

Corps sets hearing on byway

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SANDPOINT -- The byway battle opens on a new front this month as the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers seeks public comment on the Idaho Department of Transportation's plan to put fill in Sand Creek for the Sand Creek Byway.

A public hearing with the Idaho Department of Lands and the Corps is scheduled on Aug. 12 at Sandpoint High School and the agency will accept written comments throughout the month and until Aug. 6.

Construction on the byway is scheduled to begin later this year, pending approval of various permits. The structure, which will extend from the Long Bridge to Ponderay, following Sand Creek, has been in planning stages for years.

The Corps may issue a permit after evaluating numerous factors, including conservation, economics, aesthetics, environmental concerns, flooding and land use. The Corps will also consider property ownership, safety, the "needs and welfare of the people," among other concerns.

The Corps will not issue a permit until the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality certifies the fill material will violate water quality standards. DEQ evaluation is underway.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has already concluded the project is not likely to harm threatened and endangered species in the area, according to the hearing notice.

ITD says the project will not noticeably increase flood levels and will not significantly decrease Sand Creek navigability. Small boats will still be able to use the creek, the permit hearing notice states.

North Idaho Community Action Network has vowed to fight construction of the bypass, which members feel will destroy Sandpoint's tranquility. NICAN also has encouraged opponents to speak their minds at public hearings.

NICAN supporters feel ITD has misled and misinformed the community about the actual effects of the byway if it is constructed. They envision lights, traffic, noise and pollution. They also believe Sandpoint's economy will be devastated as traffic is routed out of downtown. The community has been worn down to acceptance rather than true support of the project, NICAN's Pierre Bordenave said at a May meeting.

If the permit is approved, ITD would be allowed to discharge 64,385 cubic yards of crushed rock, sand and concrete fill material into 2.71 acres below Sand Creek's high water mark for two bridges in the byway, a bicycle path, a shoreline extension and bank stabilization, according to the notice of public hearing.

It would also include a temporary construction access, temporary dams, concrete fence post footings, two screened water intakes and three habitat enhancement areas, according to the notice.

ITD says one pier will be needed in the creek to support a southbound off ramp that crosses over Sand Creek and one will be needed to support a section of the highway over Sand Creek.

The project does not require dredging and in-water construction will take place during low-water seasons.

ITD says it has worked hard to minimize the amount of material it will put into Sand Creek by using retaining walls, adjusting alignment of various components and reducing the number of piers, the application states.

Mitigation efforts include the creation of 2.5 acres wetlands at Sandpoint High School. ITD also plans to put fill in Sand Creek at three locations to create shallow water habitat.

- If you would like to give written comment on Sand Creek Byway Construction to the Corps of Engineers, write to the agency at U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Walla Walla District, Regulatory Branch, 201 North 3rd Avenue, Walla Walla, Wash. 99362-1876. Comments will be accepted until Aug. 6.