



MEMORANDUM

Public Works Department

DATE: September 29, 2021

TO: Bicycle/Pedestrian Advisory Committee

FROM: Aruna Bodduna, Transportation Planner
James Lightbody, Project Manager

SUBJECT: Castro Pedestrian Mall Feasibility Study – Concept Alternatives

RECOMMENDATION

Receive information and provide feedback on the Castro Pedestrian Mall Feasibility Study – Concept Alternatives (Attachment 1).

BACKGROUND

Castro Street is Mountain View’s oldest commercial corridor, located in downtown Mountain View, which is the historic center and civic focus of the community. Castro Street is the “heart of downtown” characterized by pedestrian-scaled spaces, wider sidewalks, and street trees with large canopy, and activated by the many people who live and work in the vicinity. The 100 to 300 blocks of Castro Street predominantly feature restaurant and retail establishments and transitions to more office, recreational, and municipal spaces progressing further south along the corridor.

The northern end of Castro Street connects to the Mountain View Transit Center, a major mobility hub for the City. Planned improvements through the Transit Center Master Plan Grade Separation and Access Project (GSAP) will create a more walkable connection to the Transit Center. The GSAP project will remove the at-grade vehicle crossing at the railroad tracks and Central Expressway, and construct new pedestrian and bicycle undercrossings (Figure 1).

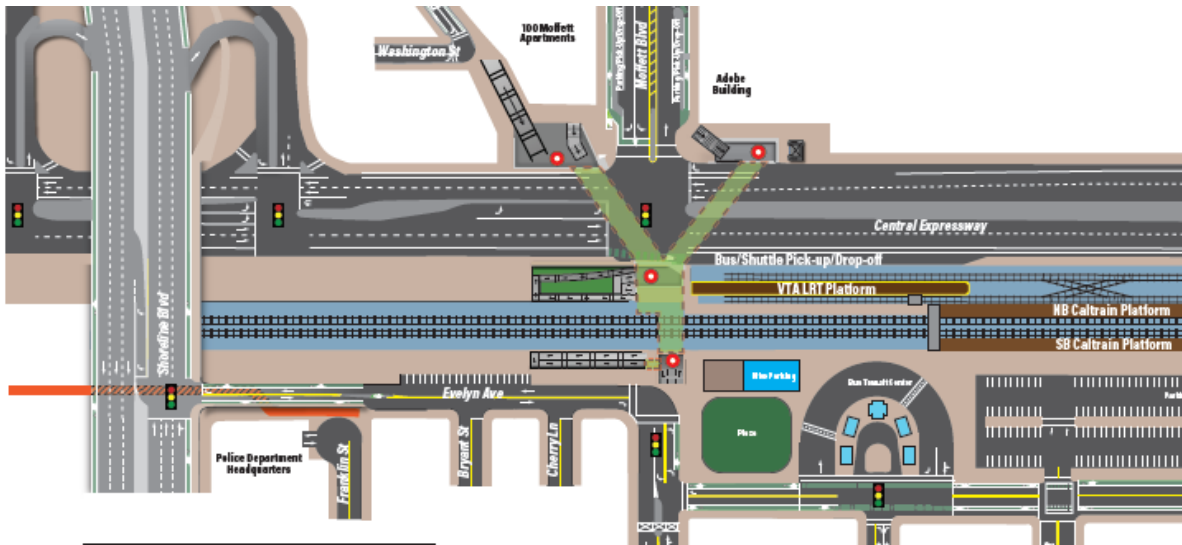


Figure 1: Transit Center Grade Separation and Access Project

During the [March 19, 2019](#) Council Study Session for the GSAP, the City Council expressed interest in exploring a pedestrian plaza/mall at the end of Castro Street. On June 11, 2019, Council approved Castro Pedestrian Mall Feasibility Study, Project 20-58, as part of the Fiscal Year 2019-20 Capital Improvement Program (CIP). On [December 10, 2019](#), Council approved an agreement with Gehl Studio, Inc. (Gehl), for this project.

