

Front and center: City applies for millions to rebuild Front Street

August 3, 2019



Crescent City is in the running for a federal grant of more than \$15 million to rebuild Front Street, from B Street to the highway, said city officials.

The federally recognized tribal Elk Valley Rancheria, just east of Crescent City, has joined the city in applying for the funds.

The Front Street project has been on the table since 2012 ... and on people's minds for much longer.

At a July 15 meeting of the Crescent City Council, City Manager Eric Wier spoke highly of the partnership with Elk Valley Rancheria, calling it an asset to the community. He also noted the assistance of the local transportation commission and of others.

"It took a lot of hands to have this come together," Wier told the council.

The city manager said the project is important to the community because Front is a main street that divides the downtown and the beachfront recreational area. How the five-lane street functions has a significant

influence on the way people experience Crescent City, Wier said in an interview.

One issue with the street is its size. The current traffic volume does not warrant two lanes each direction plus a turnoff lane, said Wier. The 80-foot crossing for pedestrians also is a concern, given the limited signage and lack of signals.

Front Street has always played an important role in Crescent City, although its functions changed as time marched on. At one time, the ocean surf came right up to the street. It later was a portion of the highway.

In the 1940s, there was diagonal parking for the businesses along the street.

For a time, it was home to an Army Corps of Engineers batch plant, turning out dolos (geometrically shaped reinforced concrete blocks) and tetrapods (tetrahedral shaped concrete structures) used to buffer against waves, protecting from erosion and tsunamis. Both were types were deployed locally.

Seaside Hospital, the only regional health organization in its time, was there, too.

In 2011, the city hired a consultant using transportation commission dollars to evaluate Front Street's functions and to consider amenities that met community needs and resources.

Beachfront Park, for example, is a well-used recreational area popular with locals and visitors. To improve on their experience, the plan is to create more parking and pedestrian barriers for added safety.

Noting criticism about Front's length and width — it's been said you could land a 747 jet there (although the nearby airport makes that unnecessary) — another planned feature is a meander around the midway point, breaking up the straight line with a curved, landscaped area that invites people into the park and downtown, with a shortened crossing.

The new design would incorporate pieces of artwork offering a sense of theme and context to the recreational areas as you move through, starting with an archway at K Street proclaiming "Crescent City: Where the Redwoods Meet the Sea," and progressing with marine features and tribal culture representations among other attractions.

Wier emphasized the need to highlight the history of four of the area's local, federally recognized tribes.

Wier pointed out that Front Street is part of Elk Valley Rancheria's localized road system, making a partnership with the city for street improvements a natural alliance. Rancheria hired a consultant to help assemble the grant application.

Wier said that without Elk Valley's consultant, the staff time required for such an endeavor would make it too cumbersome to pursue, noting a 31-page cost-benefit analysis is required among the data requirements.

It's the second time Crescent City has applied for this federal construction grant. Wier said the evaluator for the previous grant application told the city it had submitted a strong request in a competitive field of applicants chasing large-scale projects.

Coming back, the city needed to show more of the potential economic impact in its application plus more innovation. With few of the projects approved, those deemed worthy are in line for significant sums of money.

Old photographs show the surf meeting up with Front Street before a seawall was constructed, indicating the likeliness of unconsolidated sands beneath the street, Wier said. He also mentioned washed-up wood debris and other materials used as filler in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

The city manager said the street should be structurally reconstituted using modern engineering standards and methods.

“A lot of times, they would fill it with redwood,” he said. “Redwood’s a great wood to throw in there; it lasts for a hundred years, a hundred and fifty years.

“The problem is, it’s been a hundred years, it’s been a hundred and fifty years. So that wood is decaying. That’s really the problem with the street.”

Wier said that’s why the city needs to go down a couple of feet, take out and compact the unconsolidated sands, get rid of the redwood, and build a structural section to bridge deficiencies further down, ensuring the asphalt at the top a longer, more stable life.

Not knowing exactly what lies beneath the street also means the city has planned for contingencies once it opens up the street.

Among concerns related to Front Street are the possibilities of earthquakes and tsunamis. A new street might have a better chance of resisting a disaster.

Wier said that at risk with either event would be the 10-inch cast-iron water main under the street. He said if that breaks during a catastrophe, it could lead to major damage to the street and surrounding structures.

If the federal grant was approved, it could be timed to tie in with a possible city parks project along Front Street. That project would be funded through Proposition 68, the California Drought, Water, Parks, Climate, Coastal Protection and Outdoor Access for All Act that passed in 2018, which reportedly put \$254,942,000 on the table for statewide parks-related projects.

Wier said per-capita funding for cities from Prop 68 would provide for about \$200,000 locally for a parks project.

The city will be hosting public meetings and listening sessions, reviewing the 2012 beachfront master plan, and asking the community what amenities or changes it might want.

A \$25,000 California Endowment grant through a partnership with Building Healthy Communities will help pay for outreach efforts for the parks project.

The city manager said another grant in his sights would fund re-composition of the entire master plan itself, putting Crescent City in a position to apply for funds from yet another pot of money, up to \$8.5 million for

approved projects.

“This project has been a long time coming,” said Wier. “The community has waited a long time for it.

“We are continuing to try. This is not the first grant application we’ve submitted. The only way we’re going to do it is through partnerships, creative thinking and the relentless effort that this community has.”

Wier also highlighted the emergency preparedness aspect of the project, saying a public-address system would be installed along Front that could be used for recreational events such as concerts. More importantly, it would be used to broadcast information during emergencies, something beyond a simple siren.

New signage regarding tsunami danger areas would also be installed.

The city was awarded \$4 million for storm-drain improvements through a Community Development Block Grant that would play a role in the Front Street improvement plan, financing a new storm drain and outfall following the road from B to G streets. That section of road would be rebuilt with two lanes, parking and a median.

The project design is underway; bidding is expected in November, with construction beginning in April 2020.

As for the \$15 million, it’s a waiting game. Wier said he expects to find out in November if Crescent City will get that federal grant, possibly sooner.

In the meantime, he said, people could talk with their representatives and senators in the federal government, nudging them to support this important project.