



**SOPHIE HAHN**

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**CONSENT CALENDAR**

May 28, 2019

To: Honorable Mayor and Members of the City Council  
From: Councilmembers Sophie Hahn, Susan Wengraf, Kate Harrison, and Mayor Jesse Arreguin  
Subject: Budget Referral: Solano Avenue Revitalization Plan

**RECOMMENDATION**

1. Refer \$300,000 to the FY2020 - FY2021 Budget Process for the development of a two-part Solano Avenue "Master" Revitalization Plan; Part A for the Upper/Eastern end of Solano Avenue and Part B for mid-corridor blocks within the City of Berkeley, to coordinate with the City of Albany's mid-corridor Solano Avenue Reconfiguration Plan.
  
2. Direct the City Manager to send a letter to the City of Albany expressing Berkeley's desire to collaborate on reconfiguration and revitalization plans for the mid-corridor portion of Solano Avenue, and to initiate plans for coordination.

**SUMMARY STATEMENT**

Solano Avenue is a primary shopping district for much of North Berkeley, including the Thousand Oaks neighborhood and both the low and high North Berkeley hills. Revitalizing Solano Avenue as a neighborhood-serving, attractive and sustainable Main Street for North Berkeley is a key goal of local residents. Solano also has the potential to generate significantly more tax revenues for the City of Berkeley by attracting new businesses and patrons.

Upper Solano Avenue is extremely wide, with most of the right-of-way devoted to automobiles. This area presents a unique opportunity to create an enhanced sense of place for North Berkeley; to add pedestrian, landscaping and placemaking features that support a vibrant neighborhood Main Street and build community.

Solano Avenue is also the most important commercial and pedestrian-oriented street shared by Berkeley and Albany, knitting the two communities together. For approximately five blocks of mid-Solano, buildings on the North side of the street are in Berkeley, while the street, buildings on the South side of the street and *both* the North and South sidewalks are within Albany. This unusual configuration means that Albany

determines the street and sidewalk conditions for many Berkeley properties and businesses. Ensuring that mid-Solano amenities are similar and/or consistent on both the Albany and Berkeley portions of the street is thus particularly important. As a single continuous corridor, improvements to mid-Solano Avenue should be conceived and designed in a collaborative, coordinated manner.

Albany has already implemented a Complete Streets plan for lower Solano Avenue, from San Pablo Avenue to Masonic Avenue. This public investment in Albany's "downtown" at the western end of the Solano Avenue commercial corridor has triggered a notable revitalization, attracting new patrons and enlivening sidewalks.

Albany is currently discussing proposals for a second phase of their Solano Avenue Reconfiguration Plan, for the "mid-corridor" area, from Masonic Avenue to the Berkeley border. Due to an oversight, Berkeley's City Manager, Mayor and members of the City Council were not apprised of Albany's planning effort at the outset, and their visioning process has progressed without the City of Berkeley's participation.

*In light of the importance of Solano Avenue to all of North Berkeley, of Albany's "head start" on planning for the mid-Solano corridor, and to encourage the necessary collaborative process between our two cities, the need to fund a study for the Berkeley portion of Solano Avenue is urgent.*

This item refers \$300,000 to the FY2020 - FY 2021 Budget Process to begin development of a two-part Solano Avenue "Master" Revitalization Plan for Berkeley; Part A for the Upper/Eastern end of Solano Avenue and Part B for mid-corridor blocks within the City of Berkeley, allowing Berkeley to coordinate mid-Solano plans with Albany. This item also directs the City Manager to send a letter to the Albany City Manager, City Council and Transportation and Safety Commission expressing the City of Berkeley's desire to collaborate on important inter-City elements of Solano Avenue plans.

#### **BACKGROUND**

Since the 1920s, Solano Avenue has served as a neighborhood-serving shopping district for North Berkeley and a northern gateway for the City of Berkeley. Bordering Albany, Berkeley's Solano Avenue Commercial District is home to about 130 commercial spaces encompassing approximately 190,000 square feet of commercial space. The eastern, Berkeley portion of Solano Avenue (commonly referred to as "Upper Solano") was a key hub for a number of rail lines in the 1930s, and today is an extra-wide street largely devoted to automobiles and buses, with relatively narrow

sidewalks. Upper Solano has a number of restaurants, home goods, clothing, and other unique shops that make it a commercial hub for North Berkeley.

