

TO: JAMES L. APP, CITY MANAGER

FROM: BOB LATA, COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: GENERAL PLAN LEVEL OF SERVICE (LOS) DESIGNATION,  
HIGHWAY 46 WEST / 101 INTERCHANGE

DATE: DECEMBER 3, 2002

Needs: For the City Council to consider whether or not to direct staff to initiate a General Plan Amendment to consider modifying the Level of Service (LOS) standard for the Highway 101/46 West Interchange area until the interchange can be reconstructed.

Facts:

- 1 Attached is a background report describing relative facts, factors to consider, implications, and alternatives.
2. As noted in the attached staff report, the proposal is to modify the General Plan LOS standard for a limited geographic area and for an interim period of time.
3. A General Plan Amendment to consider a change to the City's LOS standard would be subject to public hearings before both the Planning Commission and City Council.

Analysis and  
Conclusion:

The attached background report details relevant facts and factors for consideration. Implications of the different alternatives are also discussed.

The City Council and Planning Commission each appointed ad hoc Committees to discuss the options under consideration.

Based on their review of the contents of the background report, both ad hoc Committees are recommending consideration of a General Plan Amendment to modify the City's LOS standard of "C" to "D" for an interim period of time and just for the Highway 46 West / 101 interchange area. LOS "C" would remain the City standard elsewhere in the community.

Support for adopting LOS “D” for the subject interchange for an interim period of time is based on the premise that all feasible interim traffic mitigation measures are being implemented. These interim measures include modifications to the intersections and also lengthening the southbound off-ramp of Highway 101 at the Highway 46 West intersection.

As noted in the attached analysis, industry standards for traffic analysis (and, incidentally, for most off-street parking plans for both public and private development projects) focus on average rather than peak demand. Designing streets (or parking) for peak demand such as holiday traffic or community events would be an unreasonably great expense.

Policy

Reference: General Plan; Cooperative Agreement with Council of Governments

Fiscal

Impact: None; mitigation measures would be funded by benefiting property owners.

Options:

- a. Direct staff to initiate a General Plan Amendment that would consider a modification to the City’s LOS standard for an interim period and only for the Highway 46 West / 101 interchange area. The change in standard would be from “C” to “D” and the interim period would be until a Project Study Report is adopted and implemented in a manner designed to provide LOS “C” for the subject interchange. Project specific matters would be deferred to the Planning Commission and staff would seek the City Attorney’s assistance to formulate participation agreements that would ensure that the set of feasible short-term mitigation measures, including extension of the southbound Highway 101 off-ramp, would be implemented.
- b. Amend, modify or reject the foregoing options.

**Background Report**  
**Proposal to Initiate General Plan Amendment**

Facts:

1. In conjunction with the development of the Target shopping center, in 1997 the City entered into a cooperative agreement with SLOCOG and the County regarding preparation of a Project Study Report (PSR) to mitigate the long-term traffic capacity issues.
2. The PSR project will define the design parameters that will be needed to accommodate future traffic demand. Changes will involve movement of frontage roads and/or freeway ramps, and there may be a need to reconstruct the current Highway 101 bridge.
3. Whereas the PSR would address the long-term traffic capacity needs, it will be at least 2 to 3 years before the PSR is adopted and begins to be implemented. Complete construction may be 6 or more years later.
4. In the interim, until the PSR is implemented, there is a need to address the capacity of the existing interchange in relation to the City's General Plan "Level of Service" (LOS) standard "C".
5. Attached is a description / definition of the various Levels of Service. Please note that LOS is defined in terms of quantified standards and how one may perceive the extent of delay / traffic congestion.
6. In addition to LOS related issues, there has been concern expressed regarding "queuing" of traffic on the southbound off-ramp of Highway 101. The issue is how to avoid the traffic hazard of a queue of vehicles extending back onto Highway 101.
7. In conjunction with a proposed McDonald's / Chevron commercial development in 2001, the Planning Commission considered traffic studies and adoption of a proposed Negative Declaration. The traffic studies projected LOS "C" during average weekday conditions. The studies did not analyze Friday or Saturday traffic patterns.
8. The Planning Commission heard public testimony pointing to congestion in the interchange and reports of queuing on the southbound ramps of Highway 101. Based on public input and their analysis of the situation, the Planning Commission determined not to approve the Negative Declaration, to table consideration of the project, and to call for further

traffic analysis designed to address the “worst case” circumstances of Fridays and Saturdays.

