City Council Staff Report

Subject: Old Town Access and Circulation Strategic Plan Overview
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Department: Transportation Planning
Date: November 7, 2019
Type of Item: Work Session – Requesting Direction

Recommendation

- Review the summary of Old Town Access and Circulation Plan discussions to date;
- Identify Council and community goals for Old Town circulation; and
- Recommend Council’s preferred policy initiative(s) moving forward.

Overview

On November 7th, several items regarding Old Town access and circulation will be reviewed. This particular report addresses the need to consider a broader and more holistic analysis of Old Town circulation and priority setting. In order to accomplish Council priorities, staff seeks direction on preferred next steps - data collection analysis, planning and study processes, implementation and infrastructure, etc., etc.).

Transportation Planning staff is aware that Council seeks near term solutions to alleviate traffic and congestion, and alleviate growing public safety concerns in Old Town. Typically, we would advocate for a period of professional and technical analysis, prior to infrastructure and operation improvements. However, we acknowledge that several “low hanging fruit” improvements can likely be implemented without the rigor of our typical planning processes and yet still make positive, incremental improvement to Old Town conditions.

Therefore, Transportation Planning recommends moving forward with two processes concurrently:

1. Comprehensive Old Town Circulation assessment (RFP was already issued, and will cost $2380,000-280,000 depending on inclusion of construction design work),
2. New drop and load zones, additional parking enforcement and signage upgrades, and new ground transportation licensing changes being recommended by staff.

We do not recommend additional capital intensive infrastructure improvements until we can model impacts, cost v. benefit, unintended consequences, etc. We believe launching a robust strategic plan is important to define a collective vision for Old Town, backed by data and public input. The following report highlights the need for a comprehensive data collection, public engagement, and modeling process to get to the next level of implementing larger capital projects that will likely have more of an impact to the core center of our community.

Background

Discussions on safety, access, and congestion in Old Town are commonplace among the City’s public safety, transit, and traffic and parking officials. As a result, Council indicated consensus to implement additional mitigation strategies. For example, staff initiated a comprehensive Old Town Access and Circulation Plan RFP to provide a comprehensive evaluation of Old Town, event mitigation, neighborhood traffic calming, dropping and loading, double parking, circling and idling. Below is a list of recent public discussions and meetings whereby priority projects/strategies were considered:

1. **Hillside Avenue Discussions:**
   Staff presented several updates (March 21, 2019 Hillside Tiered Improvements, March 29, 2018 Hillside Traffic Discussion, and May 17, 2018 Circulation Improvements) about traffic circulation and Hillside Avenue. Discussions moved from emotional, first-hand observations to more holistic and technical assessments regarding Old Town improvements as a broader project area.

2. **Old Town Projects:**
   Staff regularly updated Council on a serious of Hillside Ave improvement projects and Old Town more broadly: August 15, 2019, September 12, 2019. Projects include wayfinding and regulatory signage, striping, vegetation trimming, traffic counters, speed bump, bulb out, lodging industry, drop and load, and police enforcement. Generally, programs and projects were non-invasive, and
identified as interim until more bold, comprehensive, and costly solutions can be analyzed. These projects were easy to implement, however, it is worth noting that they were met with mixed reviews by the community.

3. **Need for Comprehensive Plan:**
   Council approved funding on June 20, 2019, to launch a more comprehensive plan for Old Town. The Plan includes conducting outreach and quantifying impacts (collecting data) to residents to model and inform the project list.

   On August 15, 2019, Council discussed Old Town interim projects and next steps, and found “the majority of Council wanted a comprehensive traffic study, to implement short term solutions…and establish commercial drop and load zones on Main Street.” (Pages 7-8 of Minutes).

   In the October 10, 2019, Council asked to bring the Old Town access and circulation discussion back for clarification of objectives and priorities. Specifically, to gain a better understanding of goals, ensure funding is responsibly allocated, and identify projects that meet community needs.

**Data & Outreach Overview**

Various pieces of data have been collected over the years, however a specific set regarding traffic and congestion in Old Town is sporadic at best, and, often several years old. Because traffic and congestion issues are filled with emotion, it is important to quantify. Traffic data was collected recently at two locations (Hillside Ave and intersection of Hillside and Main) to better quantify a particular neighborhood concern. Speed, vehicle counts, and turning movements were collected, and This memo summarizes internal data collection efforts, coupled with traffic counts that informed a microsimulation model.

**Recommendation**

1. **Move forward with Old Town Circulation Strategic Plan (planning exercise, not project based):**
   The cost is a preferred step in the capital project implementation process.

   **Pros:**
   - A Strategic Plan goes beyond identifying problems; it provides clear direction on most impactful mitigation strategies and a project list.
   - A defensible and transparent process that includes goal setting, data collection, community buy-in, and a preferred project list – the industry standard.
   - A Plan is ideal for understanding the impacts of big and bold projects/policies on locals and navigating tradeoffs, as the two may conflict at various levels.
   - This Plan would also include an “Olympic level” special event circulation approach; expensive and labor intensive, without this Plan an Olympic Level approach will be difficult to justify to critics.

   **Cons:**
   - Schedule (approximately 9 months) to create a project list and begin implementing changes.
   - Funding (approximately $230,000-280,000) goes to the planning process, rather than constructing capital projects, and additional funding would be required to build.

2. **Fund Main Street and Lower Swede Alley Circulation Projects:**
   Bob Wells drop and load and turnaround area, additional drop and load zones, and parking and staging areas. It is unclear if available funding would cover construction costs until design work is completed - curb cuts, new/different driveways, and drainage improvements on Swede Alley. These projects are above and beyond what is being recommended on November 7th by Staff.

   **Pros:**
   - These are near-term changes that will almost certainly improve circulation.
   - Funding can be reallocated towards this effort, instead of a planning process.

   **Cons:**
   - Significant loss of parking revenue.
   - Unclear of impacts to Transit movements and the Transit Center, as well as how many vehicles and vehicle types require the use of that space (demand).
   - Lack of data collection prior to short term project improvements makes it difficult to measure success (congestion relief, better access, increased public safety, etc.)
3. Do nothing: Forego a planning process, as well as eliminate any noninvasive circulation project efforts.

Pros:
- Funding is not expended; resources and labor devoted to other community issues

Cons:
- No meaningful improvements to circulation and residential made.
- Public safety, traffic and congestion will continue unabated.

Objectives for Old Town

Considerations for Council before determining a recommendation:
- How do we measure success? Public perception, reduction in traffic volumes, transit ridership, other?
- What are the goals/outcomes? Some suggestions:
  - Address public safety concerns – emergency response access, gridlock, double and illegal parking, drop and loading, and circling
  - Promote transit, walkability, and biking
  - Balance business and accessibility goals with neighborhood quality of life
- Goal prioritization

Funding
A comprehensive Strategic Plan for Old Town will cost approximately $280,000; $50,000 is allocated to project construction design and can be cut from the original scope. This brings the effort closer to $230,000. Through a combination of funding sources (Transit Fund, Lower Main Street RDA, Park Ave RDA, and Economic Development budget) $230,000 is currently available.

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