

Memorandum



To: Angela Calvillo, Clerk of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors

Through: Tom Maguire, Director of Sustainable Streets Division *TM*
Jamie Parks, Director of Livable Streets *JP*
Elizabeth Chen, Associate Engineer *EC*

From: Jeffrey Tumlin, Director of Transportation

Date: September 21, 2020

Subject: Panhandle Social Distancing and Safety Project – Project Sponsor CEQA Appeal Response

INTRODUCTION

The San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency (SFMTA) submits this memorandum in support of SFMTA Statutory Exemption No. 2020-006678ENV for the Panhandle Social Distancing and Safety Project. It is a response to a letter of appeal to the Board of Supervisors regarding the Planning Department's issuance of a Statutory Exemption under the California Environmental Quality Act for the project. The letter addresses topics other than those related to CEQA, which are separately discussed in the Planning Department's appeal response memorandum.

BACKGROUND

On February 25, 2020, the Mayor issued a proclamation Declaring the Existence of a Local Emergency (COVID-19 Local Emergency). On March 16, 2020, San Francisco's Health Officer issued a Public Health Order in response to the COVID-19 Local Emergency, requiring that residents shelter in place, with the only exception being for essential needs. This significantly affected San Francisco's transit system and required the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency (SFMTA) to reduce transit service.

With Muni service reduced, many San Francisco residents resorted to walking, riding a bike, or taking other travel modes to make essential trips. However, given space constraints, it was observed that members of the public could not safely and practically maintain the six feet of social distance required by the City's Public Health Order C19-07b in certain areas of the City such as the Panhandle. The Panhandle Social Distancing and Safety Project intends to provide relief to overcrowding on the Panhandle Path by providing a parking protected bikeway on the south side of Fell Street thereby creating more space on the roadway for bicyclists to use and thus lessening the volume of users on the Panhandle Path. This space makes possible essential walk and bike travel while transit service levels are temporarily reduced. As such, the SFMTA proposed the project in May 2020, and it was implemented in late July 2020, following San Francisco Fire Department's consent to the implementation of the project in early July 2020.

The Panhandle Social Distancing and Safety Project was proposed as an emergency response to the overcrowding at the Panhandle. The project is temporary, set to expire 120 days after the City's

proclamation of the COVID-19 Local Emergency is lifted. For a parking protected bike lane on Fell Street to be made permanent, the SFMTA Board would need to approve the permanent project following additional public engagement and environmental review, as needed.

DISCUSSION

The Panhandle Social Distancing and Safety Project is intended to reduce overcrowding on the Panhandle Path and allow users more space to social distance.

San Francisco's response to the pandemic has stressed the importance of social distancing, or maintaining 6 feet of space between individuals, to control the spread of coronavirus. The city's Public Health Order C19-07b required that all San Franciscans maintain at least six feet of separation with others not from their household. At the initial onset of shelter in place, SFMTA staff observed crowding on the Panhandle Path due to the high volume of users. Pedestrians and bicyclists on the Panhandle Path were not always able to maintain six feet of separation from other users. The Panhandle Social Distancing and Safety Project was created to improve safety for these users by creating additional space on the roadway for bicyclists to use. A temporary parking-protected bikeway on Fell Street between Baker Street and Shrader Street was implemented as an alternate route for bicyclists, thus lessening the volume of users on the Panhandle Path and improving safety for cyclists and pedestrians.

The Panhandle Social Distancing and Safety Project provided opportunities for community and stakeholder engagement prior to project approval by the SFMTA Department Operations Center (DOC) and subsequent confirmation by the MTA Board.

