



Residents question need for new downtown garage

Palo Alto officials put off decision on parking structure until early 2016.

by Genevieve Sheynar

Palo Alto officials often liken the city's strategy for dealing with the city's parking crisis to a three-legged stool. Reduce the demand for driving, make better use of parking structures and increase the supply of garages. With 2015 coming to a close, the city has put in plenty of progress on the first two legs of the figure-

ine stool. The third leg, however, is now starting to wobble.

The City Council last week voted at an 8-6 split to approve a proposal to begin design work on a new downtown garage, a facility that was included in the city's 2014 infrastructure plan and that was to go up on a city-owned lot on Hamilton Avenue, near Waverly Street. Public

Works Department staff had asked the council to approve the scope of work by which engineers would bid on the project. The approval was placed on the council's "consent" calendar, a list of non-controversial items that get approved in bulk and without discussion.

But rather than move along the staff recommendation, the council agreed to hold a hearing on the downtown garage at a future meeting. The decision came after several members of the public questioned

the need for the new garage and suggested that it would instead increase the area's parking crunch by encouraging more people to drive.

Among the speakers was downtown resident Sandra Slater, a steering-committee member of Palo Alto Forward, a pro-bus, pro-citizen group and the northern California director of Cool City Challenge, an environmental project. Slater noted that the city is already pursuing numerous measures for discouraging driving, including

the new Residential Professional Parking program (which forces employers to pay guests to park on residential streets beyond the newly established two-hour time limit), and the new Transportation Management Association, a nonprofit with a mission to reduce the number of people driving solo to work.

Slater suggested that the council compare the costs of these new programs with that of a new garage. A recent survey by the Transportation Management Association revealed that many downtown workers would be willing to ditch their cars if they had a more reliable and affordable transit option. The Epiphany Hotel, she noted, recently purchased Culture passes for its employees, resulting in about 25 percent of them converting to work by train.

"We should evaluate what the effectiveness is of this and other innovative programs that are in the works so that the council can be spending citizens' money wisely and effectively," Slater said.

Adrian Levin, member of the group Friends of Culture, likewise beseeched the council to focus on getting people out of their cars rather than building a new garage. Through the transportation nonprofit and work on the permit program, numerous opportunities to achieve the former objective have been identified, she said.

Nelson Buchanan, one of the architects of downtown's new Residential Professional Parking program, went a step further and urged the council to ditch the garage project. Buchanan acknowledged the irony of his opposition to a program that aims to relieve his Downtown North neighborhood's parking squeeze. Even so, he said, "I don't see the garage as part of the solution for neighborhood quality at all."

"The garage is only going to attract more cars like bees to honey," Buchanan said.

The council didn't discuss the garage but merely agreed to hold a full hearing on the early next year. But then too, the council majority has been supportive of a new downtown garage. The \$13 million facility is one of several city infrastructure projects to be funded largely by hotel tax revenues. Palo Alto voters agreed in 2011 to raise the hotel-tax rate from 12 to 14 percent with the understanding that the increase would be used to improve the city's infrastructure.

In that sense, backing away from a downtown garage would come with some political risk for the council. It would also raise questions from the downtown business-

Jessica Andritz walks with her daughter Geneva Rose and fellow parents and kids during "circle time" at Family Connections preschool on Dec. 15. Circle time is activity in which the preschoolers dance around the circle and say goodbye to one another at the end of the school day.



HOLIDAY FUND

Connecting to education

Family Connections helps put low-income kids on equal educational footing

by Sue Drennon

It's a hectic scene in East Palo Alto's Gardens neighborhood, mothers and young children gathered around colorful picture books, turning the pages at teacher Margarita Venter's direction. Each page is illustrated with a corresponding creature or object, letter of the alphabet and sound.

"Monkey, monkey, m-m-m," the preschoolers and their moms sang along.

To the course of three hours, the children — and their mothers — exercised while they learned, developed fine motor skills, explored science, made art and shared thoughtful meals.