Gehl is an urban design firm with extensive project experience on walkable, human-scale environments that help cities achieve their sustainability goals. They have global experience working on projects that involve designing pedestrian plazas and pedestrian-focused shared streets that create a vibrant and welcoming urban environment.

The scope of the Castro Pedestrian Mall Feasibility Study includes developing and analyzing very high-level concepts and alternatives for creating a pedestrian mall or public plaza along the 100 block of Castro Street, between Evelyn Avenue and Villa Street.

The project was initiated in February 2020 with the initial scope tasks of assessing existing conditions and data collection, but the development of concepts along with community and business outreach was put on hold due to the COVID-19 pandemic. City staff and consultant resources shifted focus to work on the temporary closure of Castro Street, known as the Castro StrEATs program. This program was implemented to facilitate outdoor dining within the public right-of-way, allow for social distancing, and support the recovery of Mountain View’s downtown businesses along the 100, 200, 300, and 400 blocks of Castro Street. After the Castro StrEATs program began, the City Council amended the program several times to address the changing County Public Health orders and respond to feedback from the businesses along these blocks.

Although the Castro Pedestrian Mall Study's formal concept development with community and business outreach was delayed, the project was able to use the Castro StrEATs program to gain insight into business and community reactions to closing the blocks to traffic and fostering a more pedestrian environment with the outdoor dining. An online public user survey was available from July 2020 to provide feedback about the Castro StrEATs program. Of nearly 700 responses received on the survey:

- Two-thirds identified as living or working in Mountain View, and nearly one-third identified as being a local visitor to Castro Street from somewhere else within the Bay Area.
- Over half of the respondents visited Castro Street multiple times since the program began, suggesting that the program was successful in attracting repeat visits.
- 95% of users reported that they felt positively about the program.
- While the survey did not request feedback regarding future conditions, a majority of the respondents provided open-ended feedback that they would like Castro Street to remain as a pedestrian plaza permanently or considered as a pedestrian plaza in the future.

Feedback from the businesses along the 100 through 300 blocks of Castro Street about the Castro StrEATs program has been generally favorable and included support for extending the closure and outdoor dining until at least January 2022. It was found the closure of the 400 block of Castro Street was less useful for outdoor dining purposes and by June 2021, nearly all the businesses on the 400 block requested that the block be reopened to traffic.

In spring 2021, work began to develop high-level concept alternatives for the 100 block of Castro Street as originally included the project scope of work. Outreach with the businesses and community to receive feedback on the concepts began in August 2021.

DISCUSSION

Gehl's Feasibility Study Draft Report (Attachment 1) details the existing conditions and physical characteristics of the 100 block of Castro Street and presents the design principles/strategies used for developing the pedestrian mall concept alternatives. The design principles are based on the vision for the downtown as identified in the Downtown Precise Plan and anticipated changes occurring with the other downtown projects in the vicinity, such as the GSAP.

Under existing conditions, the 100 block of Castro Street has one through travel lane in each direction and one turn lane. The roadway width is 56', including the parking/Flex Zones. The full public right-of-way is approximately 80' (including sidewalks on either side). The GSAP will develop a revised configuration of the Castro Street/Evelyn Avenue intersection, allowing traffic to travel east and west on Evelyn Avenue as shown in Figure 1. This not only provides an alternate access into downtown, but also provides direct access to the Transit Center, especially for buses and shuttles.

Building upon the planned closure of the at-grade crossing of Castro Street, three concept alternatives were developed with an urban design perspective to create a pedestrian mall or plaza in the 100 block of Castro Street.

Concept Alternative A, “Expand Public Space:” Prioritizes maintaining vehicle access with minimal interruption to vehicle flows while moderately increasing space for Flex Zones and patio spaces.

