

Bypass won't end traffic 'migraine'

By KEITH KINNAIRD

News editor

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NICAN steps up assault on U.S. 95 project

SANDPOINT -- Treating migraine headaches, as the legend goes, used to involve performing a frontal lobotomy.

Putting a highway on a narrow strip of land that separates Lake Pend Oreille and Sand Creek makes about as much sense, say opponents of the Idaho Transportation Department plan to re-route U.S. Highway 95 through Sandpoint.

"We don't want to perform a lobotomy on Sandpoint to get rid of the migraine of traffic in Sandpoint," Pierre Bordenave said during a presentation at the North Idaho Community Action Network's open house on Wednesday.

Nearly 30 people turned out for the 7 p.m. presentation, which began with a parody of the Joni Mitchell tune "Big Yellow Taxi." The song, which was featured at last year's Sandpoint Follies, declared that ITD intends to "pave paradise and put up a three-lane road."

"We have an amenity," Bordenave said, referring to Sandpoint's downtown waterfront. "We have paradise and we're talking about paving it."

Bordenave, president of InterMountain Resources, then clicked through a series of digital slides that challenged nearly every aspect of ITD's controversial highway rerouting proposal -- from the perceived public acceptance of the project, to its design and economic impacts.

But Bordenave seemed to be preaching to the converted as most in attendance appeared to either oppose the project or have grave reservations about it. With the absence of a for-and-against debate, some in the audience questioned what could be done to either scuttle ITD's plan or at least force the department to hit the reset button and begin the bypass debate anew, hopefully wind up with a better proposal.

"It's one thing to sit up and take notice. It's another thing to stand up and take action," Bordenave said, urging the audience to pressure community leaders into taking a stand against the project.

But assailing the project, no matter how thoroughly it's done, will get opponents only so far, said Sagle resident Ed Bittner, a vocal foe of the project.

"You're not going to convince a lot of people unless you show how it can be done (better)," said Bittner, explaining that a campaign weighted down with negatives likely won't result in a positive outcome.

At least one other audience member agreed and pressed NICAN to further develop and promote alignment alternatives.

One of the biggest obstacles to coming up with viable alternatives is funding, said Bill Miller. State highway officials have much more funding to work with, in addition to a slew of engineers.

Miller urged the audience not to let up the pressure on ITD to reconsider its plans.

"We have to force them," he said.

NICAN officials acknowledge filing a federal lawsuit might be the best hope for stopping the proposed Sand Creek Byway, though there still are opportunities to upend ITD's plans at upcoming hearings on an environmental assessment and a fill permit.

Chris Hecht, president of NICAN's board of directors, said the group will not relent in deposing ITD's plan to run the highway up Sand Creek.

"We can do better," he said. "We can do better."