All are part of a holistic educational program run through the nonprofit Family Connections, which provides kids with early-learning programs that allow them to enter kindergarten and higher grades at skill levels equivalent to or above their peers.

Family Connections is the only parent-child participation program dedicated to low-income families in San Mateo County. The tuition-free school has helped more than 1,000 families in Menlo Park, East Palo Alto and Redwood City to jump-start their children's education since 1990. A Palo Alto

Weekly Holiday Fund recipient, Family Connections received \$70,000 this year to support its Kindergarten Readiness program in East Palo Alto.

The need is great. Despite the best intentions, children in lower-income communities are still being left behind — a particularly glaring situation amid Silicon Valley's wealth and highly educated population.

According to San Mateo County School Readiness Data, having a high quality preschool

experience is one of the biggest influences on a child's school readiness, but there are too few preschool slots in the county to accommodate all of the children in need. Even with a traditional preschool experience, English Language Learner children are entering kindergarten behind their peers. In many cases, they don't fall even further behind.

That deficit is stark among local low-income school children. Just 28 percent of students at Belle Haven Elementary School and 22 percent at third graders at Fair Oaks Elementary School in Redwood City scored proficient or advanced in English language arts, according to reports by Belle Haven and GreatSchools.org. Family Connections acted in its great application to the Holiday Fund. According to research by the Anne Casey Foundation, children who have lived in poverty and are not reading proficiently



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Garage

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to who set new parking facilities as crucial to relieving congestion.

Business leaders have asserted the importance of a safe garage in light of the new downtown parking permit program, which the city is considering making even more exclusive. During a Dec. 14 council discussion, several business representatives criticized the council's proposal to limit the number of permits that would be added to employees in the future. Charles "Chap" Korman, a prominent downtown developer, said setting a cap on em-

ployee permits would be "premature." But if the council were to pursue this strategy, he said it should be done "in concert with some equity."

Chamber of Commerce CEO Judy Klatsberg likewise urged the council to evaluate constructing a new garage for employees, or building more affordable housing, rather than capping the number of employee permits. Consider the negative effects that would have on small businesses, she said.

For Councilman Greg Schwartz, abandoning the new 14,000 would be tantamount to betraying the public trust. At a Dec. 9 discussion of the city's infrastructure projects, Schwartz lauded the

fact that the city is "moving forward on every item that we set forth when we went to the public" to ask for the hotel tax increase.

"One of the things we've done in Palo Alto over the years, as you look at these things, is that we've always honored our commitments to the public," Schwartz said. "I think it's important that we do all of these projects and get them done."

According to an evaluation that the council commissioned last year, the 14-on Hamilton and Waverly would accommodate 300 spaces and increase downtown's supply by 214 spaces, 80 spaces east on the current lot. In October, the council chose this lot,

known as Lot D, over other potential sites and directed staff to also evaluate Lot G, which is located on Gilman Street, behind the downtown post office. Councilwoman Liz Krue was the only member who voted against the proposal. Krue argued that the city should first see how the city's permit program and other demand-oriented programs shake out before moving ahead with the parking structure.

In addition to a downtown garage, the city is also looking to build a new structure near California Avenue. The plan advanced last week when the council directed staff to move forward with design work on a new public-

safety building on a city-owned lot on Sherman Avenue. As part of that project, the city is also looking to build a parking garage on an adjacent Sherman Avenue lot, between Birch and Ash streets.

The parking structure near California Avenue would include 400 spaces, replacing the two lots that currently offer 300 spaces, according to a report from the Public Works Department. Staff expect to issue a design contract for both the public-safety building and the new California Avenue garage next spring. ■

Staff Writer Gemma Meyerson can be reached at gmayerson@paloalto.gov.

Holiday Fund

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in third grade are about three times more likely to drop out or fail to graduate from high school.

But Family Connections' results are promising. In a 2014 alumni survey, 73 percent of Family Connections parents reported that their child is reading at or above grade level.

