

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

September 15, 2012

Missoula County Commissioners
200 West Broadway
Missoula, MT 59802

Re: Advisory Petition to Remove Maclay Bridge as a Priority for HBRRP Funding.

Dear Commissioners and MDT:

We have recently learned that Peggie Morrison, a leader in a group known as the Maclay Bridge Alliance, submitted to you a petition the group has been circulating in Missoula County. The petition's stated goal was to advise you to remove the Maclay Bridge as a priority for funding from the Federal Highway Trust Fund's Highway Bridge Replacement and Rehabilitation Program (HBRRP). By this action, it appears the group would prefer that the Missoula County taxpayers bear the full financial burden of any future Maclay Bridge replacement or repair costs instead of having the costs covered by fuel and other tax dollars in the Federal Highway Trust Fund.

We have examined the petition's "whereas's" and have found them to include incorrect or misleading statements, partial truths, and out of date information. Since the citizens who signed the petition did so based on faulty information, we would hope you will give no weight to the advice in the petition during your consideration of what to do about the existing old bridge.

The following are our detailed analyses and responses to the "whereas's" in the Alliance's Advisory Petition:

1. Whereas, Maclay Bridge has been inspected by MDT and county inspectors and found healthy and in good maintenance with a Health Index of 96.39 as of February 9, 2010;

Fact: This statement is based on information that is far out of date. According to the July 9, 2012 Existing and Projected Conditions Report (prepared for the Montana Department of Transportation), p. 28:

The "Health Index" Based on the recent October 31, 2011 bridge inspection, the Maclay Bridge was given a health index of 89.91. Montana's statewide off-system bridge data indicates that 72.9 percent of all off-system bridges have a health index higher than the

Maclay Bridge health index. This health index value places the Maclay Bridge near the bottom quartile of all off-system bridges.

Also on p. 28 of that MDT report:

Off-system bridge data statewide suggests that 98.3 percent of all off-system bridges have a sufficiency rating higher than the Maclay Bridge health index.

2. Whereas, Maclay Bridge is a recognized landmark on a rural county road and not part of a state or federal highway system;

Fact: It is true that perhaps ¼ to ½ of Maclay Bridge's four-component structure can be documented as old and for that reason alone it may be eligible to be listed as an historic structure. But many old structures have been removed when it was determined they were public safety hazards or caused unacceptable environmental damage, such as the nearby example of Milltown Dam.

Maclay Bridge is in fact a structural hodgepodge, a patchwork of bridge sections, some of which are reused parts of other old bridges or sections added to repair past damage from floods or vehicles that exceeded the bridge's strength. Some of the bridge parts may date to 1922 or earlier, some may date to 1935, some may be older, and some are as recent as 1994 and 2003. Other parts are of unknown age, origin, and strength. Information from the Commissioners' own historic journals, dated from 1945 to 1964, and bridge plans in the County's archives confirm the bridge's checkered and uncertain past. There is both anecdotal and record evidence that the bridge has washed out and been replaced or required major repairs 5 or 6 times since 1893. The County's Office of Public Works has some of this historic information on file.

3. Whereas, because it is a single lane bridge, Maclay Bridge has a low sufficiency rating based on standards that apply to state and federal highways;

Fact: This is a misleading statement because it implies that the standards shouldn't apply to a county bridge. According to the July 9, 2012 MDT Report, the American Association of State Highway Transportation Officials' (AASHTO) Standards state that single lane bridges are not appropriate for traffic volumes exceeding 50 vehicles per day (vpd). This is true regardless if a bridge is part of a county, state, or federal highway system. In 2011, the MDT reports Maclay Bridge experienced 2360 vpd, which is nearly 50 times higher than the AASHTO standard. This is one of the reasons the bridge was officially classified as Functionally Obsolete. The July 9, 2012 MDT Report, p. 28, states:

This is based on the single-lane width of the bridge being sub-standard for the current traffic volumes, and the sub-standard curves on both approaches to the bridge.

4. Whereas, the average daily traffic has not shown significant increase in 15 years;

Fact: According to MDT Data, the traffic count measured 300 feet west of Maclay Bridge was 2060 vehicles per day (vpd) in 1995 and 2190 vpd in 1996. In 2011, it was 2360 vpd for a net

increase of up to 300 vpd over that time period, which is about a 15% increase in 15 years. That is a significant increase. MDT has carefully analyzed the past 20 years of traffic data and projects the traffic at the same site will be 3800 vehicles per day (84 % increase over 1995) in 2030 and 4550 vpd (123% increase over 1995) in 2040. It should be noted that 2040 is only 28 years away. It is difficult to believe that a single lane bridge with poor alignments at both ends will be able to handle this amount of traffic without a huge loss of service to the areas west of the river and many accidents and lives lost.

