

## Supporters say the time has come to build route

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SANDPOINT -- The proposed Sand Creek Byway is a study in mosts.

"This is probably one of the most-watched projects we've ever had and probably one of the projects that's received the most public involvement," said Barbara Babic, the Idaho Transportation Department's North Idaho spokeswoman.

It's also one of the most-requested projects, according to ITD. Babic said the preponderance of the public comment on the project sounds something like this: Just build the darn thing already.

"The comments I have read so far are overwhelmingly in support of building the project as designed, which includes all the enhancements," said Babic.

Opponents of the project, however, take issue with the level of support for the byway route. They argue a 1993 advisory vote conducted by the city of Sandpoint was orchestrated to ensure Sand Creek alignments came out on top.

But a committee formed in 1989 by the Greater Sandpoint Chamber of Commerce and the now-defunct Sandpoint Unlimited is considered by some to be a definitive show of support for a Sand Creek solution.

The Bonner County Highway 95 Committee created a matrix of priorities and then polled 14 organizations in the county about which route people favored.

"We really started from scratch," said Dick Hutter, a member of the committee who now holds a seat on the byway's Citizen Design Advisory Committee.

Organizations and municipalities which participated in the study included the Hope/Clark Fork Chamber of Commerce, the Bonner County Board of Realtors, Sandpoint Unlimited, Resort Association, the cities of Dover, Sandpoint, Kootenai and Ponderay, the Sandpoint Independent Highway District, and the Clark Fork and Sand Creek coalitions, among others.

After meeting for more than a year and a half and conducting site visits, Hutter said two potential alignments were picked -- Sand Creek and a westside route. The committee then polled the participating groups and entities.

What emerged was a clear show of support for a Sand Creek alignment. Hutter said the Sand Creek route received 517 positive points to the westside's negative 222.

Hutter said the group had achieved its primary goal to find a broad consensus on route configuration. But progress on the project hit a wall in 1992, when the state suspended development of a byway because of a funding shortage.

Some have speculated funding was allocated to projects that were not so mired in controversy.

But Hutter said the project regained momentum a few years later, when then-U.S. Rep. Helen Chenoweth earmarked millions in federal funding for a bypass at Sandpoint.

"Now there was a reason to do something," he said. "Until Helen put the money in, it was really going nowhere."

By 1994 there was a draft environmental impact statement. A final EIS followed in 1999 and a record of decision on the Sand Creek alignment was issued by the Federal Highway Administration in 2000.

Since then, ITD has embarked on what it considers to be one of the most intensive public involvement programs in state history. In fact, the American Association of State Highway Transportation Officials awarded ITD and Washington Group International, the primary consulting firm, with its Excel Award for outstanding achievements in public involvement.

"We would not be where we are with the design of a project that we have if the community had not been involved and had not been closely involved in the design process," said Babic.

Some are concerned a reinvigorated effort to halt the Sand Creek project only jeopardizes the enhancements the community insists on having because the route is already established. But ITD does not seem to be worried.

Though Babic considers opponents to be well-organized and well-studied, she contends they remain the minority.

"It's no more (opposition) than has occurred in the past, and if the comments that we've been receiving are any indication, there is still far more support for the project than there is those who have a problem with it," she said.

The state is currently processing public comments on the enhancements and expects to have the environmental assessment on the add-ons turned into the FHWA sometime next month. Before the EA was put out to the public, Babic said the document was submitted to FHWA for a "legal sufficiency review," which is something that is not ordinarily done.

If the agency declines to issue a finding of no significant impact on the enhancements, ITD could be forced to submit the changes to an EIS process.

But Babic does not envision such a development.

"We, as a project team, fully intend to address all the issues that are raised and we're confident that we can," she said. "Unless there is something we have not foreseen, or that somebody brings forward, we're confident they can be addressed." can be addressed."