- **May 13, 2020: Project was presented to residents during an online community meeting organized by the District 5 Supervisor's Office.** SFMTA staff presented the project, collected feedback, and answered questions by residents.
- **May 18, 2020: Project was announced via SFMTA Website and local media.** A project-specific website was created at <https://www.sfmta.com/projects/panhandle-social-distancing-and-safety-project> with contact information for staff. The public was able to receive timely and responsive replies to questions or concerns about the project since the project manager and team could be directed contacted.
- **May 18, 2020: Relevant city agencies were notified of the project through the COVID-19 TASC Process.** The project was reviewed by city agencies and San Francisco Fire Department (SFFD) provided feedback.
- **July 10, 2020: Project consent by COVID-19 TASC.** SFFD provided written consent to the implementation of the project.
- **July 15, 2020: Project is approved by the SFMTA DOC under Delegation of Authority by City Traffic Engineer.** The City Traffic Engineer has independent authority to approve certain

traffic modifications under Section 201 of the San Francisco Transportation Code. Section 201(a)(5) of the Transportation Code allows the City Traffic Engineer to “Install or remove any temporary Traffic Control Devices on any Street for the purpose of controlling Parking or traffic during emergencies, special conditions or events, construction work, short-term testing, or when necessary for the protection of public health and safety. Such temporary Traffic Control Devices shall be removed when they are no longer required following the emergency, condition, or event.” The City and the SFMTA established incident command structures in response to the COVID-19 Local Emergency (i.e. a City Emergency Operations Center/COVID Command Center and an SFMTA Department Operations Centers).

Given the number of emergency requests to SFMTA from the City’s Emergency Operations Center, the urgency of the requests requiring short turnaround times, and the limited availability of staff during this crisis, the City Traffic Engineer temporarily delegated authority under this provision to the SFMTA Department Operations Center (DOC) for actions that are responsive to the COVID-19 Local Emergency (See Attachment A). The Traffic Engineer delegated this authority in order to streamline decision-making under the SFMTA Incident Command. As such, this project was approved by DOC staff through the issuance of work orders on July 15, 2020 under the delegation of the authority by the City Traffic Engineer under Transportation Code Section 201(a)(5).

Documentation of this approval was provided to the appellant on August 17, 2020 following a public records request.

- **August 18, 2020: Project confirmed by the SFMTA Board.** While the Traffic Engineer has emergency authority, delegated to SFMTA DOC, to establish these changes, given the length of the emergency and nature of the changes, staff believed it was prudent to confirm the DOC’s decision through the non-emergency process of an MTA Board hearing. The SFMTA Board did confirm the DOC’s approval and explicitly limited that approval such that it expires 120 days following the expiration or termination of the COVID-19 Local Emergency.

If SFMTA intends to make permanent changes to Fell Street between Baker Street and Shrader Street, including any installation of an on-street bikeway, staff would need to conduct additional outreach and environmental review, as needed, and return to the SFMTA Board and present findings from project evaluation and outreach in order for the SFMTA Board to make an informed decision.

The San Francisco Fire Department provided written consent to the Panhandle Social Distancing and Safety Project.

The appellant is correct that SFFD stated in a May 20, 2020 letter that they did consent to the project as originally proposed. However, the SFFD subsequently has since provided written consent for the emergency project through an email sent on July 10, 2020 (see Attachment B), after additions to the proposal were made as described below.

SFFD expressed concern that the removal of one vehicle traffic lane would potentially increase congestion on Fell Street and thus increase emergency response times. In response, SFMTA created an evaluation plan (see Attachment C) where SFMTA committed to collecting data and monitoring vehicle volumes and speeds, travel times, and queue lengths following the installation of the project. As part of this plan, SFMTA will work with SFFD to analyze possible adjustments to the project to maintain effective emergency response times. Following agreement to the evaluation plan from both SFMTA and SFFD, SFFD provided written consent to the implementation of the Panhandle Social Distancing and Safety Project prior to approval or implementation of the project by the SFMTA

Quick, responsive action that can be acted upon is imperative during this public health crisis.


During the Covid-19 Public Health Emergency, SFMTA has moved quickly to ensure continued transportation safety. The Panhandle Social Distancing and Safety Project is an opportunity to support physical distancing and ensure transportation safety and public health during this unprecedented time. This project uses removable paint, signs, and posts to ensure adequate social distancing for essential bike and pedestrian travel on a heavily used east-west corridor in San Francisco.

Accordingly, we ask that the San Francisco Board of Supervisors uphold the use of a California Environmental Quality Act Statutory Exemption to allow for continued operation of the Panhandle Social Distancing and Safety Project.