However, both anecdotal and quantitative data suggest that Solano Avenue is an underperforming commercial district for Berkeley. Solano is similar in neighborhood character to the Elmwood District on College Avenue, but The Elmwood earns significantly more tax revenue per block, despite the fact that the two districts are located in areas with similar home prices and populations with similar purchasing power. Despite a modest uptick, tax revenues from Solano Avenue remained relatively flat between 2010 and 2018, especially when compared to the significant increases over that same time period in other Berkeley districts<sup>1</sup>.

In recent years, Solano Avenue has been buffeted by changing demographics, the rise of online retail, and other forces that have impacted the area's longtime shops. For nearly a decade, the prominent Oaks Theater at 1875 Solano was vacant and had difficulty attracting an appropriate tenant.<sup>2</sup> The absence of the theatre, which drew patrons throughout afternoons and evenings, has deprived the area of much needed foot traffic.

In 2018, commercial vacancy rates in the Solano District were at 5.6%. This means that of a total inventory of ground floor commercial space of approximately 191,000 square feet, about 10,696 square feet were vacant. The vacancy rate was nearly a point higher than it was the previous year, and significantly higher than in the years 2012-2015, when the vacancy rate hovered between 3.5% to 4.4%.<sup>3</sup>

Solano Avenue is also undergoing a number of changes, including the impending opening of a Touchstone Climbing Gym at the long-vacant Oaks Theatre space. Touchstone estimates several hundred visitors per day. The opening of the new gym is expected to bring many new patrons to Solano Avenue's shops and restaurants, and will also impact parking and drop off zones.

Many of Touchstone's existing patrons ride bikes to their other locations (including Ironworks Gym in Berkeley), and demand for bike parking and other bicycle amenities on Solano is expected to increase dramatically once the gym opens. Solano Avenue was identified for a future Complete Street Corridor Study in the 2017 Berkeley Bicycle

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<sup>1</sup> Berkeley Office of Economic Development, Commercial District Dashboard, March 2019

<sup>2</sup> Berkeley Office of Economic Development, Economic Development Analysis – Solano Avenue, Feb. 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Berkeley Office of Economic Development, Economic Dashboard, 2018.

Plan, and numerous requests for a Ford Go-Bike station on Solano Avenue have been received since the successful launch of the City's bike sharing program.

Berkeley can strengthen community, enhance commerce and public space, better serve a variety of transit modes and increase tax revenues with the prompt initiation of an aspirational visioning and planning process for Solano Avenue.

In the spring of 2018, the Albany City Council began a public process to develop and approve a Solano Avenue Complete Streets Plan for the "mid-corridor" section of Solano Avenue, from Masonic Avenue to the Berkeley City Limit just east of Ventura Avenue. Goals of the study include strategies to "improve safety for pedestrians and bicyclists; enhance access to transit; promote a cohesive streetscape; [and] support local economic activity"<sup>4</sup>. The study also specifically considers "street lighting, intersection alignments, signal modernization, bike facilities, sidewalk improvements, streetscape landscaping, street parking, bus stops, public art, directional signage, and gateway improvements".<sup>5</sup> Finally, the study considers a number of aesthetic features and improvements including public art, signage, and intersection and roadway design.

During the February 28, 2019 meeting of Albany's Traffic & Safety Commission, the Commission recommended to the City Council adoption of the draft Solano Avenue Complete Streets Plan<sup>6</sup>, including an alternative community plan with different parking and bike infrastructure recommendations. To date, the Plan as recommended by the Traffic & Safety Commission has not yet been discussed by the full Albany City Council, but it is expected to be heard soon. The plan, if adopted, has no sources of funding for implementation, but will guide future improvements on Solano Avenue in Albany. Despite an uneven start, there is still time for Berkeley to "catch up" and coordinate with Albany to create a cohesive, mutually beneficial mid-Solano plan that reflects the aspirations of both communities.

The community's desire for a revitalized Solano Avenue, coupled with consideration of the need to coordinate with Albany's Solano Avenue planning process presents a unique opportunity for Berkeley to begin its own visioning process for Solano Avenue.

#### **REVIEW OF EXISTING PLANS, PROGRAMS, POLICIES & LAWS**

Policy ED-4 *Neighborhood and Avenue Commercial Districts* of the Economic Development Element of the General Plan sets the goal of providing programs and

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.solanocompletestreets.org/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.solanocompletestreets.org/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5ac43de02714e5d504879d1a/t/5c6210b26e9a7f2f1c03066d/1549930705894/Solano+Complete+Streets+Public+Review+Draft+2.11.19.pdf>

services to assist neighborhood and avenue commercial districts through actions such as “enhanc[ing] the pedestrian orientation of all shopping districts”.

