

City moves ahead with \$62M tunnel

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After years of planning, the Menlo Park City Council will move forward with the construction of a \$62 million tunnel to connect Alma Street and El Camino Real, despite its "shocking" price tag and funding uncertainty.

Council on Tuesday agreed to spend \$7.4 million to finalize the tunnel project design and then seek additional funding to cover the construction shortfall, estimated at \$34 million to \$43 million, according to Public Works Director Azalea Mitch. The tunnel would go under the railroad tracks to connect Alma Street and El Camino Real, cutting down travel times for pedestrians and cyclists by more than a half mile.

"The price tag is shocking. I think this will become a vital part of the area," Councilman Jeff Schmidt said.

Council weighs options

The city has \$22 million set aside for the Middle Avenue tunnel. Council had the option to finalize the design to be shovel-ready while still seeking additional funding, build the project in stages based on available funding or stop the project.

Councilman Drew Combs favored building the project in stages, and compared it to buying a Ferrari. He said if he wanted a Ferrari right now, he wouldn't be able to pay for it and would need to finance it, which would cost him more.

"If you've got the money, some money now or some way to access some part of the project now, then that's what you take," Combs said. "That's the only thing that guarantees that you'll ever have people in the tunnel or you'll ever be driving that Ferrari."

Schmidt agreed with Combs because of the level of uncertainty, and it was unclear what funding would look like. The city has "funding hopes

and dreams," but nothing is concrete, Schmidt said.

Councilwomen Betsy Nash, Jennifer Wise and Cecilia Taylor agreed to shut down the railroad tracks for one week-end, provide bus services and have short night closures that would last four to six hours. Construction is expected to take 13 to 16 months, according to Mitch.

Interim chief of design and construction for Caltrain, Sherry Bullock, said there would be consequences if the city chose to build the project in stages, as it would become more expensive and cause more disruption to train services.

Mixed reaction

Residents had mixed feelings about the project, with some speaking against it and others in support.

"We know every person in the city is not going to use this bike tunnel. Most people get around by car. Is this the best use of our money? It's not all coming out of the city's pockets, but I'm a taxpayer. It's coming out of my pockets," Sue Kayton said.

The city hasn't considered the cost of maintaining the tunnel and of police patrolling the area, Kayton said.

Homeless people will use the tunnel as a shelter, which will make it less appealing for residents to use, Michael Barclay said.

Katie Behroozi said the project will be useful for future residents, as it will be a route from Belle Haven to Oak Knoll.

The tunnel will help relieve the pressure cyclists face while riding through Ravenswood Avenue congestion, Ken Kershner said.

The idea to build a tunnel under the railroad tracks has bounced around for decades, but the most recent plans started in 2016. Council will review the final design of the project in a future meeting and discuss funding options.

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