

1810 Riverside Drive  
Missoula, MT 59804  
August 3, 2012

Montana Department of Transportation  
Missoula District  
2100 West Broadway  
Missoula, MT 59807

Missoula County Commissioners  
200 West Broadway  
Missoula, MT 59802

Re: Maclay Bridge Study Comments

Dear Commissioners:

You are currently studying the issue of the Maclay Bridge over the Bitterroot River and will ultimately determine whether upgrade, replacement or a new structure in another location is warranted. As a long time resident of the area I would like to provide input for your consideration.

I have lived in the first house down river on the west end of the Maclay Bridge for 34 years and our property runs along the west shore of the Bitterroot River right up to the bridge. I use the bridge almost every day for access to town – so – the bridge is a big part of my life. For years I have been tolerant of the existence of this structure. However, the problems associated with escalated use including harassment from young divers swimmers and partiers, involvement with body recovery efforts, providing assistance to motorists who have accidents at the west end of the bridge coupled with new information about effects on the river and questionable structure reliability has caused me to change my opinion.

As a citizen of Missoula County I have become convinced the bridge and its piers should be removed. My reasons are that the bridge and its approaches are inherently unsafe, unreliable, environmentally damaging and is a liability to the County and community. It is an attractive public nuisance that has contributed to drowning, injuries and automobile accidents. It is also a law enforcement nightmare with parking, bridge jumping and assorted criminal activities associated with heavy public use. Some of the neighbors who cleanup the area each fall believe it to be a public health issue because of trash, human waste, dirty diapers and discarded syringes that litter the beaches.

Central to my concerns is the fact that the way the bridge was built many years ago has created a deep scour hole in the river that is an attractant that brings swimmers, beach users and bridge jumpers to the site. In addition to the scour hole there is a large eddy or whirlpool. A 1935 aerial photograph in fact shows the river to be twice as wide at the time, than it is now and the scour hole did not exist at all. The photo further shows the large beach area to be an artifact of the bridge because of the deposition around the piers. In effect the County has created a public nuisance and attractant that causes many of the problems associated with the bridge. I am concerned about the liability issues associated with the drowning as well as the vehicular accidents that occur due to the alignment of approaches on either end. The location of the bridge in relationship with the river and the placement of the piers would never be tolerated under today's standards.

Environmentally the bridge has adversely affected the natural flow and altered the shape of the river bed. This effect extends both upstream and downstream from the structure. Ecologically those effects are unacceptable. Restoration of the Bitterroot River could occur if the bridge and piers were removed. If any of your study alternatives consider retaining the present bridge in the long run, you need to retain the service of a qualified river morphology specialist to assess river dynamics.

Human Safety: Last summer I participated with Search & Rescue and the Sheriff's Department search for the body of a 14 year old boy who stepped into deep water and drowned. I saw the anguish and grief on the faces of friends and parents and it breaks your heart. A number of years ago the son of a colleague drowned when he dove in the water to retrieve a frisbee - his death devastated his father. Having lived here for over 30 years it is my estimate that we average a death every two or three years. One of the deputy Sheriffs told me they have done so many body recoveries they are able to predict where the bodies will show up downstream. There have been too many deaths!

Automobile Safety: A single lane bridge on a double lane road is a set up for conflict and accidents. Coupled with a 90 degree approach on the west end compounds the problem. Almost every year we get a crash and many of the accidents are not reported. They call for help from family and friends and tow the car away. A few months ago a car travelling east missed the turn and knocked over the jersey barriers and tore out our fence - nearly landing in the river. That incident is the second time in recent years that our fence has been significantly damaged.

Reliability: The people who live on the west side of the river deserve bridge access to town. The present bridge is very old, has severe load limit restrictions and has questionable footings. For those reasons and many more the longevity of the current bridge is in question. It could wash out (it has done so a couple of times in the past) any spring or could fail structurally. That would seriously impact us on this side of the river. We deserve a reliable bridge.

When I bought my house 34 years ago I was told by the realtor that the plan was to replace the bridge with a new structure at the end of South Avenue where an easement was granted by the Maclay family. The bridge looked old and worn at that time and knowledge of a replacement influenced my decision to purchase my house at the time. While working for the Forest Service I worked with County Commissioner Barbara Evans and Senator Conrad Burns to get financing for a new structure in order to have reliable access for forest fire fighting on public lands. The plan was a bridge at the end of South Avenue. In 1994 the County analysis showed a location at the end of South Avenue to be the preferred alternative.

Time has shown that the present bridge should be removed. The best location from an environmental, safety and reliability standpoint is the South Avenue location.

Thank you for your consideration.