



Item No. 16 Town of Atherton

CITY COUNCIL STAFF REPORT – REGULAR AGENDA

**TO: HONORABLE MAYOR AND CITY COUNCIL
GEORGE RODERICKS, CITY MANAGER**

FROM: ROBERT OVADIA, PUBLIC WORKS DIRECTOR

DATE: JANUARY 15, 2020

**SUBJECT: DISCUSSION AND FEEDBACK REGARDING THE CALTRAIN
PROPOSAL TO PERMANENTLY CLOSE THE ATHERTON
STATION**

RECOMMENDATION

Discuss and provide feedback regarding the Caltrain proposal letter dated January 8, 2020, to permanently close the Atherton Station.

BACKGROUND

Caltrain discontinued weekday train service at the Atherton Caltrain Station in August 2005. Weekend service at the Station continues. The Caltrain Modernization Program (CalMod) includes electrification and other projects that are intended to upgrade the performance, efficiency and capacity of Caltrain service along the service corridor. Caltrain had previously committed to resume weekday service with the implementation of their electric passenger train service. This service commitment is echoed in its environmental documents for the electrification project and in the long-range service vision documents of the Caltrain 2040 Business Plan, currently under development.

The service vision documents foresee a potential tripling of Caltrain's current ridership to 180,000 riders per day. It envisions express train service every 15 minutes, comprehensive coverage of local stations with local trains and greatly expanded frequencies in the middays, evenings and weekends over the full length of their system. Initially, Caltrain documents showed the service level for the Atherton station as TBD (to be determined).

The Town's Rail Policy includes a desire to work with Caltrain to restore weekday service. The Council held a Joint Study Session with the Town's Rail Committee on January 9, 2020, to discuss recommendations regarding service levels and the Town Rail Policy. The Council, at its regular meeting on January 16, 2019, further discussed the Business Plan and Service scenarios at the Atherton Station. The Mayor appointed a Council Ad Hoc Subcommittee to coordinate discussions with Caltrain regarding service levels.

Caltrain's adopted Long Range Service Vision shows hourly weekday service on local trains in their high growth scenario, with the service stop drawn from the Menlo Park station.

ANALYSIS

Caltrain Proposal Letter

Following several meetings with Caltrain and the Town's Ad Hoc Subcommittee, the City Manager received a letter from Caltrain dated January 8, 2020, requesting the Town's support for full closure of the Atherton Caltrain station. The letter outlines a number of benefits to the system as a whole, as well as potential projects and improvements that would directly benefit the Town and its residents.

With additional stops to trains described as a zero-sum gain, service to the station would be re-allocated from other, more heavily used stations where surrounding land uses are more conducive to increasing ridership. Closure of the station would steer passengers to the better utilized facilities at Menlo Park and Redwood City, which they currently utilize for weekday service, and would allow for 15-minute local service intervals at the Menlo Park Station in the long-range vision service model. The closure along with other improvements would improve safety and enable faster train speeds through the Town. Caltrain estimates that closure of the Atherton station has the potential of increasing daily ridership by 300-500 passengers. Caltrain would also realize savings associated with operations and maintenance as well as the elimination of station area upgrades (estimated at \$30 million).

With the closure of the station, Caltrain would provide the potential for the Town to use the portion of Caltrain property no longer needed to support current Caltrain operations for staging and construction of the Town Center project and potentially facilitate use of the property to enhance the Town Center development. These areas could include the existing station building, a portion of the platform area along with the parking area. Caltrain would provide a safety barrier between the Town Center and the track area by installing decorative fencing along the Town Center side of the tracks and funding for the installation of additional landscaping becoming of a public space.

To improve safety along the corridor, Caltrain would remove the center platform and in-station platform crossings, as well as provide funding for the installation of Quad Gates at the Watkins Avenue grade crossing. Caltrain has also offered to fund improvements to the Atherton Station building to better incorporate it as part of the Town's civic space. Caltrain would also be willing to partner on potential access improvements south of Watkins Avenue.

Town Center Improvements

The Town is currently in the midst of constructing the Town Center project. With the proximity of the rail station to the project, it is important to understand how the station area will be used and potentially integrated into the public spaces associated with the Town Center. Currently, the Town has no control over the Atherton Station and its surrounds. With Caltrain's focus on completing the CalMod project, the degree and timing of improvements to the station are unknown and would likely impact the Town Center.

