

Bypass environmental assessment set for public hearing

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SANDPOINT -- The public gets to weigh in on the Sand Creek bypass project during the first public hearing scheduled in years.

The Idaho Transportation Department will take public comment on the hotly contested environmental affects of additions to the proposed Sand Creek bypass project during a June 3 public hearing at the Bonner Mall from 4 p.m. to 8 p.m.

Copies of the EA will be released Friday at ITD offices in Sandpoint and Coeur d'Alene, at the Sand Creek Byway Office and at the library.

"This project has never been this far along in the process," said ITD information officer Barbara Babic.

Final Federal Highway Administration approval will be issued after ITD gathers public input.

The Sand Creek Byway will thread up the Sand Creek Peninsula and connect with Highway 95 in Ponderay, bringing highway traffic out of downtown Sandpoint.

ITD plans to begin the project this fall after obtaining the necessary permits and going out to bid. An Environmental Impact Statement has already been completed for the other parts of the project.

The EA focuses on changes brought about through community input, Babic said.

The additions include:

- A southbound off-ramp at the southern interchange.
- The addition of an auxiliary southbound lane.
- The addition of a shoreline extension of the east shoreline of Sand Creek from Bridge Street to the Cedar Street Bridge.
- The modification of a continuous long bridge structure from the mouth of the Sand Creek to the Cedar Street Bridge.
- The addition of a railroad embankment to help support a second railroad track for Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railroad.
- The development of the location and characteristics of the pedestrian and bicycle pathway
- The addition of three pathway habitat enhancement areas
- The modification of the north interchange to include a north loop on-ramp.

The project has been the subject of vigorous debate for more than half a century. Opponents of the bypass say it will not ease traffic congestion and will blemish Sandpoint.

The North Idaho Community Action Network has contended that the EA was behind schedule, and that permit applications were supposed to be completed last year, but ITD officials say they are taking care with the details of the project.

ITD will take as much time as necessary, said Babic.

"This is a carefully thought out project," she said.

Anyone not able to attend the hearing can submit written testimony to the Idaho Transportation Department, Public Involvement Coordinator, P.O. Box 7129, Boise, Idaho 83707-1129, by Thursday, June 24, 2004.