

## Public weighs in on byway at hearing

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SANDPOINT -- The public was divided on the Sand Creek Byway project, but public officials were united in their support during a Wednesday public hearing on permitting the project.

The project requires fills both above and below the water line, so both the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Idaho Department of Lands must issue permits if the project to reroute Highway 95 from downtown to the east shore of Sand Creek is to proceed. A shoreline extension, bike path alongside Sand Creek and a vegetative wall supporting the proposed structure all require fill.

The Corps and IDL will accept written comments until Aug. 23. The timeline for permitting depends upon information received through the public process, said Corps Senior Public Affairs Specialist Nola Conway.

Public officials and many of the organizations whose representatives spoke encouraged the Corps and IDL to grant permits. While many individuals agreed, other organizations and individuals warned the project will be a disaster, the soils are unsuitable for supporting fill and the project has not been accurately presented to the public.

However, Idaho Rep. George Eskridge called the project "much needed," and said environmental and community concerns have been addressed.

Bonner County Commissioner Brian Orr, Sandpoint Mayor Ray Miller and Ponderay City Councilman Dale Daugharty supported the project, emphasizing the benefits of building the bike path. They also affirmed their belief that the project would not have a detrimental effect on the environment and that creation of new wetlands would mitigate for those filled in.

The community has "numerously and repeatedly" shown support for the project, which will improve public access to the shore and enhance property values, said Miller.

North Idaho Bikeways also supported the route, which vice president Angela Bopp said would enhance tourism and give bicyclists and walkers a safer and more appealing commute.

"Rather than being a drive-through area, we become a destination," she said.

Individuals who spoke emphasized the need relieve traffic congestion in Sandpoint.

"Sandpoint is a walking town. That's what they keep telling me, but try to do that at 5 o'clock in the afternoon," said resident Bryan Egland.

People who are concerned about the environment should consider that shoreline development has long since displaced wildlife, he added.

Harvey Riffle also supported the route.

"As I look at it I can see it was inevitable that changes take place," he said.

"Friends, it's no longer an option that we have the byway. We must have the byway... Without a bypass, where do you think people are going to be? Without a bypass, it's not workable."

Byway opponents just as passionately spoke against the project.

North Idaho Community Action Network Executive Director Liz Sedler told Corps and IDL officials that the application was incomplete -- adjacent landowner Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railroad had not signed the application. Sedler also claimed the project will require dredging not discussed in the application, and that not enough effort was made to avoid or minimize the "massive amount of fill" required in the project.

Sedler called the mitigation planned "nonexistent or inadequate," and said ITD had failed to value existing Sand Creek shoreline and open water habitat. It has not surveyed the area to establish a baseline against which to determine future impacts, she said.

Intermountain Resources owner and NICAN collaborator Pierre Bordenave said the project would negatively affect businesses, would extend farther into Sand Creek than ITD has led the public to believe, and that ITD has not studied alternative routes seriously enough.

He was also concerned with the science behind the project and future risks.

"Construction of the Sand Creek highway will take years of recreational, navigational and water dependent economic business disruption, and entail the loss of this unique community asset, and it's potential, forever," he said, calling ITD visual representations of the project "a cartoon of someone's dreams."

"The water quality impacts are dismissed due to the fact that ITD and its consultants have latched onto the word 'mudflat' for Sand Creek... The water quality impact of the complete obliteration of the riparian edge for essentially the entire eastern shoreline of Sand Creek along the length of this project is not even remotely addressed."

Soils along Sand Creek are saturated and unstable, he said.

Long-time resident Bill Lewis concurred.

"When I was a kid growing up, Sand Creek was my playground and it was my back yard," he said.

"This creek's not a mud flat for me."

Soils are sand, water and clay, and it collapses under weight or when it is disturbed, he said.

ITD has a record for misjudging soils, he said, pointing to numerous examples, including the collapse of a hill near Bonners Ferry several years ago that destroyed a section of Highway 95.

"What guarantee can they give us that this cannot happen again?" he questioned.

"It needs to go to the west side where it belongs, and everyone knows it, including ITD," Lewis said.