

Opponents say bypass will clot Sandpoint's heart

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June 23, 2004

SANDPOINT -- The Greater Sandpoint area is filled with subtle reminders of one of the most controversial highway improvement projects in Idaho history.

It's a notable distinction for a project that hasn't been constructed yet.

The cut of the Cedar Street Bridge, the "sculpture" on the front lawn of the Greater Sandpoint Chamber of Commerce office and the angle of the current Long Bridge faintly predict what transportation engineers had in mind.

Gary Pietsch, a lifelong resident and longtime bypass opponent, considers the route of the current Long Bridge one of the first warnings about what was in store.

"There were a lot of people in the community that said, 'Well hell, you're going to build a road up the peninsula.' And ITD said, 'No we're not,'" Pietsch recalled.

But Pietsch was unconvinced of such protests by state highway planners.

"That alignment set the wheels in motion for what we now have today. ITD has been spending the last 50 years justifying that decision," he said.

But the railroad overpass on U.S. Highway 95 just north of the Highway 200 junction is perhaps the most obvious architectural alert.

The railroad bridge was built to accommodate up to four lanes of traffic, despite the fact only two lanes pass under it now. One ardent foe of the proposed Sand Creek bypass describes the bridge as a "double-barrel shotgun" leveled squarely at Sandpoint.

To the North Idaho Community Action Network, the stealthy design details telegraph what the Idaho Transportation Department has been planning to do all along -- ram a highway up Sand Creek.

"All this stuff has been geared toward that for years," said Liz Sedler, executive director of NICAN, which is leading the fight against the Sand Creek bypass. "This was pre-decisional. The decision was made before they did any kind of environmental analysis."

Though the Sand Creek bypass idea has been kicked around for more than 60 years, the draft environmental impact statement wasn't released until 1994. The final EIS came five years later, and in 2000 the Federal Highway Administration formally approved the project.

Opposition to the Sand Creek route has existed about as long as the idea has. It gave rise to Save Our Sand Creek, Sandpoint Tomorrow, the Alternative Realignment Committee and NICAN.

Originally, much of the opposition had to do with commerce. Business owners feared moving the highway out of downtown would cost them customers. Over the years, the movement blossomed to include an ever-expanding list environmental, cultural and aesthetic concerns.

But for as complex the argument against the Sand Creek bypass has become, there is still a simple reason why some people hate the idea.

"The waterfront is beautiful and it's a part of our town. To put a highway up it...the only thing that comes to mind is rape," Sedler said only half-jokingly. "They're going to destroy the waterfront."

Gauging support for, or hatred of, the Sand Creek route has turned into a science.

In 1989, the chamber and Sandpoint Unlimited formed a committee to find the alignment that had the broadest appeal with people in Bonner County. After identifying and ranking priorities, and polling the community through interviews, the Sand Creek route was deemed most popular.

Four years later, the city of Sandpoint conducted an advisory vote asking which alignments they liked best. The choices included two- and four-lane Sand Creek routes, a Westside alignment, a through-town alignment, and a half-dozen other options.

The two Sand Creek routes accounted for a combined 69.22 percent of the vote, according to election records. But, depending on how the numbers are crunched, some say the 1993 vote showed an 87 percent approval rating for Sand Creek.

The 1993 vote opened a new front in the bypass battle.

City officials concluded the vote demonstrated majority support for the Sand Creek alignment. Project foes see the advisory vote as a mockery wrapped in a sham inside a hoax.

Vote critics contend the turnout, 25 percent, was too small to be truly representative and criticized the fact that only registered voters in Sandpoint were allowed to cast ballots. They also argue the Sand Creek route's closest competitors -- the Westside and through-town alignments -- were designed to be so unpalatable and bizarre that nobody in their right mind would vote for them.

"That (vote) was completely bogus," Sedler said.

The city of Sandpoint stands behind the results of the vote and the way the election was conducted.

A Westside route can be devised that misses all the environmental, economic and political pitfalls that plagued previous designs, according to NICAN. Meantime, Sedler said the group will continue its crusade against the Sand Creek bypass.

"Our contention is that if people were educated about what it's actually going to look like and what the impacts are going to be -- long-term and short-term -- that a lot of people would change their minds," she said. "A lot of people have already changed their minds."