



---

## PUBLIC MEETING SUMMARY

**PROJECT:** Billings Bypass Environmental Impact Statement (EIS)  
MDT Project No. NCPD 56(55)CN 4199

**PURPOSE:** Public Meeting #1

**DATE HELD:** April 26, 2006

**LOCATION:** Skyview High School Commons in Billings, Montana

---

### Overview

The first public meeting for the Billings Bypass Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) was held at Skyview High School on April 26, 2006 from 6:30 to 9:00 pm. Approximately 120 individuals including local, state, and Federal officials attended this meeting, which was structured as an open house with a formal presentation beginning at 7:00 pm. The open house included displays on the following topics:

<b>Project History</b>	<b>NEPA Process/Project Schedule</b>	<b>Project Issues and Constraints</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feasibility Study</li> <li>• Existing and Projected Traffic Volumes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Purpose and Need</li> <li>• Project Flow and Timeline</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Existing Conditions</li> <li>• Study Area</li> <li>• Existing and Proposed Transportation Systems</li> </ul>

In addition, the following handouts were provided to all attending:

- Agenda
- Project fact sheet with study area map
- Comment sheet

### Introduction and Project Background (Bruce Barrett, MDT)

Bruce Barrett, MDT District 5 Administrator, began the presentation by introducing the project team and acknowledging public officials and representatives present at the meeting. He continued with a brief history of the project and information on the project process, schedule, and funding.

The project began in 1999, with the undertaking of a feasibility study that demonstrated a positive benefit-cost (BC) ratio for a northern transportation bypass for Billings. In 2003, David Evans and Associates, Inc. began the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process and EIS documentation based on the conclusions and recommendations of the feasibility study. The first step in the NEPA process for this project was to validate the study area in which the bypass may be feasible. The project is now in the scoping process. Mr. Barrett emphasized that the purpose of this public meeting was to gather input from the public as part of the scoping process.

Mr. Barrett then went over the project schedule and funding, emphasizing that the estimated completion of the EIS in 2008, as well as completion of final design within one year of the EIS, are “optimistic” projections as these projects take time to develop and fund. Before the project can be constructed, the NEPA environmental process, final design, and acquisition of right-of-way will need to be completed. In addition, funding will need to be obtained. Currently, there is sufficient funding to proceed through the NEPA process. As the project progresses, funding options for later phases of the project will be investigated. Project funding options include possible

adoption of the bypass on the National Highway System, which would require an act of congress; bonding for the construction of the project; and building the project in phases as funding became available.

### **Billings North Bypass Feasibility Study (Todd Cormier, HKM Engineering)**

Mr. Cormier explained that the *2001 Billings North By-Pass Feasibility Study* was undertaken to evaluate the benefit-cost ratio of a bypass that would enhance the Camino-Real International Trade Corridor and connect Lockwood and the Heights neighborhoods. The original study area was designated by a steering committee and three major factors were evaluated: environmental considerations and identification of “environmental fatal flaws,” traffic analysis using MDT’s model, and an economic analysis comparing expected project costs with potential long-term monetary benefits. After consideration of these three factors, all alternatives produced a positive benefit-cost ratio, indicating that the potential benefit of the project outweighs its potential cost. Based on this conclusion, the report recommended continued development of a northern bypass facility.

### **NEPA Process and Project Purpose and Need (Deb Perkins-Smith, DEA)**

Ms. Perkins-Smith explained that with the positive results of the feasibility study, the project has now entered the next phase: the environmental process. This environmental process is mandated by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) when there is a federal action. As shown in the handout, the environmental process has several phases: scoping and data collection, alternatives development and evaluation, and documentation of the process and the preferred alternative. The project is now in the scoping process when issues are identified. The next step is the development of alternatives in the form of potential alignments based on public and agency input, traffic modeling, and existing conditions. These alternatives will be evaluated based on a set of criteria including environmental, economic, engineering, and social/community factors. A preferred alternative will then be identified by MDT and FHWA with input from the public and government agencies. Ms. Perkins-Smith concluded with a discussion of the project’s purpose and need, emphasizing that all alternatives must meet the purpose and need in order to be evaluated in detail in the EIS. The project purpose as described in the handout is as follows:

