



Agenda Report

City Council

Date: June 13, 2023

To: Brian Saeki, City Manager

From: Shannon DeLong, Assistant City Manager
Virginia Santana, Director of Parks, Recreation and Community Services
Michelle Chapman, Senior Civil Engineer

Subject: Whittier People Mover – Initial Study Results

RECOMMENDATION

Review and provide feedback on the Whittier People Mover – Initial Study Results and provide direction as appropriate to finalize the report.

BACKGROUND

In March 2019, Brookfield Development sought to amend the Development Agreement (D.A.) for their project, The Groves at Whittier. As part of the amended D.A., Brookfield agreed to provide \$100,000 to help fund a study of potential routes for a small-scale circular transit operation that would connect the new residential and commercial developments at The Groves, PIH Health Hospital, Whittier College, Uptown, and Hellman Park.

On March 23, 2021, City Council approved the solicitation of two requests for proposals: one for the development, subject to the California Surplus Land Act, of eight scattered sites totaling 6.64 acres in Uptown, including the Alpha Beta site, and one to obtain professional services for the People Mover Study.

On September 14, 2021, City Council approved the Professional Services Agreement with IBI Group, Inc., Irvine in the amount of \$119,712 to complete the study.

IBI provided an online community survey and held a stakeholder meeting on November 11, 2021, to present the survey results. The survey was used to identify mobility needs, typical routes people take to their destinations, barriers to travel and non-automotive forms of transportation, and opportunities to improve travel in the study area.

On August 25, 2022, a joint meeting of the Parking & Transportation Commission and the Parks, Recreation & Community Services Commission was conducted to receive a report from IBI on the initial stakeholder meeting and community survey. The Commissions heard that most respondents are interested in a people mover option to serve discretionary travel such as access to local service/retail, neighborhood cafés, and gym/exercise facilities and are interested in improved weekend and evening services for destinations outside their daily commute. The Commissioners' joint

recommendation was to conduct additional stakeholder outreach to both Whittier College and the community at large.

On October 12, 2022, a second stakeholder meeting was conducted to share input received at the Joint Commission meeting and data collected in the Community Survey. Service concept refinement was discussed and reviewed.

On November 2, 2022, a public outreach meeting was conducted at The Groves with information provided to the community for several weeks beforehand via channel 3, e-newsletter, social media, email reminders, direct outreach to Whittier College and door hangers on the newly-occupied residences in The Groves neighborhood.

DISCUSSION

City Council's initial vision for a prospective People Mover was an automated circulator that would connect the new Groves development with Whittier points of interest such as Uptown, PIH Health, Hellman Park Trailhead, and commercial areas including The Quad, and Whittwood Town Center.

The People Mover initial study was a feasibility analysis on mobility needs and transportation gaps between The Groves, Uptown Whittier, and vicinity, which is necessary to justify public benefit in improving transportation infrastructure. The analysis includes capabilities of a range of autonomous and human operated vehicles offered by industry providers. The autonomous vehicle field is changing rapidly, and recommendations quickly become outdated due to technological and regulatory changes. Since the initiation of this study, similar projects have been canceled or delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, societal perceptions have shifted, and at least one major supplier of autonomous vehicles has shut down its operations. Specific technological challenges for automated vehicles include speed of travel limitations and degree of interaction with bicycles and pedestrians. At present, multi-passenger driverless vehicles in California operate below 20-25 mph speeds on predetermined routes, which makes crossing or navigating on Whittier Blvd a challenge.

The results of the initial study are summarized within key takeaways as follows:

- Operation of more advanced autonomous vehicles such as those used in Arizona and Texas require an extensive data collection and mapping effort to safely operate at higher speeds in a larger area. This would require an advanced partnership with a private operator.
- It is important to select a program that can meet the needs of its operating environment. Small driverless shuttles that operate at lower speeds would not be a good fit for Whittier Boulevard but may be suitable for smaller neighborhood streets in the city.
- Should the City pursue an automated people mover concept, it would be vitally important to properly set expectations about what the service can do, what it

cannot do, and what happens in response to a maintenance issue, crash, or other unexpected event.

- A crucial component of community buy-in is identifying a mobility need, making a clear case for how a circulator would address the need, and engaging with the public early and often about the project to understand any concerns.

While the study was initiated to determine whether an automated transit service could be commissioned to connect the new Groves commercial and retail development with new residents, the PIH Medical Center, the Uptown Core, the Quad, and potential future eastward points of interest, the analysis of the state-of-technology shows that implementation is not feasible – yet. However, stakeholder feedback does suggest that interim connectivity solutions could add value in the community and potentially provide a baseline for future automated system deployment. Therefore, City Council might consider providing direction to staff to explore one or more of the following options before receiving and filing the final report:

- 1) Provide comments on the results of the initial study, and direct staff to monitor automated vehicle implementation in California and report back periodically, perhaps every two to three years as technology advances.
- 2) Consider directing a study of on-demand micro-transit vehicle system allowing hailing from any location within a predefined radius, as has been implemented in Anaheim and recently piloted in communities such as Oceanside. This option could potentially be funded through accumulated Prop A or C funds, though it would be necessary to study and finalize a route and schedule prior to obtaining pre-approval for the use of such funding from the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority (Metro). For context, an initial estimate of an on-demand service was obtained, at a cost of \$300,000 for a six-month trial of service operating Tuesday – Thursday from 11 a.m. to 11 p.m., and Friday-Sunday from 10 a.m. to 2:30 a.m.
- 3) Consider whether a weekend shuttle to Hellman Park from the Comstock Avenue Parking Structure would be helpful to test the need for service while also alleviating the parking lot queuing issues in the neighborhood. Due to cost concerns from the Habitat Authority, the parking lot at Hellman Trailhead has not reopened following the closure of the lot during the 2020 COVID health officer orders,. A weekend shuttle during the current hours of operation is estimated to cost a flat rate of \$85 per hour, presuming the use of cutaway shuttles similar to those used for the Dial-a-Ride program (capacity for 20 or 14 passengers depending upon the model). A pilot program could potentially be funded through accumulated Prop A or Prop C funds, again following pre-approval as required by Metro guidelines.

Following a presentation outlining the highlights of the People Mover initial study and the City Council's options for consideration, staff will return with agreements or additional information as directed to finalize the initial study report.

FISCAL IMPACT

There is no impact to a discussion of the study findings; final costs for a connectivity option can be determined once direction is provided on method(s) for delivery.

STRATEGIC PLANNING GOAL

- Maintain & Enhance Quality of Life
- Transparent & Open Government

ATTACHMENTS

A. Vicinity Map – Study Area