

MEMORANDUM

COUNTY OF SAN MATEO PLANNING AND BUILDING DEPARTMENT

DATE: October 6, 2022
TO: Planning Commission
FROM: Michael Schaller, Senior Planner
SUBJECT: *Item 4: CalTrans Wireless Traffic Operation System*
Additional Information

Subsequent to the publication of the October 12 Planning Commission staff report for the subject item, the applicant, CalTrans, submitted revised photo simulations. Prior to that, they provided an analysis of how they believe the proposed project complies with the County's Local Coastal Plan (LCP). This additional information is included as attachments to this memo.

Staff had reviewed the additional information, and while the proposed plantings do somewhat help to soften the visual impact of the Variable Message Signs, we do not believe it reduces the impact to a level consistent with the applicable LCP policies. Staff is maintaining its recommendation for denial.

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County of San Mateo - Planning and Building Department

ATTACHMENT A







County of San Mateo - Planning and Building Department

ATTACHMENT B

Responses to San Mateo County Staff Report

From the October 12, 2002 San Mateo County staff report:

“Staff recommends denial of the permit because the project, as proposed, is inconsistent with the Visual Resources policies of the County’s Local Coastal Program. While the WDS modules will be relatively innocuous, the proposed VMS signs at Locations 5 and 6 will be very visible to people travelling on Highway 1, even when not activated. Both VMS signs will be illuminated, when in use. This directly conflicts with policies in the Community Design Manual which is incorporated by reference into the policies of the Visual Resources chapter.”

“There are no existing streetlights or traffic signs at either of the proposed VMS locations, which provide opens space views that the LCP seeks to protect. The proposed installation of lighted signs within these landscapes does not comply with the policies of the Visual Resources chapter.”

CalTrans response:

Along Highway One and other scenic roads, there are instances where essential roadway safety features, including signs, barriers, and lights, must be installed within open space view corridors to ensure public safety. In such instances, it is necessary to ensure that these features are sited and designed to minimize their visual impacts to the greatest extent. With regard to the proposed project, the applicant has not provided compelling evidence that the VMS are needed for public safety, nor taken the steps needed to minimize their impacts, for example by locating them in areas that would have less of an impact on views. Therefore, staff recommends denial of the requested CDP and encourages the applicant to resubmit an application that eliminates the VMS component of the project.

VMS Locations

Location 5. Highway 1 Approaching Coral Reef Avenue - Work at this location would occur at postmile 33.55, along the southbound shoulder approaching Coral Reef Avenue. Existing conditions include a gravel shoulder and regularly mowed ruderal upland vegetation. A drainage ditch that drains into Denniston Creek occurs approximately 35 feet from the roadway and is outside of the proposed work area. Work at Location 5 would include a Variable Message Sign (VMS) installed on two wooden poles, a Maintenance Vehicle Pullout (MVP), and 100 feet of guardrail (MGS). Power for the VMS would be provided from an adjacent PG&E pole. A controller cabinet and service cabinet will be installed adjacent to the sign.

Location 6.

Highway 1 North of Coral Reef Avenue - Work at this location will occur at postmile 33.33, along the northbound Highway 1 shoulder north of Coral Reef Avenue. Existing conditions at this site include a gravel shoulder and mowed ruderal vegetation. Denniston Creek passes under Highway 1 approximately 70 feet north of the proposed work area. Proposed project elements would include a VMS, MVP and 100 feet of Midwest Guardrail System. Power for the VMS would be sourced from a 3 nearby existing power pole. A controller cabinet and service cabinet will be installed adjacent to the sign.

Key Issues

A (2) Conformance with the Local Coastal Program

A Coastal Development Permit is required pursuant to San Mateo County Local Coastal Program Policy 2.1, which mandates compliance with the California Coastal Act for any government agency wishing to undertake development in the Coastal Zone.

Summarized below are the following sections of the LCP that are relevant to this project:

a. Sensitive Habitats Component

Policy 7.11 – (*Establishment of Buffer Zones*) (*for Riparian Corridors*).

