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PUBLIC MEETING SUMMARY

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

PURPOSE: Public Meeting #2

DATE HELD: October 4, 2007

LOCATION: Hope United Methodist Church in Billings, Montana

Overview

The second public meeting for the Billings Bypass Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) was held at Hope United Methodist Church on October 4, 2007 from 7:00 to 9:00 pm. Approximately 180 members of the community as well as local, state, and federal officials attended this meeting, which was structured as an open house with a formal presentation beginning at 7:15 pm. The open house included displays on the following topics:

Project History

- Feasibility Study
- Purpose and Need
- Design Objectives
- Project Flow and Timeline

Existing Conditions

- Study Area
- Congested Routes
- Opportunities and Constraints

Alternatives

- Alternatives Screening and Evaluation Process
- Typical Sections
- Initial Alignments
- Level 1 Screening
- Conceptual Alternatives
- Level 2 Screening
- Preliminary Alternatives
- Detailed Evaluation
- Next Steps

In addition, the following handouts were available:

- Handout booklet containing agenda, open house staff, project purpose, meeting purpose, project website, project flow and timeline, alternatives screening process, study area map with preliminary alternatives to be carried forward to the EIS, and project facts
- Comment sheet

Presentation

Purpose of Meeting

The purpose of this meeting was to review the preliminary alternatives for the Billings Bypass EIS. Preliminary alternatives were developed based on public and agency input collected during the initial stage of the project. Community input collected at this public meeting will contribute to the refinement of the alternatives that will be carried forward for detailed evaluation in the Billings Bypass EIS.

Project Overview

- A feasibility study was conducted that resulted in a positive benefit/cost for implementing a bypass route north of Billings between I-90 and Hwy 3. The study recommended continued project development to include completion of a location study and preparation of an appropriate environmental document.
- A study area validation was performed to establish the boundaries within which a bypass would be feasible.
- The first public meeting was held in April 2006. The purpose and need of the project, the study area and existing conditions in the study area were presented. The public voiced issues and concerns about the project as well as suggestions for where the bypass should and should not be located.
- The project team developed a wide range of alternatives based on the purpose and needs of the project, the existing conditions in the study area and the suggestions from the community.

Project Purpose and Need

What is the purpose of the project?

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

Why is the bypass needed?

- The Camino-Real Trade Corridor, which is of strategic importance nationally, lacks direct connectivity to the interstate.
- The lack of a connecting route north of Billings combined with geographic constraints requires regional through traffic to utilize urban routes. This regional traffic adds to the already congested urban street network in northeast Billings.
- Heavy truck traffic and commercial traffic with hazardous cargo compromise safety in the urban area.

National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)

Why does an EIS have to be prepared?

The project is being conducted by the Montana Department of Transportation (MDT) and the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) using federal funding sources. Federal actions, such as projects using federal monies, must comply with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). As part of the NEPA process, preparation of an environmental impact statement (EIS) is underway.

What is NEPA?

NEPA is a decision-making process that includes consideration of all reasonable alternatives, avoidance or minimization of adverse impacts, preparation of an appropriate environmental document, coordination with local, state and federal agencies, and meaningful involvement of the community and stakeholders.

Bypass Facility

The bypass will be a four-lane divided highway with full access control. The facility will be designed to interstate standards with a 70 mph design speed. The bypass will connect the I-90/I-94 corridor to Hwy 3 and will also connect to Hwy 312 and US 87. The project has been divided up into three segments:

- Eastern Segment: I-90/I-94 to Hwy 312

- Central Segment: Hwy 312 to US 87
- Western Segment: US 87 to Hwy 3

The west segment would initially be constructed as a two-lane facility based on traffic demands.

The interchanges along Hwy 3, US 87 and Hwy 312 would be service level interchanges – typically a standard diamond interchange. The interchange at the interstate would be a system-to-system interchange in which drivers could move between the bypass and the interstate without stopping or substantially reducing their speed.

Alternatives Development

How did we develop the initial set of alternatives?