9. In follow-up to the Planning Commission’s conclusion on the McDonald’s / Chevron project, the City hired Associated Transportation Engineers (ATE) to undertake a more detailed analysis of interchange capacity and potential mitigation measures designed to accommodate traffic from new development projects and at the same time maintain (or reestablish) LOS “C”.
10. The additional studies conducted by ATE reveal that, in Fall 2002, not including already approved projects that have not been constructed, the interchange operates at LOS “D” during the Weekday MIDDAY, Friday PM, and Saturday PM peak hour periods.
11. If a recommended set of interim mitigation measures (roughly estimated to cost about \$585,000) are implemented, LOS can be raised back up to “C” to accommodate existing plus approved plus pending projects.
12. To achieve LOS “C” on Saturday PM it would be necessary to relocate the South Vine Street / Theater Drive frontage road as suggested in the draft PSR, or to find an equivalent tool to relieve congestion.

Factors for  
Consideration:

Based on projects that are anticipated in the traffic study, traffic demands (measured in time delays) extend just barely into the LOS “D” category. Specifically, measured in terms of traffic delays, the current and projected delay would be 35.9 seconds; by comparison, LOS “C” has a delay limit of 35.0 seconds.

Although the current LOS is on the boundary between “C” and “D”, continued commercial and industrial development in the area feeding into the subject interchange will incrementally further reduce the interchange capacity / increase congestion. Future projects have the potential to further decrease the LOS to a point that it cannot be raised back up to “C” without substantial / major changes to the interchange design.

It should be noted that traffic coming through the interchange is split about 50/50 between vehicles going south on Theater Drive versus vehicles going west on Highway 46 West. This split would seem to be indicative of significant traffic demand generated beyond the City’s commercial development.

The City has development at three of the four quadrants of the interchange; the County is in control of the 4<sup>th</sup> quadrant. To date, the County has not taken any actions to design or fund mitigating traffic impacts on the interchange. Further,

even if the City were to restrict development within City boundaries, the City has no control over projects approved in the County unincorporated areas.

Standard traffic engineering practices do not typically require mitigation of the “worst case” traffic congestion. “Average conditions” are more typically the basis for mitigation requirements. Typically, cities focus on accommodating “average condition” rather than a “worst case” scenario.

As traffic congestion increases in the Highway 46 West / 101 interchange, there would be increasing inconvenience for motorists. Perhaps more significant, however, is a traffic safety related concern caused by vehicles “stacking” in the southbound off-ramp from Highway 101 to Theater Drive. Unless adequately addressed, cars in a line extending north onto Highway 101 could constitute a serious health and safety concern.

Based on studies performed by ATE, the City now has a list of improvements designed to address both traffic congestion and queuing of traffic on the southbound off-ramp of Highway 101. The estimated cost of the mitigation program is \$585,000, the actual cost will be a function of bid prices.

ATE has also been requested to project the proportional shares of the cost of the mitigation program in relation to the amount of traffic generated by the benefiting land uses. That projection is being used as a basis for discussions with applicants regarding their obligations to mitigate traffic impacts.

Alternative approaches to implementing the mitigation program would include:

- Seek to have Caltrans design and construct the required improvements – this option would insure Caltrans comfort with design details but the project would need to compete with other Caltrans priorities and may be substantially delayed.

- Have private development take the lead to construct the improvements - this option would be faster in terms of preparing design and carrying out the construction process, but it would rely on hiring a third party who is familiar with Caltrans design standards and who can process the plans through Caltrans in a timely manner.