5. Whereas, alternate bridge crossings exist at Highway 93S and Kona Ranch Road;

Fact: This statement misleads people into thinking these alternative Bitterroot River crossings offer the same level of service as a new two lane bridge in Target Range that is placed, for example, at the west end of South Avenue. They do not. Implying these distant bridge crossings are equivalent to a two lane bridge at South Avenue or nearby is not responsive to the needs and concerns of those living west and east of the current bridge. Having to use these other crossings would mean significantly delayed emergency vehicle response times to residences living west of the current bridge, time delays that could mean the difference between life and death or loss of homes and other valuable property. Having these longer travel distances would also add significantly to travel costs and time delays for daily commutes back and forth to work as well. Using these longer routes would also generate more exhaust emissions and impact the environment.

6. Whereas, a replacement bridge will impose significant impact on neighborhoods with respect to human and natural environments;

Fact: This assertion was addressed in the 1994 Environmental Assessment and found to be without merit. Regardless, the County and MDT are currently reassessing this very issue and will issue a report in the near future. In addition, this statement ignores the fact that there are neighborhoods already currently being unnecessarily and significantly impacted by traffic that must divert from its direct route on South Avenue to cross over streets like Humble, Woodlawn, and Clements, to reach North and to cross the current Maclay Bridge. Once there, traffic must divert back south on River Pines Road to reach the Blue Mountain/Obrien Creek junction. At least 6 streets are being impacted by the current situation, 5 more than would be required if a South Avenue bridge location was chosen.

In regard to the natural environment, the current bridge location and configuration has caused damage to the river so that currently the channel is not in a natural condition. County engineers have acknowledged this, as explained in the following quote from Missoula County's 2011 Frequently Asked Questions public information document:

"1. What are the limitations of and/or problems with Maclay Bridge?"

In addition to the design deficiencies, this bridge's piers are located in the river channel on unknown materials. The east approach to the original bridge was washed out by flooding in 1963, and since then the channel has been altered with

the deposition of material upstream of the bridge. Changing the shape of the channel changes stream flow. Increased water velocities remove material from the stream bed. If too much material is washed away, the piers in the channel will become unstable.”

(<http://www.co.missoula.mt.us/road/documents/pdfs/Maclay%20Bridge%20FAQs.pdf>)

In other words, the bridge has harmed the river environment; changed its natural course and shape; and in the process led to circumstances that threaten the bridge's own stability and public safety.

Other impacts to the environment result from the extra distance that must be driven compared to a direct South Avenue route. Currently a vehicle must drive an extra half mile to divert to North Avenue from South Avenue, cross the bridge, then return to the route of travel. At a current vehicle count of 2360 vpd, this means there are at minimum an unnecessary 1180 miles being driven each day. This waste of gasoline is also causing extra amounts of exhaust pollution to be vented into the atmosphere.

7. Whereas, a replacement bridge will be a multi-million dollar project with no firm estimate of total project costs, funding source(s) or resident tax impacts;

Fact: This statement is substantially false. While it is true a replacement bridge will be a multi-million dollar project, the funding source is well known and established. The ultimate source is the Federal Highway Trust Fund, which collects money from gasoline, diesel, and tire taxes paid by all motorists. Some of these funds are distributed by the federal government to States and Counties through the Highway Bridge Replacement and Rehabilitation Program (HBRRP) which would be the funding source for any Maclay Bridge replacement. It is premature to calculate total project costs until the best site and bridge designs are chosen. However, the agencies have estimated a range of from \$10 million to \$20 million.

There would be no resident tax impacts imposed if HBRRP funds are used, as affirmed again by the Missoula County May 12, 2011 Frequently Asked Questions document, which states, “*There are no local funds involved with the project.*” However if Missoula County passes up this opportunity to use federal dollars to replace the bridge and the bridge fails in the future, Missoula County residents will then have to bear the full costs of replacement and at that point there WILL BE significant resident tax impacts. Thus the choice is whether to use up to \$20 million in federal dollars to fix a local problem--dollars which will be spent in the local economy potentially helping create jobs and generate income. Or to wait until the bridge inevitably deteriorates or fails and be forced to spend up to \$20 million of local tax dollars, with large resident tax impacts, to fix it.