1. Determined the boundaries of the study area - Beyond the northern boundary, the bypass route would be too long, so the cost would be greater and fewer trucks would opt to use the route. South of the southern boundary, there would be constructability issues due to existing development.
2. Compiled site information about existing conditions in the study area - Information compiled included land ownership (private vs public), land use (developed vs undeveloped), community resources (parks, trails, schools, etc), natural resources (water bodies, floodplains).
3. Presented information to advisory committee/community – We met with the Billings Bypass Advisory Committee (BBAC) and the community in April 2006 to get input on the bypass project.
4. Coordinated with local, state, and federal agencies – Letters were sent to all agencies with jurisdiction to notify them of the project and request pertinent information from the agencies.
5. Based on all input received, the project team developed an initial set of alternatives.

Level 1 Alternatives Screening

We looked at each alternative and asked the question - Does this alternative meet the purpose and need of the project and achieve the design objectives of the project? The following text describes some of the general suggestions from the public that were eliminated in the Level 1 Screening.

- Various routes were suggested that were outside the study area - Routes outside the study area were eliminated because they did not meet the basic purpose and needs of the project.
- Various suggestions to use existing roadway alignments for the bypass – Since the bypass would be a full access control facility, using existing roadway alignments would result in acquiring additional right-of-way for a frontage road system to provide access to existing development and private driveways. Acquiring this right-of-way is more costly and has greater impacts to private property because of the development along existing roadways. Therefore, these options were eliminated.

What were the other constraints in the study area that dictated where the bypass could go?

- The floodplain of the Yellowstone River is relatively wide through the study area. There are two optimal crossing locations that were identified. Alternatives that crossed the river at other locations, such as the Johnson Lane alignment, were eliminated due to cost and floodplain impacts.
- The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) policy is that system-to-system interchanges be spaced at least two miles apart. Therefore, unless the bypass connects to the interstate in the vicinity of the existing Pinehills

interchange (I-90 and I-94 interchange) and involves a reconstruction of that interchange, the bypass will need to connect to the interstate at least two miles from the existing Pinehills interchange.

- The interchanges require a lot of space and are generally located at relatively flat and straight sections of the connecting roadways. There were a limited number of locations along Hwy 312 and US 87 that were identified as good connection locations because there is a lot of existing development. Alternatives with less than optimal interchange locations were either refined or eliminated to promote safety and minimize impacts.

Level 2 Alternatives Screening

Using the alignments remaining after the Level 1 Screening, the project team developed a conceptual set of alternatives. These alternatives were compared to each other based on criteria such as projected traffic, private property impacts, cost, and impacts to natural or cultural resources. The basic question we were trying to answer was – do other alternatives provide similar benefits with fewer impacts or lower cost. If the answer to this question was yes, the alternative was eliminated.

Preliminary Alternatives

The alternatives remaining after the Level 2 Screening are the preliminary alternatives that will be carried forward for detailed evaluation in the EIS. There are two primary corridors under consideration - a northern and southern corridor. However, there are three points at which the bypass route could switch between these two corridors and two options for connecting to the interstate near Pinehills. The mix and match potential of these corridors results in 24 different possible routes between the interstate and Hwy 3. If other alignments are identified by the public, the project team will evaluate them in the same manner that previously identified alternatives were evaluated. If the new alignments are feasible, they will also be developed as preliminary alternatives to be carried forward for detailed evaluation in the EIS.

Questions and Answer Session

Funding/Cost

Q: Where is the money for this project coming from?

A: A financial plan will be developed. The bypass needs to be designated as part of the Federal Highway System. We will consider bonding, earmarks, other means of funding. The construction will be phased based on available funding.

Q: How much more will it cost to build the bypass after the year 2015? Wouldn't the cost be much higher due to inflation, fuel, materials cost, etc?

A: Yes, it is likely that construction costs will be higher in the future, but that is hard to predict.

Q: Does this project rely on federal highway dollars?

A: Both state and federal funds will be used.

Property Impacts/Right-of-way Acquisition

Q: Do you study economic and other impacts to ranches and farms?

A: Yes.

Q: What is the right-of-way acquisition plan? When will this occur? How much money is available?

A: MDT follows federal regulations for right-of-way acquisition. Right-of-way can't be acquired until after the EIS and final design are completed. That should occur by approximately 2012. Currently \$19 million is allocated to be used for design and right-of-way.

