

Missoula County Media Release

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Missoula County Submits Final Documentation on South Avenue Bridge for MDT Review

Missoula County last week submitted final documentation on the proposed South Avenue Bridge to the Montana Department of Transportation for review.

The documents, [available online](#), include:

- The categorical exclusion environmental document that states the impacts of the project do not warrant an environmental assessment or environmental impact statement to comply with the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA);
- An environmental engineering analyses report, which provides details on existing conditions, the project's potential impacts and the proposed solutions to mitigate those impacts;
- A report confirming the project complies with Section 4(f) of the U.S. Department of Transportation Act, which requires transportation project development to consider impacts on park and recreation lands, wildlife and waterfowl refuges, and historic sites;
- A comment matrix addressing specific questions from Commissioner Dave Strohmaier.

"We're happy with how quickly our engineering firm, Public Works staff and the commissioners were able to make the edits required by the state and federal agencies to keep the process moving forward," said Shane Stack, Missoula County Public Works director. "This process represents the county's responsibility in providing input any time we take on a major public project like this."

The next step in the process is for MDT to review the categorical exclusion and the accompanying documents. If the categorical exclusion is acceptable, then MDT will forward it to the Federal Highway Administration for review and approval. If FHWA finds the documents are acceptable, they will sign the categorical exclusion. If MDT or FHWA have any suggested edits during their reviews, they will send those suggested edits to the county to consider.

"We look forward to receiving any additional feedback from MDT and FHWA on the project as it proceeds through the established review process, and we will continue to provide input as the process moves forward," Strohmaier said. "To be clear, the county commissioners do not need to take a vote on the project as it moves through the review process, and at no point have we voted or taken action that puts local tax dollars at risk."

Once FHWA signs the categorical exclusion, HDR, the engineering firm the county hired for the project, will start finalizing the design for the South Avenue Bridge. Then the project will proceed as follows:

- When the design is approximately 60 to 70 percent complete, MDT and Missoula County will discuss utility relocation and right-of-way acquisition. MDT can perform this phase, or the county can become certified to complete it.
- When the design is approximately 90 percent complete, Missoula County and MDT will discuss the construction phase. Again, MDT can perform this phase, or the county can become certified to complete it.
- The design phase, which will include opportunities for public comment, is expected to be complete by August 2020.
- The project will go out for bid, followed by construction. Either MDT or Missoula County can administer this phase.

The commissioners do not need to vote on whether to move forward with the South Avenue Bridge. Unless MDT or FHWA determine a heightened level of environmental review is warranted, the project is on track for construction to start in 2024. The bridge will cross the Bitterroot River southwest of Missoula, connecting South Avenue to River Pines Road. The project, estimated to cost up to \$15.4 million, will be paid for with federal gas tax funds through MDT's Off-System Bridge program. It will divert traffic away from the Maclay Bridge that currently connects River Pines Road to North Avenue.

"There's no question that we need to expand the current options for vehicles crossing the Bitterroot River," Commissioner Josh Slotnick said. "As this process continues, Missoula County will provide feedback to MDT and FHWA at the appropriate times and seek ways to enhance public safety, mitigate community and environmental impacts and limit costs to local taxpayers."

For more information, call Stack at 406-258-4818 or email sstack@missoulacounty.us.

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