Alternative A (Figure 2) provides expanded pedestrian space by narrowing the existing three-lane cross-section on Castro Street to two lanes within this block (a reduction of 10' in roadway width). The southbound left-turn movement from Castro Street onto Villa Street would not be allowed, and seven parking spaces will be eliminated. These changes allow for expanded public use spaces and Flex Zones. Although bicycles can continue to use the travel lanes similar to existing (pre-COVID) conditions, additional considerations will be investigated at a later stage.



Figure 2: Concept Alternative A

Concept Alternative B, “Castro Street Plaza:” Prioritizes the expansion of public space and establishment of a pedestrian mall on Castro Street.

Alternative B (Figure 3) closes Castro Street for vehicular traffic between West Evelyn Avenue and Villa Street to create a pedestrian mall in this segment. The two Evelyn Avenue legs will remain connected where Castro Street is currently located. Pedestrian crossing controls could be provided at the Evelyn Avenue and Castro Street crosswalks. Considerations for bicycle travel as well as emergency and service vehicle access accommodations through the pedestrian mall would be determined at a later stage.

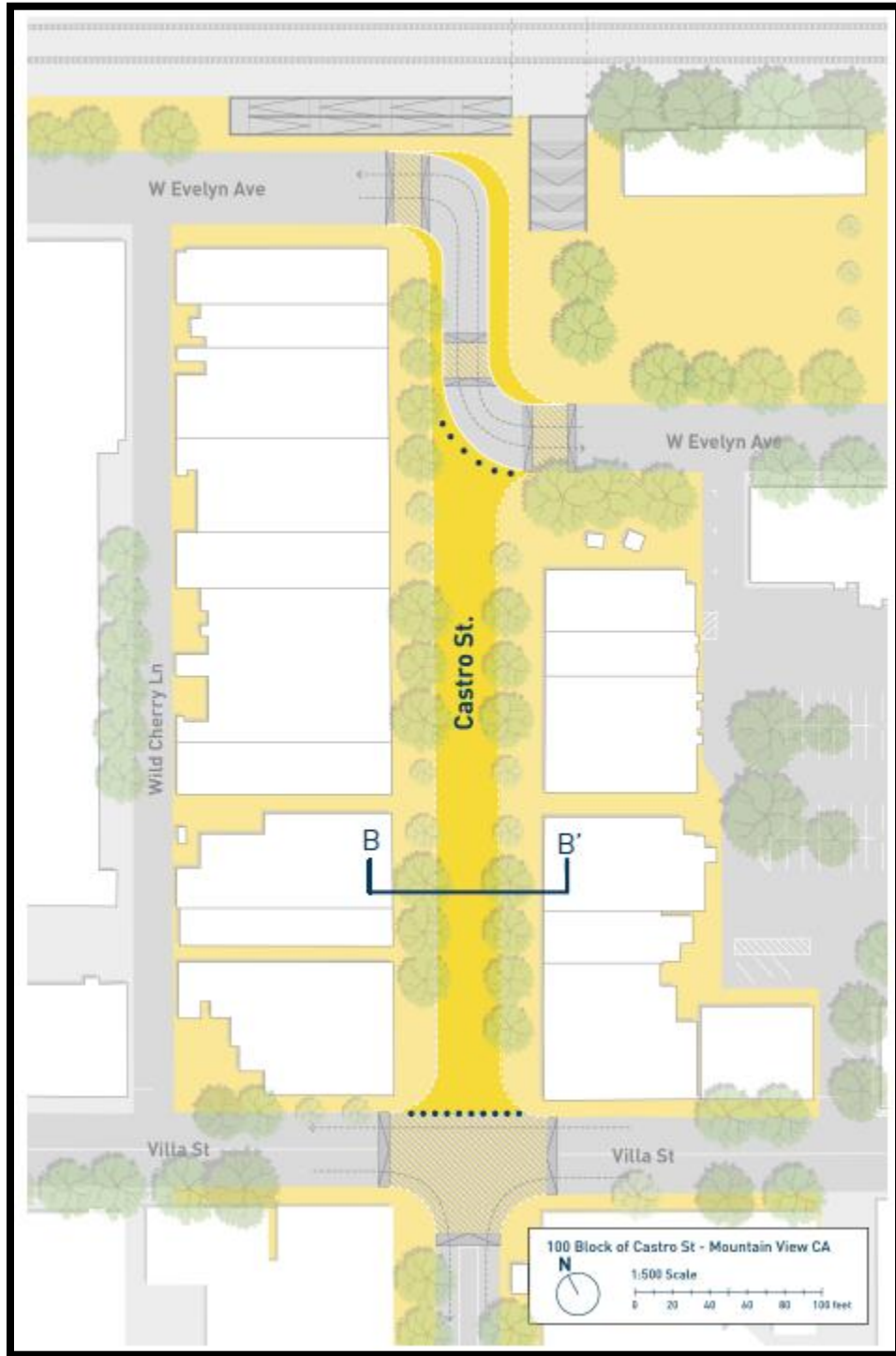


Figure 3: Concept Alternative B

Concept Alternative C, “Evelyn Realignment.” Prioritizes the further expansion of public pedestrian space on the north end of Castro Street by realigning West Evelyn Avenue and incorporating a portion of Centennial Plaza.

Alternative C (Figure 4) allows for a larger plaza area and a direct connection from Castro Street to the future GSAP undercrossing. With this alternative, the alignment of West Evelyn Avenue along Castro Street would be shifted east to align with Blossom Lane. The GSAP staircase entrance into the undercrossings would also shift south of West Evelyn Avenue to provide an alternative pathway to the at-grade street crossing. This would allow for a larger contiguous pedestrian space between the new pedestrian/bicycle undercrossing and the 100 block of Castro Street. Considerations for bicycle travel as well as emergency and service vehicle access through the pedestrian mall would be determined at a later stage.