MEMORANDUM

TO: Tom Maguire
Director of Sustainable Streets

FROM: Ricardo Olea 
City Traffic Engineer

DATE: July 10, 2020

SUBJECT: Delegation of temporary authority to the SFMTA Department Operations Center (DOC) under COVID-19 Local Emergency Declaration to Approve Traffic Control Devices to Address the COVID-19 Local Emergency.

This memo is to memorialize delegation of authority over the implementation of temporary parking and traffic changes under the Proclamation of the Mayor Declaring the Existence of a Local Emergency dated February 25, 2020 (COVID-19 Local Emergency Declaration). The COVID-19 Local Emergency necessitated parking and traffic changes beginning March 23 and I orally authorized this delegation beginning on that date. This delegation is authorized until such time as I rescind it or the COVID-19 Local Emergency Declaration expires or is terminated.

Transportation Code Section 201(a)(5) allows the City Traffic Engineer to install or remove traffic control devices “for the purpose of controlling Parking or traffic during emergencies, special conditions or events, construction work, short-term testing, or when necessary for the protection for public health and safety.” The COVID-19 Local Emergency qualifies as such an emergency that necessitates parking or traffic changes to accommodate various types of needs related to the emergency. Specifically, turn restrictions, parking/loading removal, curbside pickup, and part time or full-time street closures are part of these aforementioned traffic control devices.

In order to streamline decision making under the SFMTA Incident Command System active since March 13 I have delegated the authority to implement such traffic control devices and issue work orders that are responsive to the COVID-19 Local Emergency to the SFMTA Department Operations Center DOC. Sustainable Streets engineers like Ian Trout, Alan Uy, and others have been and will continue coordinating internally and externally for all COVID-19 emergency temporary work orders. The DOC has been and will continue tracking the temporary work that has been done under disaster response and will over the course of the disaster determine which need to be modified, continued, or terminated. Any DOC parking and traffic changes implemented that need to remain following the COVID-19 Local Emergency Declaration will require permanent legislation or authorization by the City Traffic Engineer as required under Transportation Code Section 200.

Section 201(a)(5) changes that are not related to COVID-19 will be reviewed and approved by me as usual.

Chen, Elizabeth

From: Scanlon, Olivia (FIR) <olivia.scanlon@sfgov.org>
Sent: Friday, July 10, 2020 6:04 PM
To: Kilgore, Preston (BOS); Parks, Jamie
Cc: Preston, Dean (BOS); Chen, Elizabeth; Maguire, Tom; Tumlin, Jeffrey; Sallaberry, Mike; DeCossio, Dan (FIR); Nicholson, Jeanine (FIR); Law, Chad (FIR)
Subject: RE: Fell St Parking-Protected Bike Lane - Evaluation Plan

Good Evening,

The SFFD has agreed to move forward with the temporary plan for Fell Street with the understanding that MTA and SFFD will meet one month after installation to discuss the effect of the changes and any concerns that may have arisen . Jamie, can you please let me now the timing of installation so I can setup the follow-up.
Thanks to everyone for the dialogue, we all find ourselves working in an ever changing environment.

Have a good weekend.

Best,
Olivia

**Fell St Parking-Protected Bike Lane -
Evaluation and Monitoring Plan
July 1, 2020**

Background

In response to congestion on the Panhandle Path and the Public Health Order to socially distance during the COVID-19 pandemic, the SFMTA proposes to install a parking-protected bikeway on Fell Street adjacent to the Panhandle between Baker Street and Shrader Street. The proposed project would reduce the number of travel lanes on Fell St from 4 to 3 to accommodate the new bike lanes.

