

Study paints grim picture of bypass impacts

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SANDPOINT -- The proposed Sand Creek Byway degrades the city's natural and recreational amenities and diminish downtown's role as an economic and cultural center, according to a study commissioned by the North Idaho Community Action Network.

"Our assumption is that it will open some eyes," NICAN Executive Director Liz Sedler said of the study, which was released this week.

The study's findings and alternatives to the controversial plan to relocate U.S. Highway 95 to the Sand Creek Peninsula will be the focus of a presentation and open house at the City Forum tonight.

The open house lasts from 3-8 p.m., and a presentation is set for 5:30 p.m.

The North Idaho Community Action Network hired ECONorthwest earlier this year to prepare the study detailing the economic impacts of the Sand Creek bypass. The 30-page study holds that the project's benefits are being grossly overestimated while its impacts are being underestimated.

The report concludes the bypass' final environmental impact statement is fundamentally flawed and the document's cost/benefit analysis is inaccurate.

In particular, the final EIS asserts a cost/benefit ratio of 6.3 with the Sand Creek alignment, which represents a 500 percent return. ECONorthwest contends the cost-benefit ratio is 1.5, which does not take into account the costs of environmental impacts.

The group describes the study's author, Terry Moore, as a highly qualified economics analyst who has managed more than 300 projects in land use and transportation planning, policy analysis and market analysis.

Sedler vouches for the study's veracity.

"This person, I can tell you, would not say what somebody wanted to hear just because we hired him," said Sedler.

Summaries of the study's findings have been forwarded to the Sandpoint City Council, the Downtown Sandpoint Business Association and the Bonner County Economic Development Corporation.

"Those are the people who need to have the heads-up about what are the economic impacts everybody appears to be ignoring relative to this project," Sedler said.

Copies of the study are available for viewing at the East Bonner County Library and on NICAN's Web site (www.nican.info).

State highway officials stand behind the findings of the final EIS. The economic component of the document was upgraded in 2002 as part of the environmental assessment of project design modifications.

"I want to emphasize that that the full economic study that was done for the EIS was very extensive and in-depth," said Barbara Babic, ITD's District 1 spokeswoman.

Babic said the findings of the environmental assessment verified the conclusions drawn in the EIS.