The future restoration of weekday service would provide direct service to the Town Center and Atherton Library and provide residents access to local service trains. Residents desiring express service would utilize the Redwood City station as they do now for Baby Bullet trains. Reopening the station to weekday service would likely have parking impacts at the Town Center and in the surrounding community. The closure of the station would provide Town control over the existing station building and station frontage area with the potential to integrate station area improvements with the Town Center Project.

Next Steps

Caltrain is seeking the Town's concurrence on the permanent closure of the Atherton station. If such concurrence is granted, Caltrain will begin its process to identify potential impacts, and initiate the environmental clearance process for station closure. A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) would be developed to define and memorialize the proposed actions and mitigation measures to be taken. It is anticipated that the process leading to closure would take approximately six months.

POLICY ISSUES

Current Council policy expresses a desire to expand existing rail service to include weekday service. The Council discussion should focus on the Caltrain proposal, the potential closure of the rail station and the potential benefits of station closure versus service restoration.

It should be noted that service to the Atherton station is at the discretion of Caltrain and, even if weekday service is resumed, it may be cancelled by Caltrain at some future date. Such cancellation may be without any potential area improvements.

FISCAL IMPACT

None at this time.

COMMISSION/COMMITTEE FEEDBACK/REFERRAL

This item ____ has or X has not been before a Town Committee or Commission.

- Audit/Finance Committee (meets every other month)
- Bicycle/Pedestrian Committee (meets as needed)
- Civic Center Advisory Committee (meets as needed)
- Environmental Programs Committee (meets every other month)
- Park and Recreation Committee (meets each month)
- Planning Commission (meets each month)
- Rail Committee (meets every other month)
- Transportation Committee (meets every other month)

ATTACHMENTS

Caltrain Proposal Letter Dated January 8, 2020



January 8, 2020

George Rodericks, City Manager
Town of Atherton
150 Watkins Ave.
Atherton, CA 94027

GILLIAN GILLET, CHAIR
DAVE PINE, VICE CHAIR
CHERYL BRINKMAN
JEANNIE BRUINS
CINDY CHAVEZ
RON COLLINS
DEVORA "DEV" DAVIS
CHARLES STONE
SHAMANN WALTON

JIM HARTNETT
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Dear City Manager Rodericks,

We understand that the Town of Atherton has expressed interest in exploring service levels at the Atherton Station ranging from full service to closure. We believe that the closure of the Station will provide benefits to both the Town and the overall Caltrain system as further discussed below. I am writing to request official support from the Town of Atherton for the closure of the Atherton Caltrain station. Caltrain is prepared to work closely with the Town on several actions that can improve safety and help facilitate the station closure.

Background on the Atherton Caltrain Station

Regular weekday service to the Atherton station was suspended in 2005. At that time, average weekday ridership was approximately 122 passengers per day. Today, the Atherton Caltrain Station currently receives limited, weekend-only service every 90 minutes and is used by approximately 114 riders per average weekend day. By comparison, Atherton's neighboring stations (Redwood City to the north and Menlo Park to the south), average 4,220 and 1,639 boardings respectively per weekday and 523 and 435 boardings per average weekend day.

The Atherton station is also a "center-boarding" station, meaning that its platforms are arranged in a manner that features pedestrian crossings of the tracks to access the boarding platform. This configuration limits train operations through the station, as trains operating in the other direction must "hold out" while a train is boarding. While Caltrain previously had a number of such stations within its system, most have either been rebuilt or closed over the course of the last 20 years. Atherton and Broadway station in Burlingame are the only remaining stations with a center boarding configuration. (The Broadway station is proposed to be rebuilt to current standards as part of the planned grade separation of the Broadway grade crossing.)

Caltrain made a policy commitment to restore regular weekday service to the Atherton station following the electrification of the corridor. This commitment was documented in the 2015 Environmental Impact Report for the Peninsula Corridor Electrification

George Rodericks, City Manager

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Project. Caltrain is requesting the support of the Town in revisiting this policy decision for the reasons described below.

Station Closure Rationale and Benefits

Since weekday service to Atherton was suspended in 2005, weekday ridership on the Caltrain system as a whole has grown tremendously, expanding from approximately 26,000 to well over 60,000. Caltrain expects demand for its services to continue to grow in the future as communities up and down the corridor intensify their land uses and congestion on parallel highways and roads grows worse.