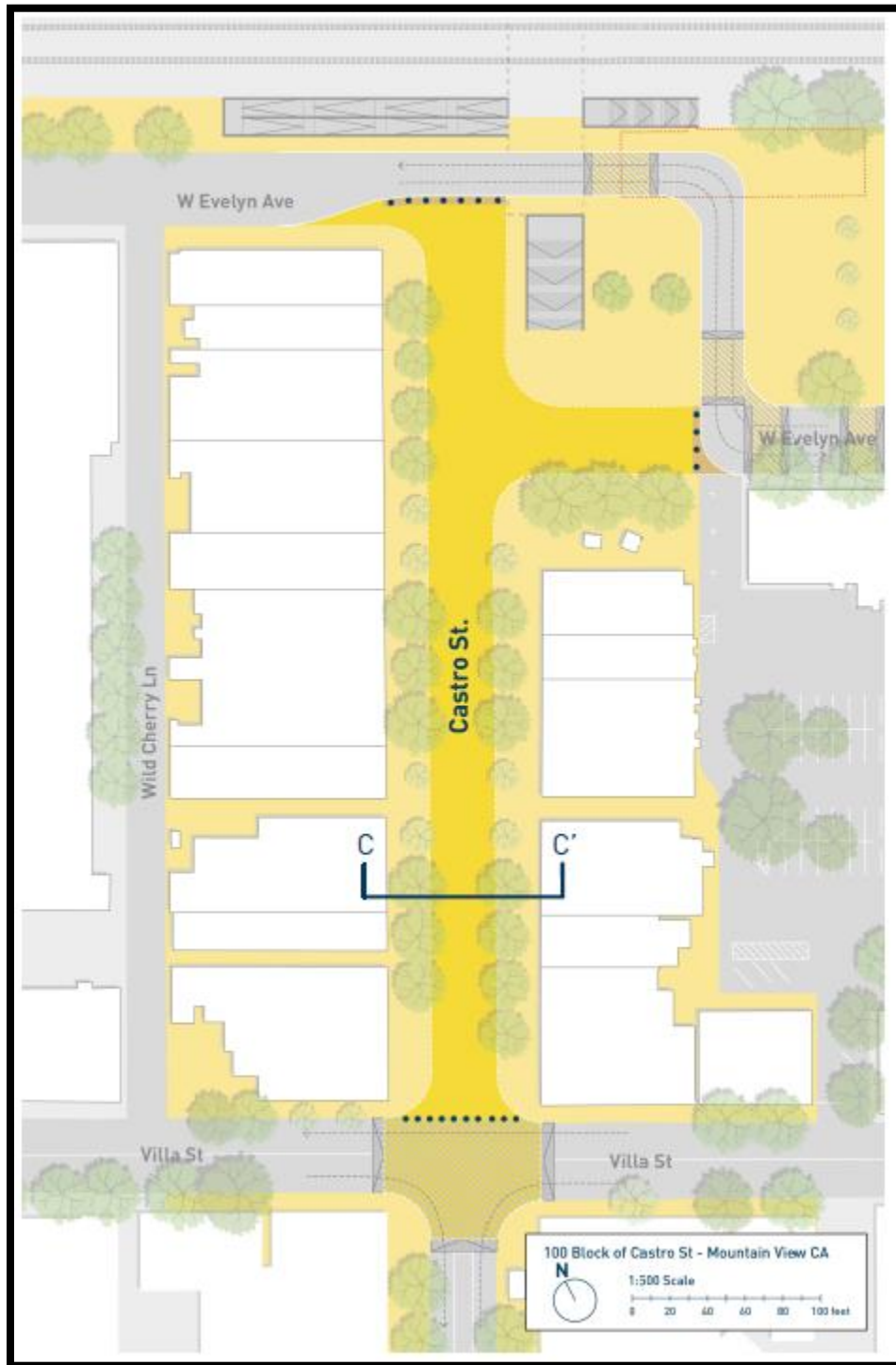


Figure 4: Concept Alternative C

Traffic Analysis Summary

A traffic analysis was conducted to evaluate the impacts of the three concept alternatives. The analysis report is included as Attachment 2. The analysis shows that all three alternatives result in minimal impacts to traffic delay throughout the study area. While alternatives that close the 100 block of Castro Street to vehicular traffic (Alternatives B and C) result in relatively higher levels of vehicle diversion, the diverted traffic is not anticipated to result in any significant congestion impacts on nearby streets. Traffic volumes on the 100 block of Castro Street are low given existing trends and additional redistribution anticipated from the GSAP.

Concept Alternatives Summary

Table 1 summarizes the key features of each alternative. The alternatives improve, to varying degrees, the pedestrian realm by increasing the accessible space along Castro Street. Alternatives B and C are most effective for providing pedestrian safety benefits by eliminating conflicts with autos along Castro Street. Alternative C provides the additional benefit for both cyclists and pedestrians by reducing vehicle conflicts along West Evelyn Avenue to access the Transit Center and the Moffett Boulevard neighborhoods. All alternatives have similar parking impacts consisting of the loss of seven on-street spaces, requiring vehicles to use nearby public parking lots or on-street parking options.

Table 1: Concept Alternatives Summary

A	B	C
BENEFITS		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allows for more pedestrian or flex space compared to existing conditions. • Minimizes disruption to existing (pre-COVID) traffic flow. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More pedestrian space compared to Alternative A • Allows creation of pedestrian mall. • Enhances accessibility to new public spaces. • Maintains vehicle movement along West Evelyn Avenue. • Some improved access to Transit Center. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Substantial increase in public space with new plaza extending the pedestrian mall. • Enhances accessibility to public spaces. • Realigns vehicle movement along West Evelyn Avenue but maintains key access to downtown. • Improves pedestrian and bike direct access to both the Transit Center and Moffett Boulevard without crossing Evelyn Avenue.
CHALLENGES OR IMPACTS		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Removes on-street parking. • Does not change accessibility to Transit Center. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Removes on-street parking. • Diversion of traffic flow on Castro Street. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Removes on-street parking. • Requires relocation or replacement of station building from Centennial Plaza. • Requires modification of proposed GSAP access. • Impacts Caltrain-owned Transit Center property. • Diversion of traffic flow on Castro Street.