This policy establishes a buffer zone of 50 ft. as measured from the 6 limit of riparian vegetation for all perennial streams. Denniston Creek passes near the proposed VMS sign at Location 6. Based upon the aerial data contained in the County's GIS, the proposed sign location is approximately 140 feet from the edge of the nearest riparian vegetation, and thus complies with this policy. No sensitive habitat or vegetation has been identified by the applicant's biologists at this location, which is regularly mowed by Caltrans during the normal course of roadway maintenance.

- b. **Visual Resources Component Policy 8.5** – (Location of Development). This policy requires that development be located on a portion of a parcel where it is least visible from State and County Scenic Roads, is least likely to significantly impact views from public viewpoints; and, consistent with all other LCP requirements, best preserves the visual and open space qualities of the parcel overall. The two proposed VMS signs are, by design, highly visible from Highway 1, a designated County scenic highway. Both signs will be five foot tall by twelve feet wide and, based upon the photo simulations submitted with the application, will sit approximately six feet off the ground. The total height of each sign should be approximately eleven feet. Each sign, again based upon the photo simulations, will sit approximately 6-8 feet off of the main travel way for Highway 1. The location of these two signs is predicated upon the proximity of Capistrano Road, which provides one of the few opportunities for stalled traffic on Highway 1 to safely turn around or (if traveling northbound) find an alternate route through Princeton and Airport Street.

The applicant has endeavored to place the signs and associated control boxes near existing electrical utilities. This has resulted in greater visual clutter at these two locations than under the present conditions and results in a reduction in the open space qualities and views at these two locations.

Response: To minimize the degree of visual impact, VMS have been located near more developed areas or where similar built features occur. Both VMS locations are on the urban side of the urban rural boundary and are subject to the policies contained in the “Structural and Community Features--Urban Areas and Rural Service Centers” section of Chapter 8. The signs will remain off most of the time and be activated during emergencies only. Signs are proposed to be located adjacent to other built features and not be installed along Officially Designated State Scenic Highways.

Caltrans has incorporated and continues to develop avoidance and minimization measures (AMMs) into the proposed project to avoid and minimize the impacts of this project on visual resources, they include:

1. The VMS sign panel size shall be the smallest necessary to convey critical emergency or hazard information.
2. Sign materials used will suit the rural coastal highway vernacular and blend with the landscape, the project team is willing to coordinate with SMC with regard to the color of the VMS signs.
3. Methods to minimize the signs’ visual presence would continue to be explored in the project’s design phase, including a potential planting plan that would provide vegetation that would minimize the VMS signs appearance from the backside of the VMS sign, and reduce the overall visibility of the signs from either direction.

Location 5

The VMS is a noticeable visual change in the foreground and creates a minor obstruction to distant views of the coastal hills in the background. The VMS would be more noticeable when in a lighted state. However, the VMS would be turned off most of the time and would only be lighted to convey emergency and incident-related information to motorists traveling on SR 1. Furthermore, the wooden poles would blend in with the surroundings. This would reduce the visual intrusion of the VMS. The utility cabinets and guardrail are common built features along the coastal highway and constitute a minor visual change.

Location 6

Location 6 has some existing urban infrastructure that will lessen the visual prominence of the new sign. The location of the signs in front of existing highway vegetation screens the roadway from adjacent properties. This creates a darker, solid backdrop for the signs which also helps to reduce their visual presence.

Policy 8.11 – (Definition of Urban).

Both VMS locations are on the urban side of the urban rural boundary and are subject to the policies contained in the “Structural and Community Features--Urban Areas and Rural Service Centers” section of Chapter 8.

Policy 8.12 – (General Regulations). This policy requires the application of the Design Review (DR) Zoning District to urban areas of the Coastal Zone, specifically for all non-residential development, the design standards contained in Section 6565.17 of the Zoning Regulations and the design criteria set forth in the Community Design Manual are applicable.