- A third option would be for the City to take a lead role, hiring an engineer and processing the plans through Caltrans - - this option would take more time in terms of the City going through the hiring process but there may be some cost savings in terms of Caltrans fees if the City is the lead agency.

Regardless of the approach taken to implementing the mitigation program, it will be necessary to obtain prior written commitments from the benefiting property owners to insure they are prepared to pay for their proportionate share of the project costs.

There are currently at least six projects that could split the costs of the mitigation program (these are all pending projects with either complete or incomplete applications with the City). As additional projects are filed in the near future, they could share cost of the mitigation measures.

Implications of  
Study Results:

The current set of recommended mitigation programs would reestablish LOS “C” for all time periods for the approved projects and for most time periods for the current list of pending projects.

The set of mitigation measures can be established as requirements of the pending development projects that will benefit from the mitigation measures.

However, even with implementation of the recommended measures, the interchange cannot achieve LOS “C” on Saturday PM periods for the current list of pending projects.

The traffic study points to about 50 percent of the traffic during peak periods relating to travel west on Highway 46 West (not City related traffic).

Unless the City modifies its expectations in terms of acceptable LOS, future projects would by definition (relative to General Plan standards) create significant traffic impacts that could not be immediately mitigated to less than significant levels.

Precedence for accepting interim congestion: In conjunction with the Niblick Bridge and the pending Wal\*Mart shopping center project, the City Council approved statements of overriding considerations. This was a recognition that (a) the bridge would not be widened and improved before the Wal\*Mart (Woodland Plaza II) shopping center was scheduled to open, and (b) there would be an unacceptable (less than LOS “C”) level of traffic congestion until the bridge project would be complete (which was then some years away) and (c) recognizing that there was a long-term solution at hand and being actively pursued (i.e.: the bridge widening project). Allowing further development to be approved along the Creston Road corridor without the prior improvement of the 13<sup>th</sup> Street Bridge is also a similar circumstance. Further, industry standards for traffic analysis (and parking) do focus on average rather than peak demand.

Future implications: There may be other future circumstances under which the City Council may wish to allow developments to proceed, knowing that the Level of Service will be (or will become) substandard but at the same time realizing that the developments themselves are also participating in paying for the long-term solution (which may be a new or improved bridge, interchange, or other traffic congestion mitigation measure).

The City should not permit any development to proceed if there would be a significant health and safety problem. On the other hand, some degree of traffic congestion may not be an unreasonable price to pay for participation in a longer-term solution and at the same time achieve the City's economic development goals.

If the City would determine instead to deny new development projects until such time as the LOS was "C" or better, there would likely not be any funding mechanism to solve the problem.

Further, since the area is impacted and surrounded by County unincorporated areas, the situation could become progressively worse without the City approving a new development project.

Additionally, property owners within the City would be at a competitive disadvantage vis-à-vis the property owners in the County if the City would deny projects and the County continue to approve projects without addressing interchange congestion.

Alternative  
Approaches:

A. For the Planning Commission to conclude that there are grounds to support approval of a Negative Declaration for the McDonald's / Chevron project and other pending projects if the project applicants are willing to fund the set of mitigation measures that would result in achieving LOS "C" for all but the worst case circumstance of Saturday PM traffic. Implicit in this option is the conclusion that at least 50 percent of the Saturday PM traffic is caused by factors that are beyond the City's control and ability to mitigate.

B. Amend the City's General Plan to allow for LOS D at this interchange as an interim situation until the PSR is adopted and implemented. This policy change would modify the definition of "significant" in terms of environmental impacts, allowing the City to proceed to approve projects with a Negative Declaration even under LOS D.

C. Prepare and request Council consider an Environmental Impact Report (EIR) that would include a "Statement of Overriding Considerations" that would be

designed to allow developments to be approved even in light of “significant” traffic impacts (i.e.: impacts that exceed LOS “C”).

