

Byway hearing focuses on Sand Creek impacts

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Testimony on route won't be accepted

SANDPOINT -- People hankering for a traditional public hearing on the proposed Sand Creek Byway will get their wish on Thursday.

But the focus of the hearing will be confined to parts of the project that come in contact with Sand Creek, namely bridge and ramp piers, a shoreline extension on the east side of the creek, and temporary and permanent fill.

That means people with something to say about the proposed route of the U.S. Highway 95 realignment project will likely be shut down by hearing examiners for the Idaho Department of Lands and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the two agencies which are conducting the joint hearing.

"It's my understanding that they're going to be rather strict about all of these procedures," said Barbara Babic, spokeswoman for District 1 of the Idaho Transportation Department.

The hearing is scheduled to start at 6 p.m. at Sandpoint High School, located at 410 South Division Street. Those wishing to testify will be asked to fill out an attendance card. The meeting opens with a 20-minute presentation by the applicant, ITD. The department's project manager, Mike Fitzgerald, said elected officials speak second, followed by organizations, which will have 20 minutes to state their views. Individuals speak fourth with each person allotted five minutes to speak.

Babic said individuals who filled out cards will be called in random order.

Government officials will be given a chance to speak after individuals, and ITD will be afforded an opportunity for closing remarks. There will be no direct cross-examination and only testimony directly related to the proposal will be accepted.

"The hearing officers may limit testimony if they feel that it's inappropriate," Babic said.

The state asserts the bypass project will have no impact on navigation. The project will result in the filling of nearly 3 acres of wetlands, which has already been mitigated through the creation of wetlands near the high school, according to ITD.

Nearly 3 acres of open water in the creek will be filled to accommodate the shoreline extension, which will be used simultaneously as a pedestrian and cycling path, and to support a mechanically stabilized earthen wall between the Bridge and Cedar street bridges. To compensate, Fitzgerald said the state plans to create three areas of habitat improvement, which include native vegetation and underwater habitat structures such as root wads, rock clusters and logs.

The amount of fill has become fodder for foes of the bypass project. They contend it will irreparably harm the creek's aesthetics and riparian habitat.