

City of Calabasas Historic Preservation Commission

**Discussion Item:
Update on El Camino Real Bell Marker
in Old Town**

Wednesday, May 1, 2024

Background

- From 1906, Bell markers were erected that memorialized the route used originally by indigenous people and later the Spanish and Mexican peoples in the 17th and 18th centuries.
- Located in Old Town Calabasas, the City's El Camino Real Bell is one of the original El Camino Real markers. And, at approximately 110 years of age, the historic bell marker is among the oldest landmarks in the City.
- The Historic Context Statement completed in 2009 found that the El Camino Real Bell in Old Town can be considered amongst the historically important objects and structures in Calabasas.



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Background

- At the February 21st HPC meeting, Commissioners requested staff to prepare a report to inform the Commission about the process for landmark nomination as provided in the Calabasas Municipal Code.
- Staff looked into the process and criteria for designation using the Historic Preservation Ordinance Chapter 17.36 of the Municipal Code, the City Historical Context report and resources that provided background information about the EL Camino Bells.
- Staff reached out to the property owner in March and April and did not hear back.



Calabasas Historic Preservation Ordinance

- The Calabasas Municipal Ordinance specified that the Commission shall take into consideration the Calabasas Historic Preservation Ordinance CMC Chapter 17.36, which outlines the eligibility and designation criteria, and stipulates the procedures for Landmark designation.
- Accordingly, the Historic Preservation Commission shall evaluate each application for landmark nomination at a public hearing, and shall decide by majority vote whether to approve any nomination and forward it to the City Council with a recommendation for historic landmark designation
- An eligible historical resource may be designated an historic landmark by the City Council if it meets the criteria established in Section 17.36.050



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Eligibility Criterion 1

1. Is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of Calabasas' history;
 - The El Camino Real Bell serves as a physical record of events that shaped California's history and is associated with the original Spanish trail that linked together the twenty-one missions. This route became an important stagecoach line used by Mexican and American settlers who formed towns along it. With only a few variations, the route is now the Ventura Freeway (Highway 101). The historic highway is commemorated by a series of mission bell markers along its entire length. Most bell markers found today are later examples placed alongside relocated and widened highway section, and they do not represent true and accurate locations along the ancient travel route. Original El Camino Real Bell markers like this one are rare, and they typically stand in or very near their original locations, along older roadway segments which were components of the earliest network of state highways.



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Criterion 2

2. Is associated with the lives of persons important to Calabasas' history;
 - Calabasas was located on the path of El Camino Real and in the middle of Rancho Simi, Rancho Las Virgenes and Rancho Ex Mission De San Fernando. Several Basques played important roles in the history of Calabasas. Indeed, the very name Calabasas is attributed to Antonio Jauregui, a Basque farmer from Oxnard. The story goes that in 1824, Jauregui was transporting a load of pumpkins, or gourds, in a crude horse drawn cart. He was traveling west along El Camino Real and was headed toward Los Angeles to sell his produce. Furthermore, The Leonis Adobe (an original 1840 adobe residence which designated a local historic landmark by the City of Los Angeles) is located on route, across the street from the El Camino Real bell.



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Criterion 3

3. Embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, region or method of construction; represents the work of a master; or possesses high artistic values;
- Mrs. A.S.C. Forbes designed the original bell and staff and final designs were approved in early 1906. The Bell embodies distinctive characteristics of the original cast iron bells and the Bell located in Old Town has been determined to be a “first generation” installation. Also, based on historic photographs, the current location is almost certain to be the original location.



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Criterion 4

4. Has yielded, or has the potential to yield, information important to the prehistory or history of the local area, California or the nation.
- Ventura Road, formerly part of El Camino Real and now called Calabasas Road, was the main path of travel between Los Angeles and Ventura Counties in the late 19th century. Although Calabasas remained thinly populated, it became a stop for stagecoach lines that generally followed the former route of El Camino Real through Los Angeles County. The location of the El Camino Real Bell in Old Town is a very familiar and established visual feature in the City.



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Local Designation Procedures

- The Calabasas Code of Ordinances Section 17.36.080 outlines the designation procedures for landmark nominations, including initial application review and the procedure for landmark recommendations by the Historic Preservation Commission to the City Council.
- The City may request designation of a local historic landmark by submitting an application prepared by the City's Historic Preservation Officer. The Historic Preservation Commission shall evaluate the application for landmark status and decide by majority vote (written resolution) whether to approve the nomination application and forward it to the City Council with a recommendation for landmark designation. If so nominated by the Commission, the Commission resolution is sent to the City Clerk who then schedules a public hearing for the City Council to consider the Commission's recommendation.



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Recommendation

- Staff recommends that the Historic Preservation Commission discuss the process for moving forward to the City Council a recommendation that the El Camino Real Bell be designated as a local historic landmark. Following discussion, the Commission may direct Staff to bring back to the Commission a resolution recommending to the City Council that the El Camino Real Bell be designated as City of Calabasas Local Historic Landmark number 8.



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