Q: What happens if the bypass splits a property? Will there be underpasses/overpasses to continue access?

A: This will be determined on a case-by-case basis.

Q: How will the Pinehills subdivision be impacted?

A: If the Pinehills interchange location is selected as the preferred alternative, there could be impacts to the Pinehills subdivision. The design will minimize those impacts to the extent practicable.

Q: What will stop a potentially affected landowner from subdividing land to increase the value?

A: Nothing. Landowners can do what they want.

Schedule

Q: How long before construction begins?

A: Beyond 2015 depending on available funding.

Q: When will you know which route will be built? Eighteen months from now will we have a preferred alternative?

A: The preferred alternative will be identified after the next public meeting and will be presented in the Draft EIS.

Community/Environmental Impacts

Q: How will noise be addressed?

A: The impact of traffic noise is studied as part of the EIS. A noise specialist will measure the existing noise levels at various locations in the study area. Based on the alternative and the projected traffic, the noise level will be estimated at sensitive receptors (residential areas, schools, churches, etc). If noise impacts are anticipated and meet the criteria for noise abatement, MDT will work with owners on potential mitigation measures.

Q: How are wetlands impacts handled?

A: Wetland impacts are identified as part of the EIS. MDT will coordinate with the Corps of Engineers on measures to minimize and mitigate impacts.

Q: Do you try to avoid historic sites and grave sites?

A: Yes.

Traffic

Q: Will you evaluate the impacts of increased truck traffic to Roundup? What are the impacts related to phasing?

A: Traffic impacts will be evaluated in the EIS for the full build-out scenario of the bypass and for phasing options.

Q: Will the bypass impact traffic on Main Street in the first phase?

A: Both beneficial and adverse traffic impacts will be identified for each phase of the project. Other projects will also reduce congestion on Main Street – Airport, Bench Connection, Aronson, and others.

Q: What will the affect of future growth be? Is future growth considered?

A: The project team will continue to coordinate with the City/County planning department to develop 20-year traffic projections based on anticipated growth patterns in the area.

Safety

Q: What type of safety studies will be done? The northern Highway 3 interchange is on a blind curve and on a hill.

A: Safety is one of the design criteria for the project and will be evaluated as part of the EIS. The preferred alternative for the project will be designed to meet safety requirements.

Q: At Lorraine Street and US 87, there is a blind spot – will that be addressed?

A: If the bypass would affect operations at that intersection, it will be evaluated as part of the project process.

Q: Is there a height requirement for bridges? Need clearance for trucks.

A: The bypass will follow applicable standards for clearance at bridges.

Bypass Design

Q: Will there be a bike trail along the bypass?

A: Bikes will be allowed to use the 10 ft shoulder area along either side of the bypass route. If a separated bike path along the bypass is identified and recommended in local plans, it will be considered.

Q: Will water, gas or other utilities be constructed along the bypass?

A: MDT will only relocate existing lines. The addition of any new utilities along the bypass would be a function of utility companies.

Q: What is the design speed of the bypass?

A: Depends on the designation, probably 70 mph.

Q: Will there be frontage roads in the western segment?

A: This is a possibility based on local access needs.

Other

Q: What does the staking in the field represent?

A: West of the Yellowstone River, the centerline of the bypass is staked. East of the Yellowstone River, the edges of the total potential impact area of the proposed interchanges are staked.

Additional comments provided at the meeting:

- At the location of the proposed northern US 87 Interchange, there are wildlife (Hungarian partridge, sage grouse, antelope, and bats) and drainage issues due to numerous tributaries of Seven Mile Creek. Also, there would be noise impacts to the Hidden Lake Subdivision.
- The segment from I-94 to I-90 should not have been eliminated. This would provide a much safer route than the existing route over the pass to Pryor Creek.
- Use Old Alkali Creek Road as an alignment alternative.
- Provide another interchange for Lockwood.
- Add the Section D back into the alternatives. The trucks would not need to slow down through the I-90/I-94 interchange.
- Please provide a link to the Right-of-way appraisal process on the project website and provide this information at the next meeting.
- Bar Diamond is a large landowner in the area and may have questions/concerns.