

Appendix E

Newspaper Articles Regarding
the June 1, 2005 Public Meeting

10 Miles May 30, 2015

Highway 69 alternate route faces opposition

■ Proposed safety changes criticized for effect they would have on ranchers

By MARGA LINCOLN
IR staff writer

A Montana Department of Transportation plan to rebuild a scenic but high-accident stretch of Highway 69 south of Boulder is running into mounting opposition from ranchers and rural residents.

MDT will hold a meeting Wednesday, June 1, at 6:30 p.m. in the Jefferson High School cafeteria to present two proposed alternatives for rebuilding the road and to hear public comment.

One proposal would widen the existing road, adding shoulders and straightening some curves between mile post 22 and 24,

according to Jeff Ebert, Boulder district engineer for MDT.

The other moves the highway across the Boulder River at the Elkhorn turn-off and runs it along what is now Lower Valley Road, a county gravel road.

MDT wants to build on a hillside this highway section because it is "in dire need of repair and to bring it up to modern standards so people can travel safer," Ebert said.

It is considering relocating a portion of the roadbed because of adjacent wetlands and rocky cliffs along the current roadway.

Ranchers feel threatened

"People definitely want to improve the safety," said Terry Minow, who ranches with her husband, Brad Smith. "They just think this is the wrong way to do it."

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Highway: Some say safety will be worse

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Relocating the highway is particularly drawing fire.

Minow and about 30 neighbors met in the past few days to discuss the project.

"Everybody opposes the rerouting," said Minow. "Most people want some improvements to the highway, but they're very concerned that the improvements protect their land and rural lifestyle and that it improve safety, not make it worse.

"People are concerned it will increase the amount of high-speed traffic and make it less safe," she said.

"Their proposed change would have a drastic effect on me and other people. My ranching operation will take a pretty big hit," said one neighbor, rancher Ed McCauley. Generations of his family have ranched in that area since the 1860s.

"If they move it over here then I don't have a safe route," he said. "I move cattle and hay and equipment up and down this road all the time."

It would affect six to eight ranching families using the roadway, he said.

People use Lower Valley Road not only for ranch operations, said Minow, but also for scenic drives, school-bus routes, horseback riding, biking, jogging and walking. It's where they teach their kids to drive.

Also at issue is the historic "red bridge" that residents have rallied to save in the past along the relocation alternative's route. It's a favorite local swimming hole and fishing spot.

Minow said she thinks the plans threaten the bridge; Ebert said a parallel bridge may be built.

The Elkhorn Working Group went on record with a May 18 letter of opposition to the proposed route change.

The group, which was formed to promote land stewardship and local economies, asks MDT "to abandon further consideration of the proposed alternative of Highway 69."

The proposed change would increase the number of collisions between cars



IR photo by Marpa Lincoln

Highway 69 has little to no shoulder, creating safety hazards. This also makes it difficult for law enforcement officers to pull over speeding vehicles.

and both livestock and wildlife, the letter states, because the Boulder River is a main water source.

The proposal could create other unintended effects, according to the letter.

"If ranches are not economically viable then the trend is to create subdivisions. Subdivisions in turn cause habitat fragmentation and the loss of animal populations," it states,

The project and issues

The total project encompasses about 15 miles, between mile posts 22 and 37.

MDT reports that 106 accidents have been recorded along that stretch of road from Jan. 1, 1994, to Dec. 31, 2003.

Daily traffic volumes are 1,500 to 1,600 per day, with 17 percent of this trucks, according to Ebert.

Accident severity in this section rates 30 percent greater than the statewide average for the state's rural highway system, according to an MDT field report.

And the truck crash severity rate is 70 percent greater than the statewide average for state rural primary highway systems.

MDT faults the outdated and substandard road design for a series of accident clusters.

About seven miles of road would be widening the existing road. The remaining eight miles would be either on the existing roadbed or relocated.

The cost is estimated at \$16 million to \$17 million for either proposal.

Money still has to be allocated for the project, said Ebert. It is at its very beginning stages. The earliest that construction could start would be 2008.

The issue of speed

However, for some, the speed limit presents a bigger safety issue than the road design.

The road's speed limit, set by the Legislature, is 70 mph for cars and 60 for trucks.

However, there is little police enforcement and trucks consistently exceed the posted speed and barrel past vehicles even in non-passing zones, said rancher Randy Kirk.

Enforcement could conceivably improve with the addition of road shoulders, so the highway patrol would have some place to pull over trucks, said Ebert.

