



April 17, 2012

Mayor William W. Brien  
Vice Mayor John Mirisch  
Mr. Barry Brucker, Councilmember  
Ms. Lili Bosse, Councilmember  
Dr. Julian Gold, Councilmember

Dear Mayor & Members of the City Council,

The draft Santa Monica Boulevard Reconstruction project request for proposals (RFP) presented for your review today signals the beginning of the most significant public works project undertaken by this city since I arrived here ten years ago. We have an opportunity to completely remake this corridor as a linear gateway to the entire city, including the Civic Center, Annenberg, and the Business triangle too. It can once again be a boulevard about which we can be proud.

And shouldn't we have pride? The corridor is a thematic link to our city's past. It is both a reminder of our humble origin as Morocco Junction on the Los Angeles Pacific's Balloon Route and, later, the landmark Route 66 that marked the high point of 20<sup>th</sup>-century automobile culture. As a cyclist and planner I respect the history of Santa Monica Boulevard, but also look ahead to it as the multimodal transportation opportunity suggested by our city plans.

Reviewing this RFP, however, I'm disappointed because it fails to exercise sufficient imagination. Here I want to identify several areas where the RFP could better communicate to bidders the opportunity, and respectfully suggest improvements that reflect current federal and state transportation best practices.

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The RFP indicates that "core reconstruction" will include a down-to-gravel rearrangement of utilities with "enhancement" options including transit-related improvements, a landscaped median and city gateways, and 'consideration' of bicycle lanes. But the RFP seems to telegraph a decided aversion to the latter; in several places, for example, it refers to median and transit improvements but makes no similar mention of the lanes.

Then there is the valence of the RFP language. It suggests we're more concerned with why we can't do it than how we can:

"Graphics should show in detail the constrains of the existing curb faces and also show the amount of additional roadway (if any) that would be required to have a bicycle lane in each direction."

This RFP suggests that dual Class II lanes are not really seriously considered. As a cyclist looking to Santa Monica Boulevard for safe travel, I hope that our consultant will instead show us how it *can* be done.

**Better Bike**

Mark Elliot, Organizer  
[mark.elliott@betterbike.org](mailto:mark.elliott@betterbike.org)

Then there is the reference to bicycle lanes alternatives like sharrows (shared-lane markings) and a Carmelita Drive route. For a heavily-traveled corridor where speeds routinely meet and even exceed 50 mph, the sharrow is no substitute for a bicycle lane. Sharrows would continue to mix cyclists with motor traffic. That is not safe for cyclists and thus sharrows shouldn't be suggested to bidders that may have scant experience with engineering true multimodal corridors.

As for Carmelita Drive, it appears to be the city's preferred option for a westbound bicycle lane. But cycling advocates note that Carmelita is less convenient because it's not direct and it is punctuated with stop signs. Even the city's own feasibility study consultant found those to be issues. Moreover, westbound re-entry onto Santa Monica is problematic because Carmelita junctures with Wilshire at an intersection that is uncontrolled. (If a northerly bicycle route is contemplated, Elevado connects more directly to the Santa Monica corridor via Whittier.)

Perhaps most critical, the RFP suggests that even incremental expansion of the corridor is a nonstarter. On page 4 the RFP states: "Current City Council direction is that the roadway will not be expanded." And later, "...it is assumed that the roadway is not anticipated to be widened...." And finally, "The project team shall plan to present their final recommendations to the Council by the end of 2012 with no changes anticipated to the existing roadway width."

The RFP language reflects a line of thinking that posits that the public is opposed to any widening at all – even a foot. But that appears to be an assumption taken without input or significant discussion. Perhaps it relies on a very narrow conception of 'the public'? In our city of 35,000 people, each of us has a stake in how our city evolves, but it's not clear who's weighed in on the future mobility opportunities for this corridor. (The RFP also makes reference to a singular width, but the boulevard curb-to-curb is anything but uniformly wide today.)

I recognize that expanding roadways is always politically problematic. But we have to recognize that an incremental change will return a significant benefit if it affords a westbound bicycle lane. This gravel-up reconstruction (and even modest realignment) can culminate in a high-profile mobility exemplar for which there is no other comparable example in the Southland.

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I would like to highlight what is missing from this draft RFP. The most obvious omission is the absence of any reference to Complete Streets principles. A 'complete street' is designed to enable safe access for road users regardless of age or ability. By including safety-enhancing engineering like curb extensions, median islands, and traffic-slowing narrowed travel lanes – improvements rolled out only in the business triangle – a 'complete street' facilitates mobility regardless of mode, whether motoring, transit, walking or cycling. Of course, a complete street would include bike lanes too.

Why not reference that approach in the RFP? The policy framework is solid: legislators in California passed a complete streets law in 2009 that mandated local governments include in

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mark.elliott@betterbike.org

General Plan circulation elements (and other planning documents) provisions to achieve equity in access. But the principles find no expression in this draft RFP (or in our plans).

I would go further and suggest that inclusion of the most progressive mobility innovations would position the new boulevard as a demonstration project. Consider these improvements undertaken today in cities like San Francisco, Long Beach, Santa Monica and even Los Angeles:

- A green 'bike box' reserves space for cyclists ahead of the motor queue to facilitate left turns or provide an advance start at controlled intersections (a measure perfectly appropriate for Wilshire/Santa Monica boulevards);
- High-visibility pavement markings show drivers and cyclists alike how to pass safely through an intersection together – a feature that finds wide acceptance in Europe and in the Bay Area and beyond too;
- Bicycle priority signals allow cyclists to move through complex junctures without fear of motor traffic – a device particularly appropriate for a chaotic intersection like Santa Monica/Doheney.

We've got to communicate our expectations to bidders if we are to think ambitiously about Santa Monica Boulevard!

In closing, let me state that there exists public support for bicycle lanes. Cycling advocates consistently call for them. Those participating in Westside Cities Council of Governments meetings, as well as our own Bike Plan Update Committee meetings and the Bike Route Pilot meeting just last week, have expressed universal support. I have personally encouraged Transportation staff not to foreclose that option because I believe that Class II bicycle lanes are one answer to our region's mobility challenges.

Here I encourage City Council to direct Transportation to revisit this RFP in order to neutralize the valence in proposal language that I've highlighted, and to remove implicit references to any prohibition on moving the curb face even a foot. I also urge the Council to include explicit references to Complete Streets principles and perhaps specify other engineering best practices that will establish our high expectations for this conceptual design.

Last, I suggest that the city suggest that the winning bidder be prepared to subcontract (as necessary) the mobility expertise called for by tomorrow's transportation demands if our bidders don't have it in-house. Better Bike will be happy to suggest several mobility consultant firms with a proven track record of multimodal mobility planning and construction. They would welcome a demonstration project of the caliber and profile of our Santa Monica Boulevard.

Sincerely,



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