

Missoula County reaffirms commitment to South Avenue bridge project

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There are plenty more decisions to be made before a new bridge is built over the lower Bitterroot River.

Missoula County's three commissioners unanimously resolved their support Wednesday for an agreement with the state to take on management of a project that could result in construction of a modern South Avenue bridge upriver from the one-lane Maclay Bridge.

The move was urged on in more than an hour of testimony by eight or nine supporters, a significant change from a hearing two years ago when commissioners first voted to move forward with a plan to build the bridge. At that time all they heard was opposition, most of it from the Maclay Bridge Alliance agitating against a new bridge.

A dozen members of the alliance and other opponents were back in full voice Wednesday, objecting to the process or urging caution.

New Commissioner Cola Rowley stepped into the fray for the first time, voting for the resolution but pledging to proceed with care and keep asking questions. She said the prospect of the Fort Missoula Regional Park, supported by a \$42 million bond last fall, is a "game-changer" for the Target Range neighborhood with impacts "that I'm still trying to wrap my head around."

"I'm not shy of being a pain in people's butts, and at some point perhaps saying I don't think this is the right direction to go," Rowley said.

"But this is not saying we're going to 100 percent go with this project no matter what it costs, no matter what the environmental impacts are," she added. "It says let's take the next step, move into the preliminary engineering and that will determine do we need an (environmental assessment) or an (environmental impact study)?"

Barbara Chilcott, legal director for the Clark Fork Coalition, said her group hasn't taken a position on the new bridge but urged the commissioners to commit to a proper assessment of the environmental impacts.

"What we have asked for is a full environmental analysis so that all the environmental impacts can be mitigated to the greatest extent, no matter what the

decision is,” Chilcott said. “We believe this is a big deal and a categorical exclusion is not going to get us there.”

County staff has determined the project would be categorically excluded from environmental review, said Bob Gentry, legal representative for the Maclay Bridge Alliance.

“As the county takes the lead on the project once again, Maclay Bridge Alliance encourages the county to re-examine that determination, because it is simply not supported by law,” Gentry said.

Others testified that there’d been plenty of testimony already over the past several years, and that the county’s public works department and project manager Eric Dickson are capable of managing the project.

Local hands can handle management of the project, said Linda St. Peter, a local attorney who lives on the Bitterroot Valley.

“We’ve already talked about the environmental damage done, the public safety problems in the sacrifice of lives and property (at Maclay Bridge),” she said. “We’ve gone through it all. Let’s get the job done. Let’s have a good healthy river. We need to start as soon as possible.”

The Montana Department of Transportation will still work with the county and cover most of the costs of designing and engineering the bridge itself. In a first-of-its-kind agreement, MDT agreed to turn over management to Missoula County and waived the requirement that the county foot 25 percent of the bill until the project is completed.

That came with a caveat: that commissioners reaffirm their commitment to satisfy federal aid compliance and so that a change of faces in the commissioner’s office won’t sidetrack the project. That’s what they did Wednesday.

Consideration of a resolution is normally undertaken at an administrative meeting rather than a Wednesday public meeting, but this one was different, Commissioner Jean Curtiss said.

“It usually doesn’t have as much fanfare,” she said.

Curtiss said she felt comfortable making such a resolution on Earth Day. The first thing HDR Engineering, the company chosen for the South Avenue bridge project, will do will be “looking at the environmental stuff and making sure that we’re doing enough. If something’s triggered, we’ll go to the next step.”