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Rainier Ave. undercrossing inches forward

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THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Published: Saturday, August 13, 2011 at 9:43 a.m.

Flooding, traffic relief and the effects of development will be major issues fleshed out as Petaluma begins an environmental impact report on a long-planned Rainier Avenue cross-town connector.

One topic that won't be in the EIR but is just as crucial is how it would be paid for. The project, on Petaluma's radar for more than two decades, currently isn't funded.

Interested parties will have an opportunity to weigh in on what should be in the EIR at a public meeting Aug. 30.

The project would extend Rainier Avenue from its end at North McDowell Boulevard east of 101 to a new intersection at Petaluma Boulevard North west of the highway.

It would create a new four-lane street a little less than three-quarters of a mile long that would pass under Highway 101 about eight-tenths of a mile north of East Washington Street. It would cross over the Petaluma River and the railroad tracks on a new bridge.

It would provide what motorists have said for years they want: another way to move between the east and west sides of Petaluma across the highway. Currently, drivers have four spread-out options: Caulfield Lane, East Washington, Corona Road and Old Redwood Highway.

A Rainier crossing has been discussed for years in Petaluma, previously as an overcrossing with a Highway 101 interchange, as just an overcrossing and most recently as a less expensive undercrossing.

An interchange with 101 still has supporters, but the City Council unanimously decided last year to move ahead with the undercrossing-only plan.

The undercrossing had to be planned before Caltrans completes the freeway widening now in progress, which will add an additional commuter lane in each direction through Petaluma.

Councilman Gabe Kearney said Friday there are multiple issues to be examined as the city proceeds with the project, not the least of which is funding.

"I like the idea of it," he said, "but I also like the idea of having a personal helicopter, and that's not happening."

The city last year committed \$3.5 million toward the planning and design of the project. This year, it pledged another \$7 million toward construction in an effort to prevent the state from taking redevelopment funds.

The proposed Deer Creek Village shopping center would be required to pay nearly \$6 million in traffic impact fees for a Rainier project. The EIR for that project is being completed now.



That is still many millions short of what the total project is expected to cost. No recent cost figures were available Friday, but previous city estimates from \$32 million upward.

Kearney said the connector would have to ease existing traffic woes before he would support it. "All of our traffic mitigation is based on having Rainier in place," he said.

Construction in the flood plain along the route would have to be restricted, as would any development, he said.

Former Councilman David Keller said the EIR must prove to residents that it will make a long-term difference in the city's traffic problems.

"I have been asking for years how much relief will there be at East Washington and on North McDowell?" he said. "How many seconds of relief, and how long will that last? I have not gotten an answer to that, not once."

A lack of data, he said, has perpetuated a "myth" that a Rainier crossing is a traffic panacea.

The public meeting will be from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. Aug. 30 at the Petaluma Community Center at 320 N. McDowell.

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