

## Byway hearing stirs passion

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News editor

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PONDERAY -- Most people either can't wait for the Sand Creek Byway to be built or hope the day will never come.

Bonner County's love-hate relationship with the U.S. Highway 95 re-routing project continued Thursday as people on both sides of the issue gathered at the Bonner Mall to comment on a series of design modifications to the bypass project.

"Where do I sign to get this started?" asked Bonner County resident Lewie Rich, a byway supporter who feels opponents have yet to propose a viable alternative to the Sand Creek alignment.

While there were plenty of people at Thursday's public hearing who are anxious to see the byway built, there were also those who think it's a monumentally terrible idea.

"We live in one of the most beautiful places on the planet and part of it's because of the mountains and part of it's because of the water," said Sagle resident Eric Ridgway. "To put a highway right on top of and next to the water is insane."

It's a debate that has polarized the community for more than a half-century. Some see the \$66 million bypass as downtown's savior because it will siphon away non-stop traffic and ease congestion. Others see the project as a planned cultural, economic and environmental catastrophe.

The intellectual tug-of-war shows no sign of stopping, even though the Idaho Transportation Department plans to start work on the bypass this year.

Thursday's hearing focused on eight project modifications, which include a shoreline extension in Sand Creek, an additional southbound lane and off-ramp, a north loop on-ramp and a bike path. But much of the discussion at each exhibit seemed to concern the overall worthiness of the project.

Parents shepherded children from exhibit to exhibit, while byway haters rubbed elbows with each other and project officials. Older folks pored over design plans and others sat quietly at tables and wrote their thoughts down on comment forms.

"It's the same old exhibits and the same old information," Liz Sedler, executive director of the North Idaho Community Action Network, said dejectedly.

The group is leading fight against the bypass project. Sedler said NICAN supporters who attended the open house-style public hearing didn't come away impressed.

"Most of them just shake their heads and go, "What's the point?" Sedler said.

Celeste Genereaux caused a stir at the hearing when she displayed a beautifully illustrated drawing of a tunnel that she claims could be built under the Pend Oreille River for a comparable price. The rendering included drawings of ornate ventilation shafts.

"It's a cool idea," said bypass foe Gail Fendley. "If you can get from England to France (via tunnel), why can't you do this?"

State highway officials said Genereaux could stay, but her drawing had to go. Barbara Babic, an ITD spokeswoman, said Genereaux was invited to submit the drawing as a written comment but the offer was declined.

"There will always be opponents. We expect that," Babic said.

By 7:30 p.m., hearing officers had conducted more than 30 interviews with people who preferred to share their comments verbally. Hearing officer Nancy Beck said response to the modifications were mixed and sometimes quite passionate.

There has never been a shortage of passion when it comes to the byway.

"People either love this project or hate it," county Commission Brian Orr said.

- The deadline to comment on proposed changes to the byway is June 24. Written comments should be directed to Gwen Smith, Idaho Transportation Department, Public Involvement Coordinator, P.O. Box 7129, Boise, ID. 83707-1129.