A	B	C
IMPLEMENTATION		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lower cost and less complex infrastructure project. • Three (3) to 4 years to design and construct once funding is available. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Somewhat higher cost than Alternative A and a little more complex. • Four (4) to 5 years to design and construct once funding is available. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Higher-cost and more complex infrastructure project than other Alternatives. • Property acquisition from Caltrain and utility relocations along with demolishing or moving building and constructing new road connection. • Five (5) to 10 years to design, acquire right-of-way, and construct once funding is available.

Stakeholder Engagement

Business and public outreach open houses were held on August 12, 2021 and September 7, 2021, respectively. Along with the Castro Pedestrian Mall Feasibility Study, other downtown planning projects (GSAP, Downtown Precise Plan, and Downtown Parking Strategy) were also included at the open house to provide a comprehensive update.

The scope of the Castro Pedestrian Mall Feasibility Study did not include the 200 and 300 blocks of Castro Street. However, with the current Castro StrEATs program, businesses and the public had the opportunity to experience vehicle-free roadway on these blocks. Building on these experiences, the open house attendees were also asked to provide feedback on whether the study’s scope should be expanded to include the 200 and/or 300 blocks of Castro Street in future phases of work.

Over 20 business representatives attended the August 12 business open house. An online survey (Figure 5) was also available for the businesses to provide feedback. Below is summary of key feedback received from the businesses:

- Permanent closure should not only be about the physical redesign of the space, but should focus on the governance, maintenance, and programming aspects as well.
- Unlike current temporary closure for outdoor dining, permanent closure should consider other programming other than just outdoor dining.


- Develop design guidelines and provide options to create unique but consistent aesthetic appearance through the closure area.
- Businesses strongly favor Alternatives B or C, but also understand that Alternative C has financial implications that the City may not be able to undertake currently. There could be a phased approach.
- Nearly 70% of the business survey respondents support expanding the study to include the 200 and 300 blocks in the pedestrian mall concept.

Over 40 community members, including property owners along Castro Street, attended the September 7 public open house held at Civic Center Plaza. Community members indicated their preference for the 100 block alternative concepts by placing stickers on the boards. The feedback received showed that the public was very enthusiastic about Concept Alternative C and very concerned about Concept Alternative A. Community members were somewhat enthusiastic about Concept Alternative B and said they preferred Alternative C over Alternative B as it eliminates the vehicle-pedestrian conflicts at the Evelyn Avenue crosswalks. Some indicated that Alternative C could be more complex to achieve compared to Alternative B. Nearly all supported extending the closure to the 200 and 300 blocks.

An online survey (Figure 6) was available for the public and businesses to provide feedback on the concept alternatives developed for the 100 block and consideration of closure of the 200 and 300 blocks of Castro Street. Nearly 1,500 responses were received, and below is the key feedback from the online survey:

- Nearly 80% of the respondents identified as residents.
- Pedestrian experience, outdoor dining, and vehicle restrictions were identified as the top three success parameters, while vehicle conflicts and cost were identified as major concerns for choosing the concept alternatives.
- A majority of the respondents favor Alternative C, followed by Alternative B.
- Nearly 90% do not support returning Castro Street to pre-COVID conditions.
- Over 85% support the 100, 200, and 300 blocks of Castro Street to remain closed to vehicle traffic after January 2022, using the interim measures currently in place until a pedestrian mall/plaza can be designed and constructed.

- Over 87% supported expanding the study to include the 200 and 300 blocks in the pedestrian mall concept.

