

SAN RAFAEL

Transit project hits key phase

Public forums slated on plan to move hub

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Transit officials are seeking public input on a \$40 million proposal to relocate Marin County's largest transportation hub in what would be a major redevelopment project in downtown San Rafael.

The Golden Gate Bridge, Highway and Transportation District is proposing to move its San Rafael Transit Center one block north. The new site would include three parcels bordered to the south and north by Third and Fourth streets and to the west and east by Tamalpais Avenue and Hetherton Street, where the Vivalon headquarters and Citibank building are located.

The relocation project is being considered to address concerns about pedestrian safety and traffic flow that have arisen since Sonoma-Marín Area Rail Transit district train tracks were built directly through the transit center in 2019.

With 800 bus trips passing through the transit center on daily basis, the presence of the track constrained the flow of traffic through the center and limited where certain buses could park.

"If a bus breaks down, if a bus is delayed by a wheelchair boarding, that has the potential to basically make the other buses not to be able to

Transit

FROM PAGE 1

get into position and potentially back up on to San Rafael city streets," said Ron Downing, director of planning for the bridge district.

"It really ties our hands in terms of being able to offer not only the level of service we offer today, it also really ties our hands if there was a future desire to expand service," he said.

Downing said the new location one block north would enable all bus sizes to access the platforms; would place both the bus platforms and SMART station in one location rather than requiring passengers to cross the busy Third Street for transfers; and would offer "opportunities for a sense of public place and a nicer environment."

The new center would include 17 bus bays, the same as now, but would make it possible to expand bus service if needed, a move not feasible at the current center, Downing said.

The proposed relocation site was one of four the bridge district is considering as part of a draft environmental review. The option found to have the least environmental impacts, Downing said.

The other locations included two alternate configurations of the proposed site that would retain the headquarters of Vivalon, formerly known as Whistlestop, or place the station under Highway 101 between Fourth Street and Fifth Av-

enue.

The public may comment on the environmental analysis through Oct. 11. The district also plans to hold two teleconference meetings: at 6 p.m. Sept. 14 via Zoom, and a Spanish-language meeting at 6 p.m. Sept. 15 on Facebook Live.

Under the district's preferred option, it would have to buy the three parcels' properties to the north owned by Vivalon, Citibank and SMART, Downing said. Leasing the property would run the risk of potential changes to the site by the owner, Downing said.

The proposal calls for part of the Vivalon headquarters at 930 Tamalpais Ave. to be relocated to the western side of Tamalpais Avenue to be used for district offices, customer service, public restrooms and a driver break room.

If approved, the project is expected to cost \$30 million to \$40 million, which could be offset by the sale of the district's existing transit center property. Construction could begin in 2023 or 2024 and last about 18 months. The project would require approvals from the city of San Rafael as well as state and federal agencies.

Vivalon's chief executive officer, Anne Grey, said while no discussions on a sale have taken place, the organization is open to a potential sale given that most of its operations are set to be relocated from its longstanding headquarters at 930 Tamalpais Ave. to its new "healthy aging



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A Golden Gate Transit bus leaves the San Rafael Transit Center in March. About 800 bus trips pass through the downtown center on daily basis.

campus" at 999 Third St.

Vivalon, which provides services for seniors and residents with disabilities, is aiming to move to the new campus by 2023, which could be when construction on the new transit center would begin.

"If the stars align, that could work out very nicely to move our programs over and not have them impacted," Grey said.

Vivalon would still need to find another location for its administrative functions and nutrition programs, Grey said.

San Rafael Vice Mayor Maribeth Bushey, who had previously raised concerns about the relocation project earlier this year, said, "As is our practice, the city of San Rafael will receive the document and review it internally and release an evaluation of it in due course."

The Marin County Bicycle Coalition supports the

district's proposed site because it would provide the best experience for transit riders by concentrating both the SMART and bus stops in one location and would provide a two-way bicycle path along Tamalpais Avenue between Second and Fourth streets. No set bike path exists in downtown.

"It gets people halfway through downtown," said Warren Wells, the organization's policy and planning director.

The organization is concerned about a proposed taxi and rideshare pickup and dropoff location just north of Fourth Street that would be in the path of cyclists. Wells said it could present safety hazards with cars pulling out and passengers opening doors.

More information about the project, the environmental review and upcoming meetings can be found online at bit.ly/3fUeGi3.