Section 6565.17(G) of the Zoning Regulations requires the protection of views through the controlling of height and location of structures. Both signs will block open space views for motorists traveling in either direction in addition to impacting the views from the adjacent residential neighborhood along Sonora Avenue.

Response: VMS proposed for the project would be 12 feet wide by 5 feet tall. Caltrans looked into reducing the size of the VMS panels but determined that the size could not be reduced, because a reduction in size of the panel would not be large enough to convey emergency-related messages. VMS must provide space for 3 rows of text, each of which must be 12 inches in height so drivers can read the text. The 5-foot-tall panels allow for adequate space between each row while the 12-foot-width provides enough length for the messaging. Furthermore, the project will be designed to be as visually compatible with the character of the surrounding area as possible to meet Local Coastal Plan requirements. Caltrans has incorporated and continues to develop avoidance and minimization measures (AMMs) into the proposed project to avoid and minimize the impacts of this project on visual resources, they include:

1. The VMS sign panel size shall be the smallest necessary to convey critical emergency or hazard information.
2. Sign materials used will suit the rural coastal highway vernacular and blend with the landscape, the project team is willing to coordinate with SMC with regard to the color of the VMS signs.
3. Methods to minimize the signs’ visual presence would continue to be explored in the project’s design phase, including a potential planting plan that would provide vegetation that would minimize the VMS signs appearance from the backside of the VMS sign, and reduce the overall visibility of the signs from either direction.

Section 6565.17(N) of the Zoning Regulations requires that the number, location, size, design, lighting, materials, and use of colors in signs are compatible with the architectural style of the structure they identify and harmonize with their surroundings.

Community Design Manual –

Brightly illuminated, colored, rotating, reflective, blinking, flashing, or moving signs, pennants or streamers should not be permitted. Both VMS signs will be illuminated, when in use. There are no existing streetlights at either location, so the proposed project would be introducing a source of light into a relatively open viewscape that LCP Policy 8.12 designates for protection.

The addition of these objects into the visual landscape at these locations will further reduce the sense of open space that currently exists at these locations which are outside of the developed El Granada - Princeton urbanized area. Locations further south, closer to the signalized intersection at Capistrano Road, would present less of a visual impact when viewed in the context of the surrounding developed urban area.

Response: Although the VMS would create a new source of light, it would not be substantial. Furthermore, the VMS would be off most of the time. VMS would be programmed to be lighted only when needed to convey critical emergency, incident, or hazard messaging to the traveling public. The VMS when lighted would be bright enough to be seen by motorists on SR 1, but would not create substantial light and glare that would adversely affect day or nighttime views in the area.

Policy 8.13 – (Special Design Guidelines for Coastal Communities) (Montara-Moss Beach-El Granada-Miramar). This policy is composed of several elements, including:

(2) Employ the use of natural materials and colors that blend with the vegetative cover of the site. The application materials do not state what color the cabinets of the VMS will be, but the photo simulations imply they will be black, which would not readily blend with the adjacent vegetation. A dark brown color would be more compatible with the surrounding landscape.

Response:

1. Sign materials used will suit the rural coastal highway vernacular and blend with the landscape, the project team is willing to coordinate with SMC with regard to the color of the VMS signs.

2. Methods to minimize the signs' visual presence would continue to be explored in the project's design phase, including a potential planting plan that would provide vegetation that would minimize the VMS signs appearance from the backside of the VMS sign, and reduce the overall visibility of the signs from either direction.

(4) Design structures that are in scale with the character of their setting and blend rather than dominate or distract from the overall view of the urbanscape. At their proposed locations, the two VMS signs will be viewed against a relatively open background as each location is at the outer edge of the El Granada/Princeton urbanscape. They will, by design (particularly when activated), distract viewers from the generally open views at these two locations. Along Highway One and other scenic roads, there are instances where essential roadway safety features, including signs, barriers, and lights, must be installed within open space view corridors to ensure public safety. In such instances, it is necessary to ensure that these features are sited and designed to minimize their visual impacts to the greatest extent possible. With regard to the proposed project, the applicant has not provided compelling evidence that the VMS are needed for public safety, nor taken the steps needed to minimize their impacts, for example by locating them in areas that would have less of an impact on open space views. Therefore, staff

recommends denial of the requested CDP and encourages the applicant to resubmit an application that eliminates the VMS component of the project.