Preferred by trucks

Residents would like semis to use Interstate 15, which was built for that

purpose, said Kirk.

MDT can't close Highway 69 to trucks, Ebert said, because it is a primary highway eligible for federal funding. Such highways must be open to trucks.

Highway 69 has become a preferred route for trucks, particularly those heading to Dillon, Idaho, Utah and Las Vegas, said Ebert.

"You don't have to cross the Continental Divide three different times, like you do on the Interstate," he explained. "It's got a flatter grade.

Although there's no permanent weigh station on Highway 69, another reason truckers like it, there is a temporary one that's used on occasion. This would be improved as part of the rebuild project.

Voicing concerns

"We want to get people out," said Ebert. "We're very open to hearing their concerns, comments and questions."

Wednesday's meeting will include a description of the project, a presentation of environmental concerns, and will be open for public comment. Individuals can talk with staff after the meeting about the project's impact on their property.

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Neighbors

C-17-01

HWY. 69 project largely opposed

■ None of the 120 who attend MDT meeting supports plan to relocate the highway

By MARGA LINCOLN
IR Staff Writer

Many Boulder Valley citizens would like to just say no to the state's reconstruction plans for Highway 69 south of Boulder. They prefer their rural and scenic highway just the way it is, even though it has a high accident rate. A standing-room-only crowd of about 120 showed

up for a June Montana Department of Transportation public meeting in Boulder to voice their concerns and hear about MDT's proposed plans for safety improvements.

One option would widen the road, add shoulders, and straighten some of the curves between mileposts 22 and 37.

The other alternative moves the highway across the Boulder River at the Elkhorn turn-off and runs it along Lower Valley Road, a county gravel road.

This option is an attempt to address environmental impacts that could arise from widening the existing Highway 69. It runs close to

the Boulder River and is bordered at times by either steep rock cliffs or wetlands.

Both alternatives are meant to address highway safety problems.

Accident severity along this designated stretch of highway is 39 percent greater than the statewide average for the state's rural highway system, according to a recent MDT field report.

No citizens at the meeting favored relocating the highway.

A number of citizens prefer doing nothing with the roadway. They asked instead for a lower speed limit and

diverting semi-trucks to the nearby Interstate highway.

"People were very passionate about their beliefs and wanting to keep this valley in a rural ranching type of environment," said Jeff Ebert, MDT Butte district engineer.

They'd like it to remain very much like it was 100 years ago when ranchers first settled in the area, he said.

He believes that safety improvements can be made to the road, while still maintaining the rural character of the valley.

"A lot of the testimony focused on things that could be done right away," such as putting in a speed zone and

increasing enforcement, said local resident Terry Minow.

"People were concerned about the speed of the traffic and the amount of truck traffic on Highway 69," she said.

Minow, a member of a newly formed group Boulder Valley Neighbors, said they are developing their own proposed safety alternatives which they'll submit to MDT.

"If you make the road wider and take out the curves, you will actually make it less safe," she said, because there will be more high-speed traffic.

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Highway: EA should take 12-18 months

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Moving the highway would negatively impact the rural lifestyle of the area, she said.

"Highway 69 is a gorgeous road, especially through the canyon," Minow said. "The trees and foliage in the fall are spectacular. I don't want to see the trees and vegetation stripped out of the area in order to make the road a big wide expanse of pavement."

Former county commissioner Sam Sampson testified that the county, years ago, asked for a lower speed limit, better enforcement of speed limits, and the construction of a permanent weigh station for trucks. None of these requests have been done, he said.

The highway has become a preferred route for trucks heading to Dillon, Idaho and Utah because it has a flatter grade and does not cross the Continental Divide three times, like the Interstate does.

It's widely believed the trucks also use the route to avoid weigh stations.

MDT can't keep trucks off the highway, Ebert said, because it's a state primary highway eligible for federal dollars.

There are also problems with beefing up law enforcement, he said. At this time, the lack of shoulders makes it difficult for officers to pull over speeders.

MDT will continue to accept public comment until July 15 on this stage of the project, said Ebert.

All of the comment becomes part of the public record for the environmental assessment, which should be completed over the next 12 to 18 months.

When a draft of it is available, another public meeting will be held to take additional public comment.

When the draft environmental assessment is released it will recommend one of three things Ebert said:

- A finding that the recommended alternative (whatever it is) will cause no significant environmental impact;

- A recommendation that the preferred alternative requires a full environmental impact statement report; or

- A "no build" recommendation, which leaves the road as it is.

Ebert said he cannot recall any recent studies recommending a "no build" option.