8. Whereas, a replacement bridge will impose upgrade requirements and impacts on area wide infrastructure including streets, roads, schools, hospitals and more;

Fact: This statement is false. There is no evidence and no basis for such an assumption that upgrade requirements will be needed for all of these facilities if a new bridge were placed on South Avenue, other than the section of South Avenue from Clements to a new bridge site. We

understand this would be funded under the HBRRP funds. The majority of the traffic on South Avenue heading to Maclay Bridge already passes by Target Range School, Big Sky High School, and Community Hospital. Changing the bridge location from North Avenue to South Avenue will not dramatically change that fact. However moving the bridge site to South Avenue will reduce traffic and the existing impacts to neighborhoods living on Clements, Humble, Woodlawn, North Ave., and River Pines, streets along which many children travel to and from school. Many schools cope safely and easily with traffic passing next to them. These include Porter Middle School on Reserve Street; Hellgate High School on Higgins Ave.; and both Big Sky High School and Target Range School on busy sections of South Ave.

The Board of County Commissioners has already gone out of its way to demonstrate responsiveness and willingness to serve Target Range neighborhoods experiencing growth. These efforts include but are not limited to providing a traffic light and reduced speed limits by Target Range School; reduced speed limits from 45 mph to 35 mph throughout the Target Range area; 4 way stops where needed; and sidewalks and pedestrian paths throughout the Target Range area

The Alliance also asserts that a new bridge at South Avenue would attract traffic, both commercial truck traffic and bypass traffic, because of the proposed two-lane bridge configuration. However, the traffic modeling the County and MDT has done to date does not support the assertion there would be more traffic that would be attracted to a two lane bridge in Target Range. The 2012 MDT Existing and Future Conditions report, p. 16, projects there will be major growth in traffic in the Target Range/Big Flat areas due to growth in those areas and regardless of the presence of a new bridge. This growth will make a single lane bridge like the existing one even more of a problem.

The majority of commercial traffic going through Missoula is traveling between Interstate 90 and Highway 93 and uses Brooks St./Orange St. or Brooks St./Reserve St. since those are the most direct routes with the capacity and speed limits to accommodate through traffic. A route that goes over a potential bridge at South Ave. could be part of an east-west route for those traveling from Big Flat to the downtown area or points north and south. But if north-south traveling trucks wanted to use it, they would need to go a circuitous route that would take them at least 3 to 4 miles out of their way and through many roadways that have reduced speed limits and difficult turning radiuses to or from the Blue Mountain/Hwy. 93 junction and to or from Reserve Street via a Target Range bridge. Thus there would be no incentive for them to consider such a route.

The majority of east-west traffic through the Missoula area primarily relies upon I-90. We have also been informed that past Missoula County studies show a significant portion of traffic along Hwy. 93 S is traveling to the Missoula area as its final destination. The purpose of this traffic is to reach retail stores and services (hospitals, etc.) and thus it would not be seeking any bypass route.

If in the remote possibility truck traffic ever became a residential issue in Target Range, the County has the authority to address the issue by declaring the affected county roads a “no truck” route. If increased passenger vehicle traffic resulted beyond that predicted, the County could address this through traffic calming devices such as “pinch points”, traffic circles, and traffic

lights. In the future, the County and MDT could also better synchronize Reserve's traffic lights and widen Reserve Street to a 6 lane configuration to handle those increased north-south traffic flows that might develop.

9. Whereas, to date the county has failed to undertake a feasibility study to determine need and support for the bridge;

Fact: The County and MDT are currently undertaking a detailed Maclay Bridge Planning Study to assess travel corridors and efficiencies, and to determine the need for a replacement bridge.

10. Whereas, there has been no process for public involvement and input for this project for over 15 years;

Fact: The County and MDT are currently undertaking a process that provides ample opportunity for public involvement and input for this project. It is a distraction and unfair of the Alliance to accuse the Board of not listening to the public and of having secret plans and motives regarding a bypass route tied to a bridge replacement/repair in Target Range.

It is troubling that the Alliance's actions and assertions, as most recently exemplified by this petition, serve mainly to protect the interests of those who own valuable property--some with large acreages with possible subdivision potential--at the west end of South Avenue.

Unfortunately, the protection of the west end of South Avenue would be at the expense of others who live in Target Range, Big Flat, Obrien Creek, and west of the Bitterroot River, as well as the rest of the residents of Missoula County. In conclusion, we again ask that you give no weight and little consideration to the Alliance's petition as you reach your decision on what to do about the replacement of the old bridge.

Sincerely,

Maclay Bridge Common Sense Coalition

email: mbcsc@maclaybridge.com

website: www.maclaybridge.com