

South Downtown Rail Underpass Reconstruction Project

Community Office Hours Summary

Tuesday, September 24, 2024, 5:30 p.m. – 6:30 p.m. (virtual)

Wednesday, September 25, 11:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m., 1:00 p.m. – 2:00 p.m.; and 3:00 p.m. – 4:00 p.m. (in-person)

Overview

The South Downtown Rail Underpass Reconstruction (SDRUR) project looks to address safety and operational issues along the rail corridor and improve transportation connectivity for all travel modes to and from downtown Colorado Springs.

In early fall 2024, the City of Colorado Springs hosted virtual and in-person Community Office Hours sessions for the public to learn more about SDRUR and ask questions directly to the project team. A virtual session was held via Zoom on Tuesday, September 24, and three in-person sessions were held on Wednesday, September 25, at The Independence Center in Downtown Colorado Springs.

The Community Office Hours looked to:

- Allow for direct engagement with the project team.
- Provide information in an accessible format.
- Create an opportunity for members of the public to learn more about the SDRUR project, including a preview of the upcoming environmental review process.
- Present the draft Purpose & Need.
- Provide additional information on concurrent projects, to the best of our ability, including responsible agency contact information.
- Understand community interests and gather frequently asked questions to inform project messaging and materials.

Participants were encouraged to stop by at their convenience to ask questions of the project team, to receive more information about the upcoming environmental review process, and to become more involved in the project. About 30 members of the public participated in the virtual and in-person sessions.

Key Themes

During the office hours, a series of key themes arose from discussions between participants and the project team. Below is a summary of those discussions.

Operational Noise from Railroads

Participants, who live within the project area, raised concerns about the train horn and train operation noise at all hours of the day, as trains pass in and out of their neighborhood.

Additionally, neighborhood residents mentioned loud screeching noises as the rail passed through the current curve at the Tejon Street and Nevada Avenue bridges.

In response to community concerns, the City shared how SDRUR could provide noise mitigation. The proposed alternative would reduce the screeching sound of rail cars by re-aligning or straightening the tracks. Additionally, the SDRUR Project includes the introduction of Quiet Zones at Las Animas and Sierra Madre Streets reducing the noise from horns sounding. Most if not all community office hours attendees supported the implementation of Quiet Zones as part of the project.

Property Impacts and Acquisition

Participants shared concerns about potential property impacts, and the process by which property would be acquired. Those who live in the project area are particularly interested in knowing more about when this process would take place. Several participants were interested in protecting homes and properties in and around the Mill Street Neighborhood.

In response to community concerns, the City provided an update on the current preliminary design process. The project's current phase will advance design to an approximate 30% design level to assist with the environmental review process. Property impacts will not be known until the final design is at approximate 60% design level to ensure an accurate understanding of the required property for project construction. Final design will occur in a future phase of the project.

For property acquisition, the City follows the Uniform Code Act process to ensure that people whose real property is acquired as a result of federally funded project are treated fairly and equitably and receive just compensation for, and assistance in moving from, property they occupy. Importantly, the process aims to ensure a fair market value for the required property is reached and that property owners are compensated fairly and equitably.

Environmental Review Process

Participants were curious to learn more about the upcoming environmental review process, and the different types of environmental class of actions.

In response to the community's questions, the City provided an overview of the upcoming environmental review process, which is required as part of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). The environmental review process analyzes a project's potential impacts and identifies potential mitigations. It also identifies the project's purpose and what issues will be addressed as a part of the project. The City is working in coordination with the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA), and anticipates the formal environmental review process to begin in late 2024 and conclude in early 2026, with opportunities for the public to provide their input.

The City explained there are three different classes of action as part of the environmental review process. The class of actions are the following:

- Categorical Exclusion Determination (CATEX) – is typically used for an FRA project with a relatively low risk of environmental impacts.
- Environmental Assessment (EA) – is used for larger, more complex projects that compare two scenarios (a build and no-build option).

- Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) – is a relatively rare environmental action, but it analyzes impacts on large projects that have undergone an alternatives analysis. An EIS is done when a project or action is anticipated to have many environmental impacts.

Funding

Participants were curious to understand how potential property impacts would be considered in future funding pursuits. The project team clarified that most federal grants require a specific benefit-cost analysis. Property impacts would be included in project costs in benefit-cost calculations for future grant applications.

