Date: July 18, 2012

To: Montana Department of Transportation & Missoula County Commissioners

Ref: Comments on Maclay Bridge Planning Study

Dear Sirs/Madams,

The purpose of this letter is to provide comments and present some environmental, public health, and safety concerns that we don't believe have been adequately covered in your contractor, Robert Peccia and Associate's, environmental scan to date. We ask that you consider the following in the ongoing environmental studies and before you decide the fate of the old Maclay Bridge or any replacement. We have lived near and observed Maclay Bridge and the river since 1982. We were also involved in the 1992 to 1994 Environmental Assessment.

Many of us who live near the old bridge have the following concerns about the current situation:

1. **The travel route from South Ave. to the bridge and the reverse route impact a lot of our neighborhoods, more than would be affected with a South Avenue bridge.** Most of the westbound traffic on South Avenue ultimately crosses Maclay Bridge, but once it reaches Target Range (TR) School, it splits. Part of it turns right and heads down Clements to North Ave., turns left and heads west on North Ave. The rest of the South Avenue traffic continues on South Avenue past TR School to Humble, turns right and goes to North Avenue, turns left and goes west on North Avenue to the bridge. Same thing happens in reverse with eastbound traffic, with some traffic turning right off North to Humble, and turning left at South Avenue. The rest of the South Avenue bound traffic continues to Clements, then turns right and heads to South Avenue at TR School. The splitting of the traffic both ways means a lot more than just one street in our neighborhoods between South Avenue and the old bridge experiences noise and safety issues from traffic passing through. This is inefficient and an unnecessary impact on our neighborhoods that could be eliminated with a straight route and a South Avenue bridge.
2. **The current route from South Avenue to Big Flat or Blue Mountain Roads and the reverse route make vehicles travel a longer distance.** Westbound South Avenue traffic heading to Big Flat or Blue Mountain must travel about an extra half mile one way compared to a South Ave. bridge route. Traffic must first head north to North Avenue by one of two routes, then, after crossing Maclay Bridge, head back south some distance to the junction of River Pines Road and Blue Mountain Road. Same thing happens with eastbound traffic. Over time, this cumulative zigzagging (with each round trip adding an extra mile), along with delays at turns and stop signs, adds to travel times, consumes extra gasoline, and generates more air pollution. It exposes more of the neighborhoods to traffic, accidents, and safety problems.
3. **The old bridge has impacted and unnaturally modified the river channel and its flood plain from their natural condition**. The 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 1930's. Apparently in the 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 stability problems.

4. **The reliability of the old bridge is a problem.** Although the old bridge's superstructure may be stable for at least the short term, the County has placed load limits on it because of its condition. However, it appears no one has examined the bridge foundations to determine if major scour around the abutment and piers will lead to stability problems. We are also unaware of any documents or plans in existence that even show how the footings were originally constructed for the bridge abutments and piers. Thus the condition of the bridge's foundations could be a future problem. The old bridge has been closed in the past, sometimes for significant time periods. Residents on the west side worry about losing fast access to medical care and emergency services. If the old bridge was closed for whatever reason and there was no replacement, it would cause great hardship and danger for them.
5. **Replacing, widening, or fixing up the old bridge at its current site will have a major impact on homes and property on North Avenue and on River Pines Rd.** The 1994 Environmental Assessment, conducted by Missoula County, the Montana Department of Transportation, and the Federal Highway Administration, showed that up to 5 homes on the west side and 2 homes on the east side of the river near the bridge would be affected in a major way by the necessary realignment of the old bridge. People would lose major parts of their yards or their entire homes. 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. Those homes on the south end of Edward Court could have their scenic views of the river significantly altered by the change in alignment of the bridge at the current site.
6. **The old bridge is a major public nuisance and safety hazard**. Due to its high steel superstructure (ideal for jumping); deep scour hole for swimming; and sand bars for

beaches, it serves as an attraction that brings with it law violations and health and safety issues. Over the years, there has been a pattern of vandalism; theft at local residences; human waste, garbage and littering under the bridge and in adjacent streets; noise, illegal parking; and a host of other problems associated with recreational use of the bridge and the sand bars and beaches underneath it. Some of the local home owners near the bridge feel unsafe in their own homes during the peak summer months. At least one owner said she sold her home recently at a loss to get out of the area, due largely to the recreation problems at the current bridge. Jumpers on the bridge frequently block traffic going over the bridge, creating a nuisance and a safety hazard.

7. **The current intersections of Edward and North at the east end of the bridge and Riverside Drive and North at the west end of the bridge are blind corners on the north side, making it highly unsafe to turn on to North.**
8. **The old bridge has created lethal conditions**. There have been a number of deaths associated with the old bridge over the last 30 years, with deaths sometimes as many as one every two years. Some of these deaths are from youthful "jumpers" who climb onto the steel structure, jump into the scour hole under the bridge, and strike objects or the bed of the river and drown. Other deaths have been due to the unsafe currents and large whirlpool under the bridge that have drowned individuals. This is an ongoing public health and safety problem.
9. **The old bridge causes a high incidence of traffic accidents year round.** There have been a large number of reported accidents at the bridge, especially the west end's concrete jersey barrier. The current count of reported accidents was 17 in the past year. In the winter, area residents experience power outages due to cars crashing in to power poles near the west end of the bridge. However, the number of actual accidents is much higher. The incidents of cars who fail to negotiate the curves at the bridge and crash into fences or other property and drive away often go unreported. Some residents on Riverside Drive state the number of accidents is likely more than 2 or 3 times the official report
10. **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, according to engineers could be built with a small to moderate sized two lane bridge (not a "Kona-style"), 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 a recreation site, and would reduce environmental impacts to the river channel. Although some claim a South Avenue bridge would become a recreation site like the current bridge, this is not likely for the following reasons: 1.) a South Ave. bridge would provide no bridge superstructure for jumping; 2.) it would provide no swimming hole because the river at that point is too shallow and gravelly to attract swimmers; and 3.) there are no beaches for sunbathers to use.

Presumably any new bridge would also span the entire flood plain and avoid impacting the river, unlike the current bridge.

11. **The river should be allowed to heal and return to its natural condition at the current site.** Removing the old bridge with its abutments and piers would allow the river to fill in the unnatural scour/swimming hole and allow the sand bars to continue migrating downstream rather than stack up around the piers to form beaches. Thus, it would not only restore the river to a natural condition but would also reduce the attraction of the site for the type of problem users we are experiencing.
12. **Perhaps eventually if the community wanted it a small foot/bicycle bridge could be constructed over the river at North Ave**. However it would be built without the poorly engineered piers and abutments that are creating the current problems.

In summary, we and many of our neighbors believe the current bridge site is a bad site. It is unsafe and for the long term, it is environmentally, economically, and socially unsound. It has caused damage to the river and its environment, to adjacent property owners, and to the health of the public at large. It should not be restored or repaired or rehabilitated or widened. After a better modern bridge is placed in the best site at the end of South Avenue just as the 1994 Environmental Assessment recommended, the old bridge should be removed.

Thank you for your consideration of these issues.

Sincerely,

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