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Guest opinion: Make a people-friendly El Camino Real

by Adina Levin

The Menlo Park Downtown Plan has built on four years of community feedback. Residents wanted to preserve and enhance Menlo Park's village character, while filling ugly vacant lots along El Camino. Residents wanted to improve east-west connectivity across the city and make it safer to cross on foot or by bike.

The draft plan addressed these goals with wider sidewalks, enhanced crosswalks and improved intersections with sidewalk curb extensions. The curb extensions improve pedestrian safety without reducing safety or convenience for drivers or cyclists by making pedestrians more visible to approaching cars, and reducing the time and distance to cross the street.

These improvements would transform El Camino into a boulevard where residents and visitors want to walk, talk, shop, and enjoy life. People would feel safe walking or biking for short trips to and from downtown, the train station area, grocery stores, and schools. Instead of dividing the city, El Camino would connect it.

But during the review process, the clear vision in the original draft got muddled.

Much in the plan was improved. The City Council recommendations to include a north-south path through the Stanford property, from Roble to the Middle under-crossing, and from the Middle trail through Cambridge. This would help pedestrians and cyclists travel north and south on El Camino, off the road. For experienced cyclists, the Planning and Bike commissions recommended, and council approved, the option of bike lanes along El Camino, just as Palo Alto and Atherton had done before.

Some parts of the plan got worse. Near midnight at a Planning Commission meeting, a commissioner raised an alarm that the curb extensions would block bike lanes. But according to federal design guidelines, curb extensions cannot extend into bike lanes. Another objection to curb extensions was that they would prevent the widening of El Camino to three lanes in each direction. A recommendation to remove the curb extensions and consider a 6-lane El Camino was unfortunately approved 4-3.

This violates key goals of the plan, including maintaining a unique village character and making El Camino safer to cross. A 6-lane highway through the heart of Menlo Park is unsafe, uninviting, and definitely unvillage-like.

Fixing the mistake

Fortunately, council members at their Oct. 4 meeting expressed that they'd changed their minds after being presented with additional information, and wanted to keep the curb extensions for pedestrian safety. But they didn't vote on this item because the meeting ran until 1 a.m. The vision for El Camino in the plan is now at odds with the will of a majority of council members. Council should fix this mistake, and now.

To fulfill the community's vision, the council should move forward with the original people-friendly design for El Camino, with wider sidewalks, curb extensions, and bike lanes. A 6-lane El Camino does not leave space for these safety features that residents have long desired.

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