More information on the project purpose and proposed design is available here:
<https://www.sfmta.com/projects/panhandle-social-distancing-and-safety-project>

Summary of Available Traffic Data

Prior to the COVID-19 crisis, Fell St typically carried approximately 2,210 vehicles during the p.m. peak hour (based on counts taken at Fell/Masonic in May 2019). During the first week of June 2020, traffic counts showed a reduction of 43% in peak hour traffic volume to approximately 1,260 vehicles. SFMTA conducted traffic modeling at Fell/Masonic to show how the proposed change could affect capacity and delay on Fell St.¹

	Peak-Hour Westbound Traffic	# of Through Lanes	V/C Ratio (ie, Percent Capacity)	Average Delay
Pre-COVID (No Project)	2,210	4	0.93	22.2s
June 2020 (with Proposed Emergency Bike Lane)	1,260	3	0.66	9.5s

This shows that Fell St is projected to operate as well or better than pre-COVID conditions, even with the proposed lane reduction.

Similarly, the SFCTA's congestion tracker shows a 31% increase in average speed on Fell St in June 2020 compared to pre-COVID conditions (<https://covid-congestion.sfcta.org/>). This reflects the general reduction in travel due to COVID-response restrictions, as well suppressed demand for travel on Fell St specifically due to the temporary closure of JFK Dr.

Proposed Evaluation and Monitoring

Given the above, SFMTA traffic modeling shows that 3 traffic lanes on Fell St, as proposed for the emergency bike lane, would easily accommodate existing traffic volumes as of June 2020. However, the SFMTA also acknowledges the impossibility of accurately predicting future conditions given current uncertainty.

As such, we propose a comprehensive evaluation, monitoring and adjustment program to follow installation.

¹ Other intersections are anticipated to have similar or lower delay, as Fell/Masonic is among the most congested intersections on the Panhandle.

- The SFMTA will collect 48-hour counts of vehicle volumes and speed to measure changes both on Fell St and the adjacent Hayes St corridor. Data will be collected during 4 time periods: pre-installation; 1-month after; 3-months after; 6 months after; and 12 months after. If JFK Dr is re-opened at any point during the evaluation period, additional data will be collected within 4 weeks of the re-opening. Data collection will occur at the following 4 locations:
 1. Fell Street, between Lyon Street and Central Avenue
 2. Fell Street, between Clayton Street and Cole Street
 3. Hayes Street, between Lyon Street and Central Avenue
 4. Hayes Street, between Clayton Street and Cole Street
- The SFMTA will monitor and measure the queue lengths at the intersection of Fell St/Masonic Ave. Queue lengths will be recorded for 30 minutes during the p.m. peak hour (as measured by the 48-hour vehicle counts). Queue length data will be collected during 4 time periods: pre-installation; 1-month after; 3-months after; 6 months after; and 12 months after.
- The SFMTA will monitor and record data from the SFCTA's COVID Congestion Tracker on a monthly basis to assess trends in vehicles speeds on the Fell St corridor.
- The SFMTA will hire a contractor to conduct travel time runs to record the average travel time along the Fell St corridor (Baker to Shrader) during the p.m. peak period. Travel time runs will be recorded using the "floating car method".

Mitigation

The SFMTA commits to assessing potential changes to the Fell St project if/when either of the following 2 conditions are met:

1. Peak-hour traffic volumes on Fell Street increase to >90% of pre-COVID conditions;
2. Peak-hour traffic speeds on Fell Street decrease to below 20 mph (as measured by the SFCTA)

If these thresholds are met, the SFMTA will work with SFFD to conduct more detailed analyses of congestion "hot spots" to evaluate possible mitigations to improving emergency response times. Mitigations may include removing parking adjacent to intersections to create space for vehicles to pull over during emergency response calls; adjusting the length of the bike lane; removing some or all parking adjacent to the Panhandle to create an emergency-response lane; or removing the temporary bike lane. Through this assessment, the SFMTA commits to working with SFFD to make adjustments to project necessary to maintain effective emergency response times.

An SFMTA staff contact will also be designated to regularly receive feedback from SFFD at any point during the temporary installation, in addition to the data collection timepoints established above.

Process for Considering Permanent Changes

The proposed project is specifically for a temporary, emergency bike lane to allow for social distancing during the on-going COVID crisis. Note that any permanent changes to Fell St, including designation of a bike lane, would require approvals through the standard legislative process including TASC and the SFMTA Board for final approval.