Response: A Visual Impact Assessment (VIA) was initially prepared by Caltrans in April 2020. In response to concerns from the public regarding visual impacts at Locations 5, 6, and 9, alternate locations were identified, and the VIA was revised in March 2021 (Caltrans 2020d).

The VMS, utility cabinets, WDS, and MGS are common features of a controlled access highway. Both highway travelers and highway neighbors are anticipated to have a moderate to low response to the proposed changes. Resulting visual impact is expected to be moderate-low. There would be no conflicts with applicable zoning and other regulations governing scenic quality.

1. The VMS sign panel size shall be the smallest necessary to convey critical emergency or hazard information.
2. Sign materials used will suit the rural coastal highway vernacular and blend with the landscape
3. Methods to minimize the signs' visual presence would continue to be explored in the project's design phase, including a potential planting plan that would provide vegetation that would minimize the VMS signs appearance from the backside of the VMS sign, and reduce the overall visibility of the signs from either direction.

RECOMMENDED FINDINGS

Regarding the Coastal Development Permit, Find:

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2. That the project, as described in the application and accompanying materials required by Zoning Regulations Section 6328.7 and as conditioned in accordance with Section 6328.14, does not conform with the policies and standards of the San Mateo County Local Coastal Program with regards to the protection of visual resources. As discussed in Section A(2) of this Staff Report, the proposed VMS signs at Locations 5 and 6 will have a negative visual impact upon the scenic resources at these locations.

3. That the project does not conform to the specific findings required by policies of the San Mateo County Local Coastal Program as discussed in Section A(2) of this Staff Report and Finding 2 above.

Response: An IS with Proposed ND was circulated for public review beginning on August 14, 2020, and ending on October 30, 2020. A public meeting on the IS was held on September 10, 2020. Caltrans staff made presentations to the local Midcoast community, including the City of Half Moon Bay City Council on October 6, and the Midcoast Community Council on October 14, 2020.

During the public comment period in the fall of 2020, Caltrans received a vast amount of input from the local community. Members of the public and local council members expressed concerns about the project, including that the proposed VMS are incompatible with the rural character of Highway 1 through San Mateo County. Comments previously received during the public review period related to the project not fitting into the coastal and rural character of the community; VMS being urban solutions for a rural area; data privacy concerns with the WDS; interruption of scenic views with placement of the signs; light pollution from the VMS; and the project not being needed because of existing cellphone applications such as WAZE. As a result of feedback from the local coastal community, Caltrans revised the project to focus on safety-oriented traffic management, rather than the day-to-day traffic management that was previously presented. Additionally, Caltrans has since reconsidered all sign locations and moved three of the signs that were thought to be most in conflict with scenic views. The proposed VMS at Locations 5, and 6 have been moved from their original proposed locations, with the goal of further minimizing the potential impacts of this project on visual resources.

Caltrans has determined the project will have less than significant visual impacts. To minimize the degree of visual impact, VMS have been located near more developed areas or where similar built features occur. The signs will remain off most of the time and be activated during emergencies only. Signs are proposed to be located adjacent to other built features and not be installed along Officially Designated State Scenic Highways. WDS are proposed for existing poles and would have no visual impacts.

The proposed project will give Caltrans the ability to inform the traveling public of roadway conditions quickly and effectively. Unlike current temporary message signs that can display a singular message, Caltrans will be able to operate the proposed VMS from the Traffic Management Center in Oakland. The project is expected to improve conditions along SR 1 by providing motorists with emergency and incident-related information upstream of an incident, so motorists have the opportunity to reroute at safe locations (intersections with traffic lights) and not exacerbate traffic conditions at emergency locations. Caltrans anticipates that this project will improve traffic congestion along the corridor by reducing the duration and impact of non-recurring congestion.