of-way to the City. One needs to ask what incentive will Caltrans have to turn over the right-of-way to the City if the City rejects the Project. Certainly such an action might not be in Caltrans' best interest, as they may want the right-of-way for a different Highway 50 improvement project, which may utilize all of the right-of-way. As ironic as it may seem to some,

it is only because of this project that the City has the ability to acquire any portion of the right-of-way for pedestrian travel or other uses exists.

For all of the above reasons, it is staff's recommendation that the City Council conceptually approve the Highway 50 Operational Improvements Project with all the elements as set forth above and find that this project does not result in any significant environmental impacts or potentially significant environmental impacts in those areas of the Project subject to City approval.

Finally, it needs to be noted that staff is recommending tonight "conceptual" approval of the Project. There still remains agreements to be negotiated with Caltrans regarding such things as the sewer line relocation and right-of-way relinquishment, which will have to be agreed upon before the Project will be able to proceed.

Respectfully submitted,

John Driscoll
City Manager/City Attorney