On a scale from 1-5, please take a moment to rank the 3 concept alternatives and the option to make no changes (at the end of the ranking we welcome additional input with a write in response option) 

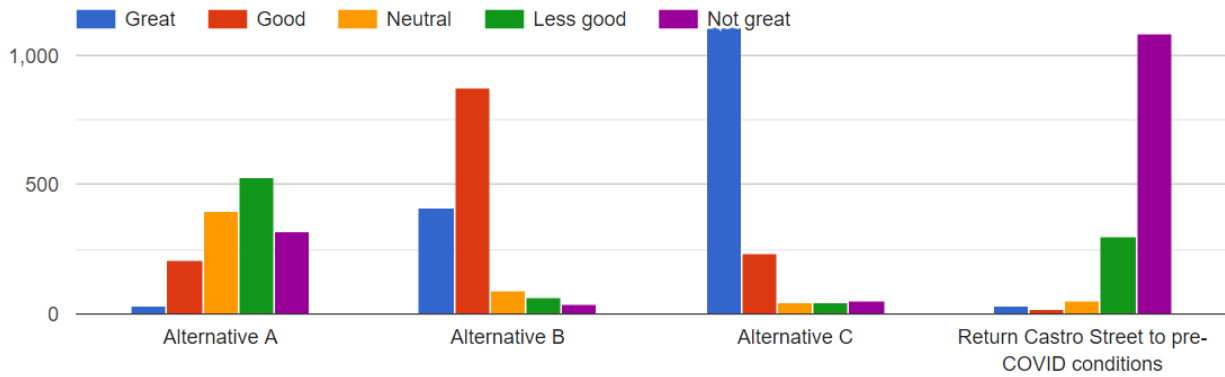


Figure 5

The current scope of study is a feasibility study for creating a pedestrian mall of plaza along the 100 block of Castro Street. Should the study be expanded to include the 200 and 300 block of Castro? (W Evelyn Avenue to California)

1,490 responses

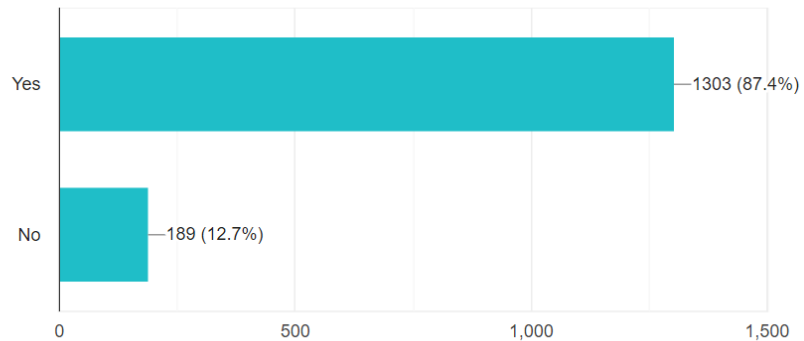


Figure 6

B/PAC QUESTIONS

The project team is seeking the B/PAC's input on the following key questions:

1. Which Concept Alternative(s) for the 100 block of Castro Street are supported by the B/PAC?
2. Should the study scope be expanded to encompass the 200 and 300 blocks of Castro Street?
3. What input does the B/PAC have into critical issues and key design features to consider for next steps in developing a pedestrian mall/plaza concept for Castro Street?

NEXT STEPS

Staff will present this information to the Downtown Committee at their October 5, 2021 meeting and at a City Council Study Session on October 12, 2021. Based on the feedback received from the committees and direction from Council, staff will develop the next steps that may include the following:

- Council resolutions to continue the current closures of the 100, 200, and/or 300 blocks of Castro Street beyond January 2022.
- Identification of actions, budget, and staffing resources for interim improvements to the current closure.
- Identify funding and staffing resources to create a CIP project for further development of the preferred concept and for the design and construction of the final concept.

AB-JL/BW/1/PWK
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Attachments: 1. Castro Pedestrian Mall Feasibility Study Draft Report
2. Castro Pedestrian Mall Feasibility Study – Traffic Analysis