The success may be due to the fact that the lessons in its colorful classroom aren't just for kids. Parents learn how to nurture their children and develop positive parenting skills. They learn how to manage stress and to become good leaders, how to be their child's first teacher and their lifelong advocate.

Family Connections is teaching parents how to value their own self-worth and to let those attributes shine, even if they can't read or write or don't have good finances, said Ruth Perles-Ben-Zur, program director.

"Our strongest part is family engagement. The parent is an asset in the community. We believe that when we build a strong foundation in the parent-child relationship and build community trust, when we support each other and when a parent feels confident and proud, the child feels that," she said.

Programs, many of which run concurrently with the preschool education, help identify and address risk factors such as mental health, substance abuse and family violence so that the child has a better chance of healthy growth

and development. The organization offers maternal depression screening and helps identify special-needs children, getting kids and their families the services they need early on.

Along with basic education, Family Connections weaves in several other skill-building components: a father-involvement education and activities program, a parent cafe where small-group discussions allow parents to meet and talk about important topics and build leadership skills; support groups with a psychologist, health and nutrition classes with gardening, cooking and exercise; and a parent leadership program to increase self-esteem and encourage advocacy and involvement in the child's education.

For Inaia Gutierrez, a mother of three, Family Connections has been a godsend.

"When I came to this country seven years ago from Panama, I had no family here," she said. "Everyone was always working."

Seeking community and resources for her son, she brought her son to Family Connections when he was 18 months old. Now he is in the Young Scholars program, which provides support and mentoring for children from the time they enter Family Connections through high school and entrance into college. The program ensures that students meet educational benchmarks, such as third-grade reading proficiency, high school readiness and college preparation, Perles-Ben-Zur said. Gutierrez' daughter, 3, is also

enrolled at Family Connections. During a recent workshop, the family and costume staff headed by the leading library in search of a book; then she took part in the jumping game that teaches kids how to count while jumping and spelling some of the movement little kid energy.

Gutierrez looked on, reflecting on the education she has received here.

"The learned how to improve myself as an individual because I am the role model for my children. If I was good today, I have to be a good person. It has helped my kids to be independent and to relate with other kids and to have the opportunity to interact with different children," she said.

And she is already seeing the results of that impact. Gutierrez' son, Natanuel, has developed a kind and giving heart. It's the sort of attitude that Family Connections seeks to instill to build a strong and thriving community of leaders for the future.

When Natanuel, now a kindergarten at the Cesar Chavez Apple School, saw that other children were in need, he approached his mother to ask if they could help. And that makes Gutierrez proud.

"He asked me if we could give a blanket to kids who don't have one," she said. ■

Staff Writer Joe Diwanian can be reached at jdiwanian@paloalto.gov.

Donations to the Holiday Fund, which supports dozens of programs in the Family Connections, are still needed. More information can be found on page 15.

CITY OF PALO ALTO
NOTICE OF PUBLIC HEARING

NOTICE IS HEREBY GIVEN that the Palo Alto City Council will hold a public hearing at the regularly scheduled meeting on Monday, January 11, 2015 at 6:00 p.m. or as near thereafter as possible, in the Council Chambers, 200 Hamilton Avenue, Palo Alto, to consider Approval of a Record of Land Use Action for a Variance to Allow for a Reduction in the Required Front Setback (Contextual) from 37 Feet 1-1/4 Inches to 32 Feet for a New Two-Story Single Family Residence Located at **224 Churchill Avenue**. Environmental Assessment Exempt from California Environmental Quality Act.

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Holiday Waste Service Schedule

Residents of Palo Alto are closed on Christmas (December 25) and New Year's Day (January 1). If your regular collection day falls on either one of these holidays, your collection day will be moved to the next day (Tuesday). Regular collection schedules will resume the following week.

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
20	21	22	23	24	25	26

DECEMBER/JANUARY

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
27	28	29	30	31	1	2

Questions? Contact Greenworks at Palo Alto at (650) 421-8915 or customerservice@greenworks.com