

MACLAY BRIDGE – Another Perspective – August 2012

The Montana Department of Transportation (MDT) and Missoula County are conducting a study on the future of Maclay Bridge. The current bridge was determined to be functionally obsolete. Its health index as measured by MDT and Missoula County inspections ranks it in the lower 25th percentile for bridges in Montana. That is, 75 percent of the off system bridges in Montana (those not on federal or state highways) are in better shape and function than Maclay Bridge. More information can be found here: <http://www.mdt.mt.gov/pubinvolve/maclay/>. To utilize federal funding for replacement or rehabilitation, the County Commissioners must use the state process for analysis of the situation.

The County Commissioners and many residents are concerned about the long term safety and health of the current bridge. Parts of the old bridge have washed out and had to be replaced 2 or 3 times, with the last major washout in 1964. Some residents who live on both the east and west sides of the existing bridge have concerns that have not been heard:

1. Most of the westbound traffic on South Avenue ultimately crosses Maclay Bridge. Once traffic reaches Target Range School, it splits. Part of it turns down Clements to North Ave., then heads west on North. The rest of the traffic continues on South Ave west of the TR school to Humble, turns and goes to North Ave., then heads west on North to the bridge. Same thing happens in reverse with eastbound traffic. This splitting of the traffic means a lot of our neighborhoods between South Avenue and North Avenue experience noise and safety issues from traffic passing through from South Ave to the Bridge and return.
2. Both North Ave. and River Pines Rd. are classified as collector roadways which currently serve more traffic than county standards allow on collector roadways. With traffic projected to increase in the future by approximately 2% per year, this problem could force a serious dilemma.
3. Because of the design of the approaches to Maclay Bridge and the design of North Ave and River Pines Rd in the area of Maclay Bridge, there are significant vehicle crash clusters from the intersection of Humble and North Ave to 0.30 miles southwest of the intersection of River Pines Rd and Riverside Drive on the west end of Maclay Bridge.
4. In 2011 the load limit on Maclay Bridge was reduced to 11 tons as a result of Montana Department of Transportation inspection and bridge analysis. This resulted in emergency vehicles and school buses restricted from use for a period of time until an agreement was reached allowing the rural fire department to use the bridge for some (but not all) of their emergency equipment as long as they straddle the center line and travel at no more than 5 miles per hour. This tenuous agreement and its limitations raise serious concerns for residents on the west side of Maclay Bridge about reliability of the old bridge and its access for medical care and emergency services.
5. There are no bike/pedestrian lanes or shoulders on River Pines Rd west of Maclay Bridge.
6. Westbound South Avenue traffic heading to Big Flat or Blue Mountain must travel out of its way about an extra ½ mile, heading first north to North Avenue, then, after crossing Maclay Bridge, heading back south to the junction of River Pines Rd. and Blue Mountain Rd. The same extra travel happens with eastbound traffic and over time, cumulatively adds to increased travel times, extra gasoline consumption, generates more air pollution and exposes more of the neighborhoods to traffic and safety problems.
7. The current bridge was not designed for the site it is in. It is too short and thus the channel had to be modified when the bridge was placed there in the 1920's. Apparently in the 1920's or 1930's, River Pines Road, which is in the flood plain, was built up for the west bridge approach, effectively turning it into a levee in the flood plain that constricts flow. The bridge abutments and piers were also placed in the channel in ways that add to the constriction of the river flow. This has led to significant environmental problems in the river. Much of the west bank of the river along River Pines Rd. has also been modified with riprap. The bridge has caused a big whirlpool with channel scour under and downstream of the bridge, which has deepened the channel and caused bank loss, especially on the west side downstream of the abutment, where erosion and loss of private property has been documented. It has also caused the river to deposit sediments upstream of the two center bridge piers. This scouring may be slowly undercutting the current bridge abutments and piers, creating long term

For more information you can contact Orville Daniels, Don St. Peter or Mike Burnside at orvilled@maclaybridge.com

stability problems. The MT Dept. of Transportation and the Missoula County Office of Public Works have identified scour as an area of special concern at Maclay Bridge and intend to monitor it in future inspections.

8. If MDT and the County choose to replace, widen, or fix up the current bridge at its current site, it is likely homes and property near the bridge will be directly affected on North Avenue and on River Pines Rd. The 1994 Environmental Assessment conducted by the MDT and Missoula County demonstrated up to 6 homes on both sides of the river near the bridge would be greatly affected with some removed. This would be due to the need to move River Pines Rd. to the west and to widen the curve on the west side of the river to properly align the road and bridge. The bridge's west end would be moved upstream and the bridge lengthened so it would pass over or near the large island in the river. Homes near the east end of the bridge would also be impacted through widening of North Avenue and movement of the east end of the bridge.
9. There is ongoing vandalism, theft, human waste, garbage, littering, noise, illegal parking, and other problems from the recreational use of the old bridge and the sand bars and beaches underneath the structure.
10. The current intersection of Edwards and North at the east end of the bridge is a blind corner on the north side, making it highly unsafe to turn on to North from Edward Ave.
11. There have been a number of deaths associated with the current bridge over the last 30 years, perhaps as many as one every two years. Some of these deaths are from "jumpers" who climb into the steel structure and jump from the part of the bridge into the scour hole under the bridge and others may be due to the unsafe large whirlpool in the scoured area under the bridge.

The 1994 Environmental Assessment conducted by the County found that the best bridge alternative was to build a new bridge at the west end of South Avenue to connect in a straight line to the Big Flat and Blue Mountain Roads. This alternative would have a straight alignment, could be built with a small to moderate sized two lane bridge, would eliminate the accidents and the dangers of a one lane bridge, would reduce travel times and pollution from the current route, would avoid creating another recreation site, and would reduce environmental impacts to the river channel.

The MDT and the County Commissioners very much need to hear from those of us who live near the bridge and have firsthand experience about the problems. Comments should include 1.) What are the problems with the current situation (accidents, noise, garbage, safety, vandalism, parking, congestion, environmental, etc.)

2.) What is needed to fix the situation (two lane v. one lane bridge, moving the bridge to another better site like South Ave., etc.) and

3.) Any concerns about replacing or widening the current bridge at the present site.

Comments can be filed online at MDT's internet website and must be filed within the next two or three weeks to be considered in the study: mdt.mt.gov/mdt/comment_form.shtml?project=MaclayPlanningStudy

Comments should also be mailed to MDT and to Missoula County Board of Commissioners:

- Maclay Bridge Study Comments - MDT Missoula District - 2100 West Broadway – Missoula, MT 59807
- Missoula County Board of County Commissioners - 200 W Broadway - Missoula, MT 59802

➤ Comments can also be emailed to the Board of County Commissioners and MDT at:

jcurtis@co.missoula.mt.us

bcarey@co.missoula.mt.us

milandquist@co.missoula.mt.us

zkazimi@mt.gov

sludlow@mt.gov

For more information you can contact Orville Daniels, Don St. Peter or Mike Burnside at orvilled@maclaybridge.com