



PAINTER
PRESERVATION
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HISTORIC PRESERVATION & URBAN DESIGN

February 21, 2008

Ms. Diane Ramirez
City of Petaluma
11 English Street
Petaluma, CA 94952

Re Historic Structure Report for Petaluma Railroad Trestle

Dear Ms. Ramirez,

It is exciting to see that Petaluma may be closer to preserving the Petaluma & Santa Rosa Railroad Trestle. After reading recent articles in the Argus and Press Democrat, I picked up a copy of the report. I think it's an excellent report, well written, with detailed historical analysis and easy-to-follow technical analysis. I have a few comments that I think will help substantiate the importance of this public landmark and historical resource.

Historic significance

The trestle is located at the edge of the Petaluma Historic Commercial District National Register District and is within the City of Petaluma's local historic district that encompasses largely the same area. Additionally, it is in essence in the center of the spur track that served the Riverfront Warehouse area, which has been called out in the Central Petaluma Specific Plan and numerous historical studies for consideration as a historic district. The trestle is important for many of the same reasons as the resources within these overlapping districts.

The river and the railroad spurred the economic development of the city and were the reasons for its existence and success as a port city. They also established the pattern of physical development that the city would take from that point to the present. This is graphically illustrated in the trestle itself, a visual reminder of the economic activity that centered on this area. It can also be seen in the historic warehouses that are left along the riverfront, which illustrate how goods arriving via rail could be unloaded at the front door of the warehouses, stored in preparation for shipping, and loaded directly onto scows on the piers outside the rear door. There are few resources left – the trestle and a handful of warehouses – that show us how this worked and why the city developed the way it did. This makes preservation of the trestle and remaining warehouses all the more important.

Public support for preservation of these resources is demonstrated by the fact that the city supported the 1994 nomination of the downtown (where many of the commercial structures supported by port activities were built) to the National Register; adopted design guidelines for the local historic district here in 1999; and emphasized the importance of the historic resources in the warehouse area and all they represent in the 2003 Central Petaluma Specific Plan.

The importance of the area and its associated infrastructure has been documented in numerous historical studies. The trestle was listed – although not rated – in the *Central Petaluma Specific Plan*. The

historical significance of the trestle and the railroad in general to this area is documented in the following studies:

- Cassandra Chattan of Archaeological Resource Service, *An Evaluation of Cultural Resources Along the Proposed Petaluma Trolley Master plan Project, Petaluma, Sonoma County*, for Lauren Williams, President, Petaluma Trolley, March 21, 2003.
- Carey & Company, *Basin Street Properties, Historic Resource Evaluation*, May 2003.
- Diana Painter of Painter Preservation & Planning, *M. Vonsen Company & the First Street Warehouses, 209, 219, & 301 first Street, Petaluma, California*, for Basin Street Properties, September 2004 (historic context for mitigation of demolition of the warehouses).

Cassandra Chattan stated in her study that the Petaluma & Santa Rosa Railroad Trestle was individually eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. I reiterated this in my recommendation for nominating the trestle as part of Petaluma's Historic Commercial Historic District as a contributing property, stating, "The treatment of the railroad trestle in this location will be important to retaining what is left of the historic context in this area." In addition the following local historians have advocated for preservation of the area in general: Bill Roop and Katherine Flynn, Archaeological Resource Service; Susan Clark, Clark Consulting; and Katherine Rinehart, Petaluma Museum Association.

I support Past Consultants' recommendation that the trestle is eligible for listing on the National Register under Criterion A (association with local history) and Criterion B (association with persons important to our history) and their recommendation that the trestle is correspondingly eligible for listing on the California Register of Historical Resources and the local register as a contributing structure to Petaluma's local Historic Commercial District.