D. Deny pending and future development projects until there is an ability to complete and implement the PSR to provide LOS “C” for the subject interchange.

Analysis of  
Options:

Planning Commission approval of a Negative Declaration (Option # 1) will address the current development proposals but may not accommodate a significant number of additional projects in the immediate geographic area. Related factors:

- Under the Cooperative Agreement with SLOCOG and the County, the City is required to evaluate the vehicle-capacity of the interchange every six months. Theoretical traffic generation from approved projects has been included in the traffic analysis and projections; actual traffic flows may create more or less impacts (and, therefore, could tip the scale to LOS “D”).
- As new projects are proposed and incorporated into the traffic model / projections, at some point the average conditions are likely to once again become LOS “D”.
- The City has no control over the amount of traffic generated in the County quadrant of the interchange and over the number of vehicles traveling to destinations west on Highway 46 West. Increasing truck, RV, and other traffic could create LOS “D”.

In light of the foregoing, it would seem that approval of a Negative Declaration based on installation of the recommended set of improvements will address only relatively short-term mitigation needs.

An Amendment to the General Plan reducing the expected LOS from “C” to “D” until the PSR is complete and implemented would seem a longer lasting interim solution. Reasons to support:

- The City has funded the PSR.
- The City has demonstrated substantial effort toward completing the PSR.
- The City has consistently required new developments since and including the Target Shopping Center to enter into agreements to not protest

formation of an assessment district to help fund the implementation of the PSR once adopted.

- Without approved developments, the funding for the PSR will not be forthcoming.
- Caltrans standards for their jurisdictional area are LOS “D”.

Preparing an EIR and adopting a Statement of Overriding Considerations would accomplish the same purpose as Option # 2 (recognize that congestion will occur and will need to be accepted until the PSR is complete and implemented) but at a significantly greater cost in both time and money.

Denying future development projects until the PSR would not seem reasonable based on the following:

- It would be inequitable for the City to deny development and at the same time have the County continue to approve developments in the SE quadrant of the interchange and in the County areas accessed by Highway 46 West;
- Development in the immediate area would be contributing to the solution by funding the improvements called for under the PSR;
- Commercial and industrial development in the subject area is foreseen in the City’s General Plan;
- Denying new commercial and industrial development in the subject area would be inconsistent with the City’s Economic Development Strategy.

Conclusion: In order to address the short-term and longer-term interim traffic circulation needs for the subject interchange (until such time as the PSR is approved and implemented), the following three-part program is proposed:

1. For the Planning Commission to consider concluding that there are grounds to support approval of a Negative Declaration for the McDonald’s / Chevron project and other pending projects if the project applicants are willing to fund the set of mitigation measures that would result in achieving LOS “C” for all but the worst case circumstance of Saturday PM traffic. Implicit in this option is the conclusion that at least 50 percent of the Saturday PM traffic is caused by factors that are beyond the City’s control and ability to

mitigate. The cost of participation would be spread over the benefiting property owners based on their traffic generation rates.

2. Propose to the City Council to Amend the City's General Plan to allow for LOS D as an interim situation until the PSR is adopted and implemented, combined with a requirement that all benefiting properties proportionately participate in the cost of installing all identified interim improvements. This policy change would modify the definition of "significant" in terms of environmental impacts, allowing the City to proceed to approve projects with a Negative Declaration even under LOS D. (Note: even if the Planning Commission does not approve # 1 above, this second step would still be a viable option; it would take more time but it would still require installation of the same mitigation measures).
3. Request the City Attorney to formulate an agreement format that would permit benefiting property owners to agree to participate in funding their proportionate share of the mitigation program. The proportionate shares would be established by ATE and would be subject to modification if additional projects are found to be complete and there is capacity (at LOS "C" or "D", depending upon # 1 and/or # 2 above) to accommodate their traffic needs. Note: Proceeding with the mitigation program and additional project approvals would be dependent upon property owners being willing to commit to funding the mitigation measures.