*To improve the Camino-Real International Trade Route and alleviate traffic congestion on the city street network by providing a bypass route connecting I-90 east of Billings with MT Highway 3 northwest of Billings.*

### **Initial Alternative Concepts**

Bruce Barrett introduced some of MDT’s initial ideas about developing alignment alternatives. Items to consider in developing the potential alternatives include the following:

- Johnson Lane Interchange – an alternative connecting to this interchange may improve connectivity between the Heights and Lockwood as well as the interchange configuration at this location.
- I-90/I-94 Interchange – an alternative connecting to this interchange may provide an opportunity to improve connectivity for the Lockwood area, as well as to improve safety at the existing I-90/I-94 interchange by improving geometric deficiencies.
- Yellowstone River Crossing – the location of the Yellowstone River crossing should be carefully considered to minimize bridge construction costs.
- Future Western Bypass to Laurel – in developing bypass alternatives, the potential to eventually connect the north bypass from MT 3 to I-90 at Laurel via a continuation of the bypass should be considered.
- Interstate Standards – consider constructing the bypass to interstate standards including control of access so that it might be identified as an I-90 Business Loop in the future.

The presentation was concluded and the attendees were invited to ask questions and provide input. Questions and comments received at the open house focused on potential alignments for the bypass, how the project would be funded, how private property might be impacted, and how this project relates to other transportation projects in the area. The following is a brief summary of the questions and comments as well as the informal discussions that occurred later during the open house.

### **Questions from the Community**

#### ***Potential Alignment Alternatives:***

Q: Are you able to identify the proposed alignments?

A: (Bruce Barrett) – There are no alignments developed yet.

Q: Would it be possible to use existing roads as part of the bypass, specifically Highway 87 and Shepherd-Acton Road?

A: (Deb Perkins-Smith) – We will consider using existing roads as part of the alternatives development process.

Q: Is the bypass too long and out of the way (out of direction)?

A: (Deb Perkins-Smith) – Using the MDT traffic model, we will look at criteria such as travel time as well as travel distance for the bypass alignment alternatives. These criteria were used to determine the limits of study area. The study area boundaries represent the limits at which a proposed route would be too long, and there would not be a travel time savings. The traffic model will help determine the threshold at which the proposed route alternative is too long for people to choose to use the new road.

A: (Bruce Barrett) – Because Billings is a destination for truck traffic, there should be no illusion that trucks will disappear from city streets as a result of this project. Trucks will continue to enter Billings for delivery and will not avoid the city entirely.

Q: Was the Lockwood – Mary Street alignment considered in the study?

A: (Deb Perkins-Smith) – Current land development and the location of the airport were driving factors in determining the southern boundary for the study area. The Mary Street area is no longer feasible given the extent of development in the area.

#### ***Project Funding and Right-of-Way Acquisition:***

Q: How are transportation project funds distributed between communities? Will this project be competing with other state projects for potential funding sources?

A: (Bruce Barrett) – This project has been congressionally earmarked, so there is money set aside specifically for this project. Further, there is legislation in place that drives the distribution of the other state highway funds among the MDT districts. Bonding is a funding technique that has been used by MDT on other projects, such as US 93 and could be an option for the Billings Bypass project.

Q: Please describe the right-of-way acquisition process.

A: (Bruce Barrett) – All property acquisition follows a federally mandated process. Property is appraised for highest and best use according to federal standards. Sometimes this will go into negotiation. Of course, all attempts to avoid major impacts will be made in the EIS process, although ultimately the state does have the right to eminent domain.

Q: Is swapping land a possibility?

A: (Bruce Barrett) – I have never been involved with, or heard of a case of mitigating loss of property by swapping for another parcel of land.

***Impact of Project on Local Traffic:***

Q: Will this project alleviate traffic on Main Street?

A: (Deb Perkins-Smith) – One of the criterion used in the screening of alternatives will be how much traffic is reduced on Main Street and other local streets to alleviate congestion.