Social significance

The *Petaluma & Santa Rosa Railroad Trestle Historic Structure Report* states that the structure is important for its role in the economic development of this city: "The Petaluma Trestle is a surviving symbol of the agricultural and commercial might that made the city a prosperous regional transportation center for the movement of agricultural and manufacturing goods throughout the Sonoma County, and greater Bay Area" (*Past Consultants LLC, 2007:24*). It also states that it is important for its association with George P. McNear, whose family was integral to Petaluma's commercial and industrial development. Finally, the author stated that the Period of Significance for the structure is 1922 to 1992. This brings the structure into a very different type and era of importance. As a highly visible vestige of the railroad in downtown, I suggest that it has actually grown in prominence as a symbol of the city and a link to the past in an area that is rapidly losing its historic resources.

The trestle has come to be a symbol of the city and a place where the old and new come together. The importance of the trestle to the city's identity has been documented on an on-going basis. It's been featured in numerous public relations materials, as well as photographs and paintings by local artists. It was included on the cover of the Petaluma Visitor's Bureau first magazine, which enjoyed a distribution of 100,000 copies. Most recently the trestle was featured headlining an article in Petaluma's "Visit Petaluma" Sesquicentennial Edition, entitled "Historic Downtown Petaluma 150th Anniversary" (ironically it's the only historic structure in the photograph, everything else dating from within the last five years) (*Visit Petaluma 1858 Sesquicentennial 2008, 2008:25*).

The 2008 book *Celebrating Petaluma* was written by numerous contributors and published by the Petaluma Sesquicentennial committee and the Petaluma Visitors Program in honor of the city's 150th birthday. In this publication, the trestle is featured in ten contemporary and historical photographs and

paintings, not including photographs of the nearby Turning Basin, Balshaw Pedestrian Bridge, and piers along the river.

This same photograph graces the cover of the *Petaluma Chamber of Commercial 2004-2005 Membership Directory and Business Community Profile*. The trestle has been featured numerous times on the cover of the *Petaluma Visitor Guide* over the last ten-to-fifteen years, including this year's cover. It is also regularly seen by visitors to the City of Petaluma's website in Scott Hess' beautiful photographs of the city and region.

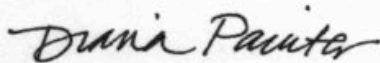
A photograph of the trestle and mill is on the cover of the *Central Petaluma Specific Plan*, which includes a number of policy statements about the importance of the P&SR railroad right-of-way as linking significant centers in town and as a visual landmark (*Central Petaluma Specific Plan*, 2003:42). The trestle, along with the "Great Mill" and picturesque yachts in the foreground, is on the cover of the Petaluma's Visitors Program folder, used to package the Petaluma Area Chamber of Commerce's public relations materials. It's even on the cover of the 2005-2006 phone book and the current map of the city.

In addition to being a symbol of the city, the trestle has become associated Petaluma through local festivals and events, as well as the everyday activities that make living in Petaluma special. The growing number of activities along the river, promoted and facilitated by the city's infrastructure improvements and the activities of local businesses and community leaders, is exactly what you want to see for continued quality of life and economic vitality in a community. Without the railroad tracks and trestle, the river, and the existing historic districts, this place could be anywhere. The natural environmental and historic buildings and structures are what make it special and meaningful.

This was pointed out in John Fitzgerald's November 12, 2007 letter on the *Historic Structure Report*, which documented the importance of public use of the trestle with many photographs of people observing the Petaluma River Festival from the trestle, as well as enjoying the waterfront in general, prior to the trestle's closure in 2003. Newspaper articles state that the River Festivals were attended by an estimated 20,000 to 25,000 people in the early 1990s.

Clearly the trestle is important to the city in many ways. It is important for its iconic presence in the landscape, as a way to experience and enjoy the waterfront, and as an important reminder of the city's history and one of the last vestiges in this area of its founding as a port. The Historic Structure Report represents an important next step in preserving this resource for the future. I wholeheartedly support retention and restoration of the trestle, and nomination of the structure to the local, state and national registers and am willing to assist in this effort in any way I can.

Sincerely,



Diana J. Painter, PhD