



April 17, 2023

Via Electronic Mail
(city.council@culvercity.org)

City of Culver City - City Hall
9770 Culver Blvd.
Culver City, CA 90232

RE: Proposed project to expand vehicle capacity on Culver City arterials

Dear Mayor Vera and Members of the Culver City Council:

On behalf of the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), we are writing to express our support for the MOVE Culver City initiative and raise concerns about a potential decision that the Culver City Council may make at its April 24, 2023 meeting to remove the dedicated bus and bike lanes and to expand vehicular capacity on principle arterial highways through Culver City, including Washington Boulevard and Culver Boulevard.

Removing dedicated bus and bicycle facilities created through the MOVE Culver City initiative and replacing them with vehicle lanes would undermine Culver City's efforts to address the largest source of pollution affecting local communities and our entire climate system – transportation. Further, it would make safety conditions worse for people who walk, bike, ride buses and drive through Culver City's downtown. Additionally, it would slow down the City's own transit system, causing delays for transit riders and increasing the City's operating costs.

To be clear: Any action by the City to increase the number of lane-miles available for mixed-flow vehicle traffic requires analysis, disclosure, and mitigation of potential environmental impacts pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). Converting dedicated bus lanes to mixed-flow vehicle traffic lanes is not a ministerial act, nor would it qualify for any statutory or categorical exemption to CEQA. *E.g.*, Cal. Code Regs. tit. 14 § 15301 (limiting categorical exemption for “existing facilities,” including “highways and streets,” to actions “involving negligible or no expansion of existing or former use.”). The City therefore must comply with CEQA before it makes any final decision on the proposed project. Further, because the project may cause disproportionate impacts to residents of color and immigrant background who use the transit system, the City must also conduct an analysis under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act.

Potential Impacts Requiring Analysis under CEQA

The following are just some of the potentially significant environmental impacts from the proposed project that would require analysis, disclosure and mitigation under CEQA.

Transportation Impacts

The CEQA Guidelines provide specific instruction on how lead agencies should analyze transportation impacts under CEQA:

Generally, vehicle miles traveled is the most appropriate measure of transportation impacts. [...] “vehicle miles traveled” [VMT] refers to the amount and distance of automobile travel attributable to a project. Other relevant considerations may include the effects of the project on transit and non-motorized travel.

Cal. Code Regs. tit. 14 § 15064.3(a). The Governor’s Office of Planning and Research’s “Technical Advisory on Evaluating Transportation Impacts in CEQA” advises lead agencies to consider if their project type is one that is likely to increase VMT, and then to measure how much additional VMT the proposed project will cause:¹

If a project would likely lead to a measurable and substantial increase in vehicle travel, the lead agency should conduct an analysis assessing the amount of vehicle travel the project will induce. Project types that would likely lead to a measurable and substantial increase in vehicle travel generally include: Addition of through lanes on existing or new highways, including general purpose lanes, HOV lanes, peak period lanes, auxiliary lanes, or lanes through grade-separated interchanges.

The proposed project’s potential VMT impacts require careful study under CEQA. The project would entail adding approximately 2.6 lane miles of vehicular lanes to principal arterial highways, a project type likely to significantly increase VMT according to OPR guidance. To develop a preliminary estimate of the increase in VMT, we used the Induced Travel Calculator from the National Center for Sustainable Transportation at UC Davis, which the California Department of Transportation has adopted to analyze VMT impacts of highway expansion projects.² Our preliminary estimate is that the project will induce approximately six million additional VMT per year. This additional driving must be analyzed to determine if it constitutes a significant environmental impact.

The proposed project’s effects on transit should also be assessed. Removal of dedicated bus lanes is likely to degrade bus service in the area, and decrease bus ridership, bike and micromobility ridership, and pedestrian activity, each of which increased substantially following the introduction of upgraded dedicated bus and bike lanes along the corridor.

¹ Accessed April 5, 2023. https://opr.ca.gov/docs/20190122-743_Technical_Advisory.pdf

² “Transportation Analysis Framework.” Caltrans. Accessed April 10, 2023. <https://dot.ca.gov/-/media/dot-media/programs/transportation-planning/documents/sb-743/2020-09-10-1st-edition-taf-fnl-a11y.pdf>

Criteria Pollution Impacts

The proposed project's potential air pollution impacts require study under CEQA. The City is located in a non-attainment area for ozone and particulate matter. The increase in driving caused by this project will likely lead to significant additional criteria air pollution, including ozone, carbon monoxide, nitrogen dioxide, sulfur dioxide, and PM10 and PM2.5, from tailpipe exhaust and brake, tire and roadway wear.

Greenhouse Gas Emissions Impacts

The proposed project's greenhouse gas impacts also require assessment, and based on available information it would likely be significant. Because of the induced VMT that the proposed project would cause, we expect the project will generate pollution equivalent to the annual emissions of approximately 600 to 700 passenger cars and light trucks burning approximately 300,000 to 365,000 gallons of gasoline. This equals up to 100,000 metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent per year.³ This is nearly an order of magnitude larger than the 10,000 metric ton per year interim CEQA significance threshold that the South Coast Air Quality Management District has used for stationary sources for over a decade.⁴

Safety Impacts

Increases in roadway capacity and VMT will increase the risk of crashes, especially to vulnerable road users. The proposed project will increase vehicle speeds which dramatically increases the likelihood that a collision between a car and pedestrian would cause a fatality. On average, 90 percent of pedestrians survive being hit by cars travelling 23 mph, but only half of pedestrians survive being hit by a car travelling 42 mph, according to the Federal Highway Administration.⁵ Further, the project would increase the number of mixed flow vehicle lanes that pedestrians will have to cross and force people biking to share lanes with vehicular traffic, which runs counter to safety best practices.⁶

OPR guidance on addressing transportation safety in General Plans advises agencies to: reduce speed and increase driver attention, protect vulnerable road users and reduce overall VMT and sprawl.⁷

³ Estimates generated via the Induced VMT Calculator available at SHIFT.RMI.org. Inputs were as follows: (1) California, (2) Other Principal Arterials, (3) Los Angeles County and (4) range of 2 and 3 lane miles. Accessed April 5, 2023.