A: (Bruce Barrett) – A benefit of the project would be shifting traffic from congested streets in the city onto the bypass.

Q: Will local access be provided to the bypass?

A: (Bruce Barrett) – The access locations and any frontage roads have not been determined at this time. Although traffic modeling may not indicate that local traffic volumes necessitate access at this time, there may be a need for access in the future. There were three potential interchanges identified in the feasibility study; however, the EIS will look at the opportunities for any additional (or reduced number of) interchanges. Many people have recommended that recreational access to the Yellowstone River be provided as part of the project, and this is something that will be considered.

***Other Transportation Projects:***

Q: Is this project part of the “Mexican – Canadian Super Slab”?

A: (Deb Perkins-Smith) – This project will be consistent with recommendations for the Camino-Real International Trade Corridor and is not a part of any private highway endeavor (such as the “super-slab” project).

Q: Will previous traffic and planning studies be used in this EIS process?

A: (Bruce Barrett) – Although planning studies have been done in the past, it is imperative to look at current traffic data and update the traffic modeling data to accurately evaluate alternatives. Traffic data is dynamic and needs to be consistently updated; however, the project will use any existing traffic data if it is applicable.

A: (Bob Marvin) – The previous Bypass Feasibility study for this project was a formal study that received funding as a result of the Yellowstone County Commissioners efforts. A Truck Bypass study, completed in 1998, was prepared for Concerned Citizens in Lockwood using private funding. That study provided the impetus to initiate the subsequent FHWA feasibility study, which in turn led us to the current EIS process.

A: (Deb Perkins-Smith) – We are aware of previous planning efforts including the *Billings Urban Area 2005 Transportation Plan* undertaken by MDT and the City of Billings. The EIS traffic modeling and analysis will work to refine traffic data.

Q: Is the “Inner Belt” project part of the bypass EIS?

A: (Bruce Barrett) – No. The Billings Bypass and the Inner Belt Loop are separate projects. The Inner Belt Loop is a city-sponsored project and MDT has no involvement in it.

### **Public Comments from Open House**

Comments received from the community during the open house pertained to the following:

- Potential alignment options such as:
  - Use of I-90/I-94 interchange as eastern terminus.
  - Use of Johnson Lane interchange as eastern terminus.
  - Use Johnson Lane interchange to existing Pioneer Road as part of eastern segment of bypass.
  - Follow Five Mile Road alignment north from Mary Street to Hwy 312 and head north avoiding existing development.
  - Use Hwy 87 as part of the bypass route for the majority of northward movement.
  - Use Hwy 87 north to Shepherd Acton Road.
  - Use Hwy 87 north to Roundup to Hwy 12, west on Hwy 12 and south on MT 191 to I-90 at Laurel.
  - Create two bypass routes: One at the northern limit of the study area and one at the southern limit.
  - Consider a bypass south of the City of Billings.
  - Consider a bypass west of the City of Billings using Route 3 southwest to I-90 at Laurel.
- Existing features to consider in developing bypass alternative: springs, streams, and other water bodies, and a private airplane runway.
- Identification of development plans in the study area.
- Support of the bypass concept to alleviate traffic congestion.
- The need to provide a connection between Lockwood and the Heights, so that people do not need to travel through downtown to get to the Heights area for shopping.
- The need to identify the bypass location now, before the area becomes more developed and is too difficult to implement a bypass.
- Concern from property owners about the possibility of the bypass going through individual properties.
- Suggestion of using existing roadways (specifically Shepherd Acton Rd) in order to reduce the environmental impacts of a new roadway.
- Confusion about the difference between the feasibility study area and the current study area. It was explained that the feasibility study area was used to assess the benefit-cost ratio and the current study area has been validated to show that any alignment within it will have a positive benefit-cost ratio. It was also explained that no alignment, including the corridor depicted in the feasibility study, has been chosen as the final alignment.
- Confusion about previous planning efforts and right-of-way purchase for a bypass by MDT. No right-of-way has been purchased for this project.
- Confusion regarding planning efforts which occurred during the development of the current interstate system over 40 years ago and the current bypass project.