Specifically, the City Council referred a Solano Avenue Economic Development Study to City Staff on April 25, 2017 to provide baseline information for future strategic planning and business development and initiatives. Several economic reports developed by the Office of Economic Development also demonstrate the potential for improvement to the City’s tax base by working towards a thriving Solano Avenue.

#### **ACTIONS/ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED**

The City could defer initiating a comprehensive study for Solano Avenue and take it up at a later time. However, this would preclude any collaboration in the Albany redesign process, and because it is likely that any plan or vision approved in Albany will inform future changes in Berkeley, it is important that Berkeley be involved at the earliest stage possible. Delaying the study would also further prolong improvements to the Solano Avenue commercial district. Given the length of time need to conduct a thorough community process and to complete any construction or infrastructure project that is approved, starting a process now will ultimately yield more timely results.

#### **CONSULTATION/OUTREACH OVERVIEW & RESULTS**

Councilmember Hahn’s office has discussed the possibility of collaboration with Berkeley with Albany City Councilmembers and the Albany Mayor, and discussed with City Manager Dee Williams-Ridley funding for a Solano Avenue study, outreach protocols and project timing.

#### **RATIONALE FOR RECOMMENDATION**

The Albany study has been in development for nearly a year, and will soon be reviewed by the Albany City Council. Because Solano Avenue spans both Albany and Berkeley, it is imperative that Berkeley be informed of and engaged with proposed Albany improvements, and that a Berkeley study be undertaken to establish Berkeley’s own objectives and preferences for Solano Avenue.

Transportation infrastructure and other changes to the Albany-side of Solano Avenue will undoubtedly influence any future transportation infrastructure on the Berkeley portion of Solano Avenue. As such, collaboration between Berkeley and Albany on the mid-corridor redesign is key to a sensible and coherent transition between the Albany and Berkeley portions of Solano Avenue.

#### **IMPLEMENTATION, ADMINISTRATION & ENFORCEMENT**

The two elements of the requested study are intended to produce inspiring plans for the Upper and mid-Solano portions of Solano Avenue in Berkeley. The Avenue should be seen first as a public space and a driver of community and economic strength; a neighborhood destination, not just a place to pass through quickly.

The goal for Upper Solano, from The Alameda to approximately Ensenada Avenue (exact western border to be determined by the study), is to create a strong and aesthetically pleasing sense of place, and to enhance the experience of the public realm. Upper Solano Avenue already serves as a Main Street for much of North Berkeley; the intent is for this area to become a more vibrant, attractive and accessible Main Street; a complete ecosystem with greater amenities for residents of all ages, and for all modes of transit. Improvements should be considered that create spaces for social interaction and define a character for the street, including but not limited to landscaping, seating, street furniture, lighting, public art and other features that invite the community to gather, linger, shop and dine more frequently.

The goal for the Berkeley portion of mid-Solano (from approximately Ensenada to where Albany picks up responsibility for the street and sidewalks) is to continue pedestrian and other amenities at a scale appropriate for the mix and concentration of retail, office and residential uses, and to coordinate with Albany to ensure a cohesive corridor.

The study should include robust community outreach and input and, at a minimum, a community survey, a public realm study, review of transit needs and pedestrian safety and crossings, a parking study, review of street and curb alignments (including possible alternatives to the Colusa Dogleg) and green infrastructure.

#### **FISCAL IMPACTS**

\$300,000 to fund a two-part Solano Avenue “Master” Revitalization Plan. Funds for implementation of the plan have not yet been identified; this is a preliminary visioning process to create a master plan from which funding needs and resources can be derived. Transit infrastructure and pedestrian accessibility improvements that may result from future implementation are intended to increase City tax revenues from Solano Avenue.

#### **ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY**

This recommendation is consistent with the City of Berkeley’s environmental sustainability goals by encouraging biking and walking, incorporating green infrastructure, and strengthening community.

#### **CONTACT**

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**ATTACHMENTS**

1. Map of Solano Avenue Commercial District, OED Economic Dashboards 2019
2. Photos of streetscape, pedestrian, and traffic treatments on Upper Solano Ave

**Attachment 1**



**Attachment 2**