The City provided community members with an understanding of the project's funding. The Pikes Peak Rural Transportation Authority (PPRTA) funded Phase I: Alternatives Analysis in 2018. A FRA Consolidated Rail and Safety Improvements grant with a local match by PPRTA funds the current project phase for preliminary engineering and environmental clearance. The identification of future funding is on hold as the City completes the environmental review process.

Rail Realignment Alternatives

Participants asked several different questions about other rail realignment options to help reduce the property impacts on the Mill Street Neighborhood. Specifically:

- Lowering the roadway on Tejon St. and Nevada Ave. to obtain adequate vertical clearance and replacing the railroad bridges in place.
- Rerouting the truck route into downtown to avoid Tejon and Nevada or some combination of the streets.
- Rerouting the rail line north of Fountain Creek and through Dorchester Park or use the Drake Powerplant Site for rail realignment.

The project team clarified that the build alternative (M1 alternative) was identified as the least impactful alternative that met the project Purpose and Need and was more readily implementable during the alternatives analysis compared to other options. Additionally, the proposed solutions outlined above were not identified as appropriate alternatives because:

- Lowering Tejon Street and Nevada Ave. was reviewed in the alternatives analysis (alternative H) and not selected as the utility, stormwater, and property impacts were more significant than the M1 alternative due to the depth and length of roadway work required.
- South Tejon Street and Nevada Avenue are the only nearby arterials leading into south downtown Colorado Springs; therefore, diverting truck traffic to another route would require reclassification of that roadway and would result in undesirable traffic and neighborhood impacts.
- Realigning the train tracks to pass through Dorchester Park is not allowed under federal law due to its designation as a Section 4(f) resource. Federal projects generally do not permit repurposing of parkland for other purposes.

Multimodal Connectivity and the Legacy Loop

Several participants shared an interest in the SDRUR project supporting the connection of the Legacy Loop and an overall increase in multimodal connectivity to and from downtown. The proposed grade-separated trail connection under the railroad and Las Vegas Street is the final missing link in the Legacy Loop trail network.

Hydraulics and Flood Plain

One participant asked about what is known for the hydraulics of relocating a portion of the railway closer to the original creek bed of Fountain Creek. The project team shared that the preliminary hydraulic design will progress with the environmental analysis and at this time there are no indications of long-term effects.

Safety

Residents in the Mill Street neighborhood shared concerns about safety related to traveling under the Tejon and Nevada street bridges, the at-grade rail crossing on the Sierra Madre and Las Animas Streets, and around Dorchester Park.

Community Engagement and Project Evolution

A participant asked about how community engagement shaped and informed the previous and current project phases. Phase I: Alternatives Analysis originally focused on replacing the two railroad bridges at Tejon Street and Nevada Avenue. Through community engagement, the project's scope was expanded to help address connectivity, multimodal, and safety concerns in the project area.

In the current project phase, a listening session was held with the Mill Street Neighborhood to hear their concerns and perspectives. The neighborhood shared a presentation on its history and how it feels the project would impact Mill Street's character and community. The City had been seeking additional funding to complete the design and start project construction. The listening session resulted in a signed letter from the Department of Public Works that would pause any pursuit for additional federal funding related to railroad track realignment, and associated property acquisition, until after the NEPA process is complete if BNSF replaced the South Tejon Street bridge. The City may still seek funding for other project elements, not related to track realignment.

Schedule

Several participants inquired about the project schedule. The current project phase is expected to conclude in early to mid-2026. The next phase, which involves conducting the final design, acquiring property, and beginning construction, could take 2-3 years or longer. Funding has not been identified for this next phase of the project.

Concurrent Projects

The project team received several questions about the Royer Street Bridge closure, the BNSF Tejon Street Bridge Replacement project, and the Colorado Springs Utilities Drake Powerplant Redevelopment. The SDRUR project team collected comments shared by the community, and

will share this information as well as provide information on the project website as information becomes available.

Next Steps

The City is also developing an updated Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) document, which will be posted to the project website as a way to answer questions heard during the Community Office Hours.

There will be additional public engagement opportunities as the formal environmental review process is anticipated to start in late 2024.