

PLANNING & COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT

STAFF REPORT

DATE: DECEMBER 5, 2013

TO: TRANSPORTATION ADVISORY COMMISSION

FROM: DAVID REYES, DEPUTY DIRECTOR OF PLANNING & COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT

SUBJECT: REVISING THRESHOLDS OF SIGNIFICANCE FOR TRAFFIC IMPACTS – IMPACT ON PROJECTS IN THE PIPELINE

RECOMMENDATION:

It is recommended that the Transportation Advisory Commission recommend to the City Council that

- When the City Council approves revised thresholds of significance for traffic impacts that the new thresholds would not apply to projects that have been deemed complete and that have executed a memorandum of understanding to prepare a traffic study.

BACKGROUND:

One of the four foundations to the update to the General Plan is that the City should, “Plan for walking, biking, and transit.” This corresponds with Guiding Principle Five, “Pasadena will be a city where people can circulate without a car” and is supported by numerous existing policies and proposed new policy topic areas. Given this renewed focus, it is necessary to revise current practices so that they correspond with the existing and proposed direction in the General Plan.

When a project has been determined to be subject to the California Environmental Quality Act, (CEQA) the project must be analyzed to determine whether or not it will have a significant effect on the environment. In relation to traffic and transportation, the City has specific metrics and thresholds that determine whether the impact created by a project is significant; CEQA calls these thresholds of significance. The City’s current thresholds of significance examine a project’s impact on an intersection’s level of service and on a specific segment of a street. Both of these metrics – level of service and the segment impact – only examine the impact a project will have on car traffic; they do not explore a project’s impact on pedestrians, bicyclists and transit users. Due to this inconsistency between policy and practice, staff plans to bring forward to the Transportation Advisory Commission, Planning Commission and City Council

recommendations on new metrics and revised thresholds of significance for traffic and circulation impacts.

ANALYSIS:

The first step in revising the metrics and thresholds is to determine which projects in the development review pipeline would be required to use the new thresholds. This report outlines five options and offers points to consider in each option.

Option One: Submittal of an Application for an Entitlement

In this first option, once the City Council adopts revised thresholds of significance these new thresholds would apply to any new application submitted thereafter. Any application submitted prior to approval of the new thresholds would undergo review based on existing thresholds. A concern with this option is that if the existing metrics are determined to be more favorable, some applicants may submit projects that are incomplete and are not suitable for further case processing. More importantly, this could saddle the community with projects that have not been fully considered.

Option Two: Application Deemed Complete

In this second option, new thresholds would apply to any new project applications that the Planning Division subsequently deems complete. Any applications deemed complete prior to approval of the new thresholds would undergo review based on existing threshold criteria. However, since a traffic study is not required to deem an application complete, and may not be executed for a considerable period of time, there is no substantial reason why the project should not undergo review based on new traffic thresholds.

Option Three: Release of a Notice of Preparation

In this third option, once the City Council adopts revised thresholds of significance these new thresholds would apply to any new project that subsequently releases a Notice of Preparation. Projects that release a Notice of Preparation prior to City Council adoption of new thresholds of significance would be reviewed based on existing threshold criteria. A Notice of Preparation (NOP) is only released for an EIR project; NOPs are not released for projects that require a Negative Declaration or Mitigate Negative Declaration. Unfortunately, there is no parallel to the Notice of Preparation and no clear point when analysis begins for projects that require a Negative Declaration or Mitigated Negative Declaration.

Option Four: Execution of a Memorandum of Understanding to Prepare a Traffic Study

In this fourth option, once the City Council adopts revised thresholds of significance these new thresholds would apply to any new project for which the City subsequently executes a MOU to prepare a traffic study. Any projects that have already executed a MOU would undergo review based on existing thresholds. For background, applicants are not allowed to prepare their own traffic studies for use with CEQA. Instead, applicants must sign a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the Department of Transportation (DOT), at which time staff hires a

traffic-engineering firm to prepare a traffic study. At the request of the applicant, the DOT can execute the MOU at any point in the development review process, including prior to submittal of an application. Therefore, under this option, it would be possible for project applicants to secure its usage of the existing thresholds so early in the development review process that a project could go through substantial changes. This causes the same rush noted in Option One.

Option Five: Application Deemed Complete and MOU to Prepare a Traffic Study Executed (Staff's Recommendation)

In this hybrid option, once the City Council adopts revised thresholds of significance, the new thresholds would apply to projects that have not been deemed complete and/or have not executed a traffic study MOU. Any projects that have both been deemed complete and have executed a traffic study MOU would undergo review based on existing thresholds.

Staff's recommendation accounts for two main issues highlighted in the options above. It limits the potential influx of incomplete application submittal and the rush to submit applications or execute traffic study MOUs to secure use of the existing metrics. It also addresses the fact that if the City deems a project complete but execution of the traffic study MOU can happen at a later stage, thereby preventing a project's use of the existing thresholds. In these cases, since the traffic analysis has not begun there is no substantive reason why the project's traffic study should not use the new thresholds.

Once a traffic study MOU is signed and the project has been deemed complete, the applicant nor the City may not modify the methodology and metrics of the traffic study nor require the applicant to prepare an additional traffic study using the newly adopted metrics. Allowing a project to change its methodology while a traffic study is being prepared or after a study is prepared would unfairly delay a project.

NEXT STEPS:


The Department of Transportation (DOT) has begun preparing a traffic model that will assist in the preparation of new traffic metrics and associated thresholds of significance. In early 2014, DOT will meet with the public to review draft recommendations on these new metrics and thresholds. After making appropriate modifications to the recommendations, DOT staff will bring these recommendations to the Transportation Advisory Commission, Planning Commission and the City Council for review and approval.

Respectfully Submitted,



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