Serving this increased demand is challenging and the railroad struggles to balance maintaining auto-competitive travel times while also providing service to the many, closely spaced stations along the line.

As we plan for the future of our service, it is clear that the railroad will not be able to provide every station with the level of service that its surrounding community might desire. In general, adding new service (or 'stops') to trains is a zero sum game--either requiring that a stop be re-allocated from elsewhere in the system or that the entire train be slowed by several minutes, degrading the railroad's ability to compete with auto travel in terms of travel times.

The lower density, residential character of the land uses around the Atherton station suggest that the station is unlikely to generate significant future ridership, even with restored weekday service. Closure of the Atherton station would allow Caltrain to re-allocate service that would have been provided to Atherton to nearby stations where denser land uses will generate more ridership and provide a broader benefit to the public as a whole. Our analysis of ridership and land use trends suggests that if we are able to reallocate service from Atherton to adjoining stations, Caltrain could increase its daily ridership by ~300-500. Closure of the Atherton station would also obviate the need for a future costly and disruptive station upgrade to remove the holdout rule, estimated (several years ago) at \$30 million--allowing these scarce funds to potentially be put towards other system improvements that will provide broader public benefit.

Residents of the Town of Atherton will also benefit from a station closure, including improved safety along the Caltrain line through more restrictive access to the track and platform area, reduced noise impacts from fewer trains stopping, and improved traffic flow with a reduction in future gate-down time. In addition, closure of the station will provide the Town the potential to use the portion of Caltrain station property no longer needed to support current Caltrain operations for staging and construction of its Town Center project and, potentially, facilitate a new use of this property to enhance the Town Center development.

Proposed Actions Supporting the Closure

Caltrain requests formal Town support for the station closure. Caltrain will support this action by pursuing funding and taking action to plan and construct several projects that support the closure and provide mitigating benefits to the Town. These actions (estimated at a cost of \$7-9 million) include:

- Construction of a right-of-way fence separating the current station from the Town Center property; removal of the existing center station platform and track crossings.
- Removal of station furnishings (ticket vending machines, bike lockers) and modify the station shelter to better integrate with the Town Center.
- Implementation of grade crossing safety improvements at Watkins Avenue, potentially including installation of quad gates.

Caltrain will also work cooperatively with the Town to explore the feasibility of a new path extending south of Watkins Avenue, on property adjacent to, but not within, the Caltrain right-of-way. Engagement of the City of Menlo Park and third party land owners would be needed as part of any feasibility assessment. This path could provide a more direct and convenient connection to the Menlo Park Caltrain Station. If the path were found to be feasible, Caltrain would work with the Town to identify funding opportunities.

We ask the Town to help support these actions by coordinating station modifications with the Town Center project (e.g. shelter modifications and landscape plans), supporting Caltrain funding applications and participating in the path feasibility study. We also expect the Town to enter into a lease for any portion of Caltrain property used as part of the Town Center. In return, we ask the Town to confirm that there are no plans for grade separations at Fair Oaks and Watkins Ave and those will remain at-grade crossings.

The closure of the station, along with the closure of the pedestrian crossings that access the station platform, would also eliminate the need for trains to sound horns as they approach the station. Currently, under the requirements of the California Public Utilities Commission and Caltrain's own operating rules, horns must be sounded for safety purposes as trains approach the station and its pedestrian crossings. It is understood that the Town may pursue approval of an expanded Quiet Zone as a result of the station closure and safety improvements at Watkins Avenue, which, combined with the closure of the station, would significantly expand the area in which horns are not sounded. Caltrain will cooperate with that effort.

George Rodericks, City Manager

January 8, 2020

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Next Steps

We would like formal Town concurrence with the complete and permanent station closure. Your action on the station closure will initiate a Caltrain process to identify potential impacts, undertake environmental clearance, and develop a station closure resolution. This process will take approximately 5 to 6 months. We also expect to develop a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Town that would further define and memorialize the proposed actions. The MOU can be developed in the next few months and approved at the same time as the station closure resolution.

Thank you for considering this proposal. We believe it will be of substantial benefit to both the Town and Caltrain. We look forward to working closely with the Town in the future.

Sincerely,



Jim Hartnett

Caltrain Executive Director