⁴ "Greenhouse Gases (GHG) CEQA Significance Thresholds." South Coast Air Quality Management District. Accessed April 12, 2023. <http://www.aqmd.gov/home/rules-compliance/ceqa/air-quality-analysis-handbook/ghg-significance-thresholds/page/2>.

⁵ "Speed Management is Key to Road Safety." USDOT. Accessed April 10, 2023. <https://highways.dot.gov/public-roads/winter-2022/05>

⁶ "Traffic Calming to Slow Vehicle Speeds." USDOT. Accessed April 10, 2023. <https://www.transportation.gov/mission/health/Traffic-Calming-to-Slow-Vehicle-Speeds>

⁷ OPR. General Plan Guidelines, Appendix B: Transportation Safety." Accessed April 5, 2023. https://opr.ca.gov/docs/OPR_Appendix_B_final.pdf

Alignment with Policies and Programs

Title VI of the Civil Rights Act

The removal of dedicated bus lanes is likely to degrade transit service in a way that could have disproportionate impacts on protected populations covered by Title VI of the Civil Rights Act. The City must assess these potential impacts and potential mitigation measures before adopting the project.

The U.S. Department of Transportation explains: “Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 protects people from discrimination based on race, color, and national origin in programs and activities receiving federal financial assistance.”⁸ The act applies to Culver City because the City receives federal funding for transit service. Users of the Culver City Bus system are likely to be disproportionately people of color and immigrants based on regional transit ridership demographics.⁹ (We were not able to obtain a copy of the City’s latest on-board rider survey.) This project would likely lead to disproportionate harms to protected classes by reducing the quality of their transportation service by making buses slower and less reliable due to the removal of dedicated bus lanes.

Riders of Culver City Bus Route 1 (the main line serving the project corridor) are disproportionately low income, with 47 percent of riders living in households earning less than \$15,000 per year compared to only seven percent of Culver City residents overall living in households earning below \$15,000. In contrast, only five percent of riders of Route 1 live in households with incomes over \$75,000, compared 52% of Culver City residents living in households with incomes above \$75,000.¹⁰

According to the City’s 2022-2023 Title VI Report, the Culver City service area is comprised of residents of whom 52.6% are “minority” and 47.4% are “non-minority.”¹¹

Expanding vehicle capacity and removing bus and bike lanes would also be inconsistent with the City’s commitment to environmental justice as described in the Title VI report, because it would cause disproportionate impacts to minority populations who ride Culver City Bus in greater shares.

In the Title VI report, the City notes that bus-only lanes are one of its key strategies for improving transit services: “Bus-Only Lanes – Through the MOVE Culver City initiative, Culver City implemented pilot bus and bike lanes in its downtown corridor on Culver Boulevard and Washington Boulevard that enable buses to move efficiently through this corridor that connects downtown Culver City with E Line, Culver City Station and Arts District.” Removal of these bus

⁸ “Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.” USDOT. Accessed April 10, 2023. <https://www.transit.dot.gov/title6>

⁹ “Falling Transit Ridership: California and Southern California.” Manville, M., Taylor, B., and Blumenberg, E. Accessed April 13, 2023. https://scag.ca.gov/sites/main/files/file-attachments/its_scag_transit_ridership.pdf

¹⁰ Lu, Jeffery. “Culver City Washington Boulevard Transit Lane Feasibility Study.” Accessed April 13, 2023. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/29p3d7rt>

¹¹ “Title VI Report and Limited English Proficiency Plan.” City of Culver City. Accessed April 11, 2023. <https://culver-city.legistar.com/View.ashx?M=F&ID=10510309&GUID=0D131E5A-4FA0-4A9B-B3C7-35C0C500333F>

lanes would undermine a key strategy identified to the Federal Transit Administration for improving transit service in compliance with Title VI.

Culver City General Plan

Expanding vehicle capacity and removing bus and bike lanes would be inconsistent with the City's commitment to environmental justice established in the *Culver City General Plan 2045*, which focuses on equitable planning for future generations through its core values of equity and inclusion, sustainability, innovation and creativity, and compassion and community. The Title VI report also notes that the General Plan's guiding principles for mobility are: "to build more active and shared modes of getting to, from, and through Culver City by providing more reliable, safe, affordable, clean, and connected transportation and mobility options for people of all ages and abilities." The proposed project undermines recent efforts that would advance those general plan goals.

Conclusion

On behalf of the Natural Resources Defense Council, we request that the City Council not remove the improvements created through the MOVE Culver City initiative, and thus expand vehicular lanes and capacity through the City's downtown. Further, we expect any decision to be fully compliant with the requirements of the California Environmental Quality Act, Title VI of the Civil Rights Act and the City's General Plan.

Sincerely,

Carter Rubin
Senior Transportation Lead

cc:

Heather Baker, City Attorney
Diana Chang, Chief Transportation Officer