December 7, 2019

Re: Comment on Agenda Item 48 (Destination Sacramento Program)

Dear Members of the Council:

I am writing as a resident of Midtown and as the winner of the public portion of the city’s open waterfront competition to support the proposal to improve Old Sacramento – and, critically, to ask the Council to take action to remediate the damage Interstate 5 does to the city’s waterfront. The highway seriously damages quality of life in Sacramento by cutting the city off from the river, and impairs the waterfront’s and Railyards’ potential success. There is now a narrow window to consider better options, as CalTrans is rapidly moving forward with a potentially billion-dollar-plus spending program to rebuild the American River crossing of the highway and its approaches.[[1]](#footnote-1) This project will further entrench the highway on the river, but it is not too late to make a better choice.

The Council should immediately ask staff to study alternative options for this spending more consistent with the General Plan and the city’s livability goals, and to work with CalTrans to study better options.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In particular, both Arup Consulting (including former CalSTA Deputy Secretary Kate White) and the Urban Lands Institute have confirmed that they are interested in providing planning services to the city; Arup is willing to conduct some of this work pro bono. I have discussed this possibility the Mayor’s past and present senior environmental advisers, as well as the Railyards and Riverfront Program Manager; all have been supportive. I have also explored options with city engineering staff and various council staff and all, again, are interested in better understanding their options. In conversations with various state officials, I have also consistently found interest: California’s capitol city deserves to have a thriving waterfront. Now is the time to solidify this interest and develop a concrete set of policy choices before the highway is rebuilt. Council direction is needed to move forward.

These options should include a hard look at options that include highway “decking” – covering the sunken portion of the highway with a deck that can support parks and housing – as well as lane narrowing, and freeway removal (including, of course, replacement with surface streets and transit for local traffic and potential freight re-routes on other north/south corridors, including potentially on I-80 back to I-5). All of these options appear potentially feasible:

Decking could revitalize the waterfront south from Old Sacramento as far as southern midtown. As you know, the city secured CalTrans design approval of a ~$250 million decking option in 2008 that would have revitalized the southern waterfront. The considerable property value increases associated with a connected waterfront, embracing the Crocker Park expansion and potential housing would transform the area. Decking projects of this sort have been employed or are underway throughout the country, including in Boston, Atlanta, Dallas, and St. Paul, Minnesota.

Removal or lane narrowing is also very worth considering. As you may be aware, cities across the country have experiment with highway removal, with considerable success. Removal has succeeded or is underway in cities as diverse as Portland, Milwaukee, Syracuse, Rochester, and San Francisco. Oakland is also actively investigating removing the highway severing its downtown from West Oakland, and earlier relocated a second highway to create Mandela Park. Each of these cities is experiencing revitalized downtowns and parks as a result of these decisions.[[3]](#footnote-3) Lane narrowing – though less satisfactory – could at least shrink the wide gulf the highway cuts between the river and town, and could make decking projects less expensive.

The economics are straightforward: Freeways do not pay taxes, and they depress property values around them. As California seeks to densify and build new housing, replacing freeways in the urban core with housing and parks increases property values and tax revenues, as well as making cities more pleasant. Moreover, alternative solutions – generally a mix of new roads, transit, and better design – very often reduce congestion while improving multimodal transport and cutting air pollution. As CalTrans and SACOG both move to focus on designs that can reduce emissions and cut vehicle miles travelled (VMT), removal, narrowing, and decking options are also good candidates for state and federal funds. The net economic benefits of creating a viable waterfront very likely outweigh costs associated with the transition.

Sacramento has a real chance to join cities across the country that are seizing these benefits, rather than passively accepting the bad choices of the highway-building area. As the Council declares a Climate Emergency, affirms a General Plan focused on livability, and invests in the Waterfront it should actively work to improve the city’s urban form and fully unlock the benefits of our river city – by reconnecting the city with its river.

The public would be with you. Hundreds of people voted to support reclaiming the waterfront in Sacramento when I proposed it, or that many other voices have echoed the call – including this Council when it almost moved forward with decking in 2008.[[4]](#footnote-4) As the Council moves forward to improve Old Sacramento, it should ensure its investments seed greater change – and are not undermined by the highway building of half-a-century ago. Please take the opportunity to initiate planning at the staff level to remove, deck, or otherwise remediate Interstate 5 before it is too late. CalTrans planning is moving forward now; the City should not delay.

Thank you for your action on this matter.

Sincerely,

Craig Segall

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1. *See* Tony Bizjack, Sacramento Bee, “State may tear down major Sacramento bridges to build bigger ones for mega-trucks” (March 5, 2018), available at: <https://www.sacbee.com/news/local/transportation/article201449679.html>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Mayors’ Innovation Project provides a very useful policy overview of these options here: <https://www.mayorsinnovation.org/images/uploads/pdf/SURDNA_freeway_brief.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For a recent survey of successful projects, *see, e.g.*, David Harrison, Wall Street Journal, “Highways Give Way To Homes as Cities Rebuild” (Dec. 1, 2019), available at: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/highways-give-way-to-homes-as-cities-rebuild-11575208801>. *See also* Congress for the New Urbanism, “Freeways Without Futures 2019”, available at: <https://www.cnu.org/news/freeways-without-futures-2019> for a good overview of projects past and present. A good initial introduction to public benefits can be found in Adam Millsap, Forbes, “Is It Time to Take Highways Out of Cities?” (Nov. 21, 2019), available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/adammillsap/2019/11/21/is-it-time-to-take-highways-out-of-cities/#4c62a39f1a04>. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *See also, e.g.*, Walt Seifert, Inside Sacramento, “Time to Unplug I-5” (June 2019), available at: <https://insidesacramento.com/time-to-unplug-i-5/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)