

PLANNING ACHIEVEMENT AWARDS DESCRIPTION “Hard Won Victories”

STATE ROUTE 15 AND THE MID-CITY BRT

The Fight for Follow-on Commitments and Promised Facilities in City Heights & Mid-City

History

Construction of the Mid-City segment of State Route 15 was a watershed event for the Mid-City community, which had long suffered the impacts of over 35,000 cars per day passing through its neighborhoods on surface streets (Wabash Boulevard and 40th Street). The community had been further damaged by CALTRANS practices in acquiring and vacating the future freeway corridor. Recognizing the extraordinary circumstances surrounding this project, the design of this segment of freeway was intensely negotiated with the community with the goal of making the new freeway both a regional asset and a catalyst for neighborhood renewal.

Many design amenities resulted from this process including:

- construction of the freeway in a narrow, below-grade channel to minimize the physical division of the community;
- creation of a four acre cut-and-cover park over one block of the freeway;
- enhanced pedestrian linkages across the freeway; and
- integration of rapid transit into the median of the freeway, supported by expanded overcrossings to serve as transit plazas at the interchanges of SR-15 at University Avenue and El Cajon Boulevard.

These commitments and mitigations were codified in Memoranda of Understanding and Agreement between CALTRANS and the City of San Diego and other agencies, most notably in the 1985 through 1993 timeframe. The transit service plans that would fulfill this promise were adopted as part of SANDAG's Mobility 2030 (the 2003 RTP).

The SR-15 - CenterLine- Rapid Transit System, a state-of-the-art bus rapid transit (BRT) system to be located in the center median area of the freeway, was at a critical juncture in 2007. The new 2007 Regional Transportation Plan (RTP) was being prepared for adoption. There are pressures to identify the I-15 corridor as a future HOV corridor (not needed in the Mid-City region before 2030, by CALTRANS estimates). Further, SANDAG wanted to designate the corridor as a key freight corridor in the Goods Movement Action Plan (GMAP), which will be incorporated into the 2007 RTP. A Project Study Report (PSR) conducted by CALTRANS over the course of 2006 made clear that either of these options, if adopted into the 2007 RTP, would prevent the CenterLine Rapid Transit System and Stations from being constructed as promised.

The City of San Diego was a signatory to the 1985 Memorandum of Agreement and the 1993 Memorandum of Understanding with the State of California Department of Transportation. The documents included promises to mitigate air and noise pollution impacts on Central Elementary School, divert truck traffic to I-805 to the maximum extent feasible and dedicate the center median area for use of a rapid transit system and stations accessed from the transit plaza's located at University Avenue and El Cajon Boulevard overpasses. When CALTRANS told the community that Transit in the Centerline was not possible, community groups and business leaders became outraged and solicited help from their local council office. In 2007, the Council Office of Toni Atkins assisted with staff from SANDAG, appointed a Working Group of public members, agency representatives, non-profit organizations and community activists. The Working Group worked for several years, hand in hand with the Council Office and KTU+A and IBI to develop a range of alternatives that could include transit in the freeway corridor.



a) Challenges or barriers: What obstacles, whether physical, natural, political, social, or a combination thereof, were faced and addressed by the nominated effort? What is the extent of these challenges or other adversarial conditions, and what steps were undertaken to meet the difficult circumstances? *From the beginning, City Heights and Mid-city has suffered from the proposal to build a freeway through what was 40th Street. Though designated a freeway from the late to early 1970s, the project stood at a standstill for decades, all the while, lowering the value of properties and discouraging redevelopment and investment in the area. Finally, in the mid 1980s, agreements were made assuring certain efforts such as transit services, park development and continuity of business storefronts across El Cajon and University Avenues (utilizing the bridge decks for actual business development). Through construction of the freeway and through the improvements of the bridge decks as transit facilities, these agreements were being honored. However, in 2006, CALTRANS proposed HOV lanes and increased truck traffic through the SR-15 corridor. Based on their own studies, it was determined that transit could not be accommodated in the corridor and CALTRANS and the CHP basically told the community it would not happen. The community immediately became involved and researched the previous agreements. Based on the earlier agreements and environmental impact mitigations, CALTRANS reopened the studies and helped to support the planning and engineering efforts. A working group worked for years to overcome the technical and political processes that told them that this could not be done. Working with consultants, the working group and SANDAG found technically feasible solutions. The community has been working on obtaining the political and financial support for these improvements. A victory is occurring this month, with CALTRANS, SANDAG and MTS agreeing on a preferred alternative. This, after a delay of 5 years for these improvements to be implemented and 10 years after the construction of the freeway, is a hard won victory for the community.*

b) Available resources: What resources were available and how were these resources (financial, personnel, consultants, etc.) managed, leveraged, and deployed? *One of the available resources that was tapped into was a the Insight Project, a CHCDC program funded by the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) to create local capacity to organize residents to speak out on their own behalf. The outreach efforts coordinated as a result of the Insight Project resulted in the Mid-City MOVES Mobility Coalition, a coalition of local community-based organizations who saw that there was a mobility deficit in the area that negatively impacted the lives of City Heights residents. The actions of the Coalition created political will for the agency (SANDAG) to allocate consultant resources to work with the community on developing a satisfactory solution. The Coalition took advantage of existing community networks to galvanize the resources that were needed. Additionally, the consultant team brought to the project, a number of visualization and graphic communication tools that made the project understandable not only to the general public and laypersons, but also to the design and engineering team. A full three dimensional model was developed that was used for on-the-fly presentations, self running movies and visual simulations.*

c) Progress and positive effects: What are the lasting effects the effort has had or is likely to have on planning in the community? Has the effort removed or mitigated the barriers and obstacles? How has or will the effort shape the future in the community or locale? What influence has the nominated effort had on community leaders and their views about the value and effectiveness of planning? *Through the SR-15 planning process over the last two years, the agency's efforts to explore many alternatives in an iterative, objective process has built credibility for the agency within the community. The continued focus on this area has also resulted in additional planning resources being brought to this area in the form of a Smart Growth Implementation grant from SANDAG to the City of San Diego Planning Department, which will try to anticipate the potential effects of the new transit service from a land use perspective and engage the community in planning for this future. It is anticipated that the new transit service will transform Mid-City from an economically-isolated area to a highly-connected hub, with high-speed transit to downtown and other employment centers. This change is expected to increase development pressure in the neighborhoods surrounding these stations. The Smart Growth Implementation Grant planning process is scheduled to begin with the public on 3/29/2011. This effort has also shown that original commitments made to communities need to be honored and that the practices of the past, in terms of environmental justice and impacts on communities, need to be resolved from the beginning to the end of the planning, design, engineering and construction process. All in the community and the region will benefit from lessons learned in this part of the City of San Diego.*